

The Variant Effect
PART SEVEN: ALPHA
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CHAPTER 1

There was a flashing flicker of light from behind as a low rumble of thunder rolled up the tunnel. It pushed at their backs, heavy and ominous, plunging the shadows before them into deeper darkness.

Hyde paused ten yards from the sewer opening and let his hood-lamps play over the dirty water at his feet. Something had wrapped loosely around his right ankle. Keeping the barrel of his magnum up and ready, he dredged the water by his foot with a backhand sweep of his cane.

Something there.

The metal tip cut through the murk and snared a piece of elasticized rubber with a steel snap button. Then, with sinking heart, he recognized the ragged foot-long strip of clear material—the flexible joint fastening from a bag-suit. It allowed the wearer to adjust the one-size-fits-all covering.

Ssskin...

“What is it?” The corporal’s voice was shrill. In his anxiety he bumped against Hyde, who had to brace himself with his cane.

“Carefully, corporal,” Hyde whispered, raising his gun and moving forward. Their boots splashed in the ankle-deep water and shuffled over humps of sandy sediment in the shallows.

The sewer gurgled and echoed, water splattered and dripped, reverberating, alternately amplified by the tunnel’s shape. Hyde’s audio receptors were distorting the noises,

making the confined space confusing. He paused to switch on his intercom, and motioned for the corporal to do the same.

“Keep your head,” Hyde said, suddenly crowded by the younger man’s breathing over his earphones. He started forward again. “Twenty yards from us the tunnel branches east and west.” He peered into the circular shadow ahead. A heavy mist diffused their hood-lamps, but he could see the textured wet surface of the concrete walls where they met the massive block-like juncture that formed the joint where the sewer forked.

Hyde had studied Colonel Hazen’s maps as a matter of course, and while the water drainage system was simple enough, there were complicated overlaps of ventilation shafts and maintenance hatches due to the army’s installation of the underground storage area. Not rocket science, but Hyde knew such old architecture was prone to structural failure, weakness and there was also the possibility of unmapped renovations and additions. Decades of army engineers, plumbers and gas fitters could have seriously altered the original layout.

The corporal’s breathing increased to an anxious whistle as they moved toward the east-west fork in the tunnel, as their hood-lamps created great black shadows to left and right.

“Easy, corporal,” Hyde hissed, wincing as his right calf cramped. His back was clenched by similar spasms, but he was committed now. *It was only pain.* He had to see this through. The Variant Effect was impossible to predict, and assuming the worst might damn someone he still had a duty to save.

A chance you don’t deserve.

The water was deeper at the crossing. Hyde’s foot landed on something soft and his balance shifted. He staggered and dropped to a knee, cane beating the water for purchase as he fell forward on his knuckles.

And a face popped up out of the water. Skinned, bereft of character, two rolling dead eyes stared up into Hyde’s.

He snapped his teeth and hissed, heaving himself upward, feeling the corporal’s hands lifting him, even as the younger man’s shout cycled upward with terror.

“God!”

At their feet, a dead baggie, the exposed muscle and bone of its ribcage torn by three bullet wounds. Its lower half was draped with the remnants of a squad jumper and boots. By the size of the body and flare of its hips...

“Shanju,” Hyde breathed, studying the upper torso, a massive wound of raw meat and tissue; it was difficult to determine underlying structures. But there was fatty tissue, torn with the skin, and the distinct orange-sections of breast lobules. “It’s Shanju.”

Thunder boomed up the tunnel.

Then Hyde gasped. *What’s this?* He levered her up with his cane.

Remarkably, her skull had been opened and the brain removed.

“What happened to her?” the corporal blurted, his hood-lamps focusing on the empty cranium. “Can Biters do that?”

“Not Biters.” Hyde shook his head, lowering himself over his cane to inspect the body. “This is a surgical wound from a Stryker saw.” He pointed at the open skull. “Squad med-tech’s carry a portable version for emergency amputations.” Hyde looked up along the tunnel. “This was done without finesse.”

“Who did it?” the corporal whispered, hefting his shotgun at the darkness. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Hyde said rising. Somewhere his suit’s audio had picked up the splashing of many footsteps.

A group of them...distant.

“Was it Lazlo?” the corporal continued. “Didn’t Jailbird have a criminal record?”

“And a *meritorious* police service record,” Hyde said, tilting his head back to focus his hood-lamps on the young man. “Easy, corporal. Stay calm.”

“I’m just a *driver*.” The corporal drew back from Hyde’s skinless face, as his own voice echoed in the tunnel. “What am I doing here?”

“Staying *alive*,” Hyde said, turning back to the dead baggie, “so you *will* calm down.” He reached for his chest-mounted high-resolution single-shot camera and tapped it a couple of times to detail the corpse and its open skull. Neither he nor the corporal was equipped with vid-com links. Bandwidth issues with uplinks kept video capture available to only a pair of designates per squad. There was always a *Recorder* too—a baggie who served as the squad’s ‘black box,’ should the worst happen.

“Brass’ Science Units also carried Strykers back in the day,” Hyde continued, glancing along the tunnel. “They collected samples after squads treated hunting packs.” He growled wordlessly. “The samples were flash frozen in nitrogen thermoses. Time was of the essence.” Hyde grunted. “We had to understand the Effect.”

“*Ssskin.*”

“What was that?” The corporal swung his gun to the left, then the right.

That was on the intercom.

Sounds of splashing and hissing echoed down the tunnel. But it was just sound moving toward them originating somewhere distant. Hyde heard a woman’s voice, authoritative one moment, pleading near madness the next.

She’s alive!

“We are in luck, corporal,” Hyde said, barely pronouncing the words. “The captive is still alive.” *If it’s her—but how?*

The woman’s voice came again, echoing over the wet sewer noises. It was followed by the staccato splash of many feet running in the water. Then more echoes.

Hyde dimmed his hood-lamps and ordered the corporal to do the same before they started pushing up the right fork in the tunnel toward the activity. The darkness closed in. Water was rising around his ankles.

“Where are we going?” the corporal panted frantically.

But Hyde pushed on silently, listening for sounds of hope.

Then, clear and cold came the *clicks* and repetitions of the single word hissed: “*Ssskin.*”

Biters ahead—not far. *Lots of them.*

Skin.

He turned up the gain on his suit’s external audio to confirm that indeed it was a woman’s voice he also heard. *Yes!* There was a pleading tone to it, but it bore a commanding central core as it spoke, the content garbled by distance.

“Corporal,” Hyde whispered over the intercom. “Are you familiar with the expression: Tactical withdrawal?”

“Retreat?” the younger man answered quickly.

“I want you to fall back to the sewer opening and contact the squad.” His voice shook, as another anxious explosion of sound and repetitions of the word *skin* scattered up the tunnel. “Captain Dambe should be here by now.”

The corporal grunted, “But you...”

“Do not have as much to lose as you, *driver,*” Hyde said. “And I am not defenseless.” He turned to the corporal. “Get the squad! Tell them, I will attempt to rescue the captive or *captives* and retreat along the east tunnel. *Hurry!*”

The corporal didn’t hesitate. As his splashing footsteps receded, the dim light from Hyde’s hood-lamps fell on a patch of curly brown fur floating on the water at his feet—the partly chewed skin of a small dog.

CHAPTER 2

The scene in front of the sedan was swept into clarity by the windshield wipers before melting in the steady rain—only to reappear briefly with the next pass of the rubber blades. The cycle continued. T-1 loomed ahead. All around it, hood-lamps flickered as the squad deployed and prepped. They'd be setting out portable welding kits, collapsible grating and razor wire. After the squad was in the hole they'd seal it shut. Then as they moved forward they'd search out openings and hiding places and seal those too. All temporary, none of it airtight, but the idea was to force the pack out into main tunnels or open ground where individuals could be *treated*.

As long as there were shadows and nooks to hide in, the squad would be vulnerable to ambush, and a single Biter in full presentation could do a lot of damage in close confines, attacking when the baggies could not fire without hitting other baggies. It was why they shied away from automatic weapons. *Pick your target and kill it.*

More than one squad had been whittled away in a tunnel fight back in the day. The attrition rate could be high against a large hunting pack. Their high card now was they were after a fresh pack—inexperienced Biters still orienting themselves to *Ritual*.

“Give me another blast, Joe,” Beachboy said as he stopped the car well back of T-1's mammoth outline. Past it Borland saw Lazlo's van. It was wrapped in plastic and yellow tape. *Bad. That's bad.*

“Sure.” Borland handed the bottle over, and the younger man drank until he coughed. He had steered Beachboy toward the whiskey in the car since he didn't want to tap into his reserves. There was no knowing when he'd get another top-up, and he was banking that Aggie hadn't found his backup bottle in the T-1 sleeping berth. She had already confiscated the box of cranking materials from the trunk and was unmoved by Borland's story that they were for celebrations after, should any of them survive.

“What the hell happened?” Beachboy's eyes pleaded as he handed the bottle back. “I can't believe I did that.”

“You'll be surprised what you'll do by the end of all *this*,” Borland drawled and tipped the bottle, washing down bits of peanuts and granola. He'd eaten an energy bar on the way over. The snacks were clipped into various pockets in his bag-suit. He ordered his companion to do the same, but the younger man was too thirsty to eat.

“But I...” Beachboy faltered. “I should have let *you*.”

“I was doing it,” Borland said, remembering the scene, lifting his gun to treat the Biter, the baggie chained to the wall, and then Beachboy pushed his arm down. “But it was your call. He was your friend.”

“He took three shots to the head—point blank! That’s *impossible*,” Beachboy’s voice broke as he reached out for the bottle again. There was an ounce left and he drank it.

“Variant overrides natural responses.” Borland took the empty bottle back and threw it on the floor. “So we have to do the same.”

“Is that why you burned the house?” Beachboy asked. “I know what you said, but tell me again. And why didn’t we call the fire crew in to do it?”

“Beachboy, we aren’t in wonderland any more.” Borland’s voice was harsh. He remembered clambering out of the stalker’s lair and digging a butane barbecue lighter and spray can of Lysol out of the basement’s storage closet. They shoved the couch under the wooden stairs, buried it with newspaper from the recycle bin and soaked it with Lysol. The cleanser burst into harsh orange flame as they hurried out of the basement. Smoke was rolling across the main floor as they drove away.

Without keys, they had to abandon Hyde’s Horton. *Let him explain it.*

“And, now that Variant’s back, the rules no longer apply,” Borland insisted. It had begun to rain while they were in the house, and he expected the accompanying gusts of wind to fan the flames.

“But *protocol*?” Beachboy insisted.

“Ziploc. Gas. Burn. I know.” Borland nodded. “Protocol’s there to quarantine a site to give tech time to prove Variant presentation. We know what happened and you *treated* the only Biter at the site.”

“*Treated*?” Beachboy’s eyes were wild as he hurried past the realization. “Why was he chained up?”

“A stalker.” Borland slapped at the door handle, opened it to the cool night air. “I know who did it.”

“Is that why Hyde was there?” Beachboy grabbed Borland’s arm. “Does he know?”

“No,” Borland said, shaking his head—heart sinking.

“So why do we keep it quiet?” Beachboy’s fingers dug into Borland.

“I’m ordering you to play along until I can prove it. I’ll take the blame.” *As usual, and stalker talk will spook the squad.* “Welcome to the day,” Borland growled and yanked his arm away. “In the meantime, we found your friend there. He had already presented and you had to put him down.” His expression softened, and he rubbed at his jaw. “Wait till you see Aggie’s *protocol* on that one.”

He climbed out of the car and watched Beachboy’s dark shape appear on the other side. Something about the set of the man’s shoulders had changed, even in the dim light of reflected hood-lamps, he looked uncertain. *He’ll make it—just popped his cherry and needs a good cry.*

And Borland thought back on the scene in the basement, in the dark and dust of the stalker’s lair. He remembered Beachboy pushing his .38 down and raising his own gun. He could still see the tragic revulsion on the younger man’s face as he fired and fired and fired...

“Borland!” Aggie’s voice ripped through the dark air as she crossed the space between T-1 and the sedan. The bag-suit hugged her athletic form. A shotgun hung over her right shoulder from a strap that ran across her chest, dividing and accentuating her breasts. She carried another shotgun in her left hand.

Behind her, the squad had formed ranks beside T-1. “We’re ready to deploy. Hyde’s still in there, but we can’t raise him. Wizard says the weather’s screwing with the electronics.”

As if to prove the point, the sky flickered and thunder rumbled. Rain pattered noisily on their bag-suits.

Borland nodded, his fingers squeezing his vinyl hood and pulling it from his belt. Beachboy’s palm-com had warbled seconds after they set fire to the stalker’s house. It

was Aggie calling, ordering them forward to Lazlo's position: the hotlink entry point. Hyde had made contact, a garbled message from his driver. Lazlo's crew was missing. The skinned squad captain and his corporal had entered the sewer in pursuit of survivors.

One death wish leads to another.

Borland watched T-1's ramp fold up. An ominous boom followed as the armored body locked tight. Mudroom would be secured away in the driver-socket. Wizard would be in the squad compartment, coordinating communications with her jury-rigged equipment.

"Aggie," Borland said, gesturing to the transport. "How am I going to consult?"

"First person." She stepped in close and pushed the extra shotgun into his hand.

"Come on, Aggie. I can't move in those tunnels!" Borland snarled. "It's been twenty years. I'm not in shape for that."

"I'd say you're about the right caliber for the hotlink," she said, glancing over at the sewer opening where it stuck out of the hillside like a gun barrel.

Borland gave her that one with a shrug. She rarely teased.

"You've been doing pretty well so far." She stared at Beachboy. Aggie could see he was far off. "We lost three baggies at HQ and at least one here. I can't spare anyone."

"But..." Borland gestured to his physique. "I'll slow you down."

"You better not, and if you get stuck in the hole we've got sparklers to go through you." She turned to Beachboy, and he snapped to attention. "What happened?"

"Biters had entered the house at that address and," the young man's voice cracked, "we were too late to help. *He*—he presented."

"Who?" Aggie's glare intensified.

"Go easy," Borland grunted. "He had to..."

“I shot Mofa!” Beachboy blurted.

“Mofa *presented*?” Aggie’s focus tightened. Borland watched her shoulder drop. “And *you* shot him?”

Beachboy nodded, and Aggie punched him with a hard right to the jaw.

He dropped on his ass, looked bewildered as Aggie extended a hand and pulled him back to his feet.

“That’s so you don’t get comfortable killing friends.” Her voice was heavy with emotion as she slapped the younger man’s shoulders and helped him adjust his bag-suit.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Beachboy said, sucking on a split lip. “I won’t.”

“What about the little man on the tape?” Aggie switched gears, turned to Borland.

“Nobody else home.” He shrugged. “Might be the individual that Hyde’s trying to rescue from the Biters.”

“Who lived at the address?” Aggie asked.

Borland paused, lifted his open hands and then shrugged. “I didn’t have time to research it.”

“Mofa was infected *during* the attack?” Aggie shook her head. “Hyde would have said something.”

“Who knows? The old cripple’s gone ape—going off half-cocked without backup,” Borland said dismissively, before adding: “Oh, yeah and—there was lots of body fluid, and we had no way of ziplocking the place.” He wheezed. “It’s a residential area. The back doors were broken in. Neighbors could have entered so I burned it.”

Aggie pursed her lips like she was about to speak, hurl an insult or say something caustic. Instead she turned and walked toward the squad.

CHAPTER 3

Hyde pushed himself through the pitch black, his hood-lamps dimmed to a dark red glow. The last waves of adrenaline and hope had burned down to embers. He was exhausted and had already been forced to slide his gun away so he could use both canes to manage the slippery footing. It was a dangerous proposition but he had no choice. His right foot was cramping with every step, his lower back was seized with spasms as he shivered in the cold. The skin-shell suit had shipped water and he had no skin to insulate him. His coat was soaked and clung to his aching legs, tangled in his braces.

The sewer's low ceiling forced Hyde into a perpetual crouch, not a stretch for a man on canes, but it did not allow a change in stance and so inflamed his aching hips. At times, the circular sewer opened outward where new construction replaced the old tunnel with flat walls and floor. For those short stretches, he could straighten up to allow some circulation into his cramped shoulders. But otherwise, there was no relief.

He labored over his canes; drool hanging from his jaws. The silver pendulum swung each time he craned his neck or twisted his head up to catch echoes. Just water sounds, drips and splashing; but there were other things that he tried to identify. *Voices?*

The suit's external audio system picked up the rapid movement of Biters in waves—and sometimes, dreamlike among them, he was sure he heard a woman's voice talking, at one point pleading, and then cajoling, insinuating. *Impossible.*

No one knew what the early Biters were like before Ritual was fully formed. Were they more human...?

SCREECH!

The ear-splitting whine of a high-speed electric motor drowned out his eavesdropping—ahead, something small and shrill—a power tool—squealed. Then he caught a flash in the dark, as if amber light was boiling in the water. A silhouette appeared over it, hunched and backlit by hood-lamps. Some forty yards from Hyde, near where the tunnel branched east and west, someone in a bag-suit was bent over something in the water. This far in, the liquid was flooding halfway up Hyde's calves at times. The rain was falling hard up on the surface and all those square miles of airport tarmac would be channeling the water down into the tunnels.

The shrieking stopped and as Hyde moved closer, the stranger's hood-lamps showed activity momentarily above the water's surface before it sank out of view. It was just a glimpse, but enough. The stranger pulled the brain out of a red raw open skull and pushed it into a black canister that he then swung up over his shoulder on a strap, where two similar containers hung.

Hyde hissed, hooked a cane over his top button and dug into his coat for his gun, but was forced by numb hands to search with his eyes.

When he looked up with magnum drawn, the mysterious baggie was gone. Glimmering light shimmered from the tunnel on the right where Hyde knew the sewer stretched on to the east for half a mile to another cistern where water drained directly from the runways.

Moving cautiously, uncertainly on his single cane, Hyde slowed as he approached the crossing. An upgrade to the sewer created a flooded space ten feet across where the cramped main pipes intersected inside a massive concrete culvert.

Hyde was able to rise out of his crouch near where the knee-deep water still glowed. Some source of light beneath the surface gave off a pinkish ambience, but sudden splashing sounds to his left kept him from giving it more than a glance. Then the word: "*Ssskin*" reverberated from the black hole that marked where the tunnel branched to the west.

He glanced to his right and saw a silhouette in vinyl shrinking, splashing away on an eastern course. A black moving figure etched over a spark and then...

"*Ssskin.*" *Click. Click. Click.* "*Ssskin. Skin. Skin.*" *Click. Click.*

The hunting pack!

Hyde swept his gun around to the west and aimed into the smothering black circle of shadow. His hand came up to his hood-lamps but froze as his eyes adjusted, made out a single distant circle of dim light. *And movement.* Black shapes lurching across the orange-brown opening. *The cistern.* Then stronger light flashed and flared chaotically behind monstrous shapes.

"*Ssskin!*" The word hissed across the darkness, growing louder with excitement and anticipation. *Ssskin. Ssskin. SKIN!*

“Be good! Be good!” A voice, a woman’s.

She’s alive!

Hyde gasped, quickly pushed a sleeve back and tapped a combination of commands into his skin-shell’s display controls. Immediately, the illusion of skin appeared on his hands and arms. It gave off a faint glow that warmed the tunnel walls. He pushed his hood back, then snatched at the buttons to open the cloth coat that hung from his shoulders.

Hyde looked past his nose; it was obvious, right there where it used to be between his cheeks—his nose. And then...

Look at me! My God! Look at me...

Tears welled in his eyes as he...

Skin wrapped over his swelling chest muscle and defined the contours of his abdomen and groin before flowing away to cover his thighs and legs. Everything down to the hair follicles. *My God!* He gasped and looked away. It all looked normal. He had skin!

I can’t take it!

He was human!

It’s illusion!

Hyde’s vision blurred. *You fool!*

Why did he have to despise himself for coveting some humanity?

Don’t fall for it.

Even Borland in his toxic cocoon of flesh was more a part of the human race than Hyde. Was that why he could never forgive the drunken fool? On top of everything else, did Borland simply make it easier for Hyde to despise his own humanity? Or was it envy?

Wake up!

Envy was emotion. Emotion destroyed rational thinking, and rational thinking was all Hyde had left. But the dream—the dream of envy would always tear at the rational, would always seek to bring him down. Envy made the truth unbearable and the truth was simple: He was a thing that should be dead. He should have died with his squad. That would have justified abandoning his responsibilities to life.

Abandoning Jill...

“*Be good...*” The woman’s voice echoed close again, pulled Hyde from his agony.

“I’m coming,” he whispered in answer.

He closed his coat over his spectral flesh, and started forward. He threw one cane aside and hefted his magnum as a new surge of adrenaline pushed him quickly toward the dim light where the Biters moved. “I’m sorry...”

The Biters continued to leap and scuttle across the circular opening where the tunnel connected to the western cistern—the hellish image growing larger as he approached. The skin eaters were splashing and leaping—chanting the object of their obsession: *Skin. Skin. Ssskin!*

Hyde stepped out of the tunnel and onto a flooded walkway. It was a yard wide and circled a pool five yards across.

“*Ssskin!*” the hunting pack screamed in terror or desire, startled by his sudden appearance. Their skinned, monstrous, and pathetic forms drew back crouching, hissing. Teeth snapping.

There were ten, no, twelve in the group: eight adults or near-adults and four children. As they backed away, he saw that one wore a circle of head-lamps where his tattered hood and tunic hung from skinned head and shoulders. Partial faces looked back at Hyde, enough features among them to form expressions: Fear. Anger. Desire for...

Ssskin!

The pack pulled back to the far side of the cistern and crouched snapping and slashing at the air where they gathered around a woman's legs. She was beautiful, with dark hair, dressed in khaki pants and top. She stood with her back against the wall by another opening that would lead south through the western side of the loop. *The squad would come that way.*

Thank God!

She appeared unhurt...

"It's me!" Hyde choked the words out as he turned up the light on his hood-lamps. His skin-shell display adjusted. "It's daddy, Jill. It's *me!*"

The woman's—*his daughter's*—eyes were round with terror, near madness as the hunting pack cringed at her feet, as this sudden apparition appeared.

"Are you hurt?" Hyde kept an eye on the pack.

"*Ssskin!*" a big male hissed.

"*Ssskin, click, click...*" answered the others, as their naked eyes focused on Hyde's face, at the dark skin there.

"Daddy?" Jill shook her head. "*Impossible.*"

"It's the suit display. Not real," Hyde explained and shrugged. "I was told you lived in Parkerville, but I already knew. I wanted to get you out."

"You're all right..." Jill leaned forward, shaking her head. "You came for me?"

"*Ssskin!*" the big male hissed again, and snapped a glance at the other adults. A trio of them broke off and started circling toward Hyde from around the far side of the cistern. The others started slowly forward—directly, only yards away.

"Yes, honey, I love you," Hyde croaked, struggling to get the words out. He shook tears from of his eyes to watch the pack. Their hunched and bloodied forms were moving closer.

“I’m in trouble, daddy,” Jill said, her hands coming up to her mouth. Her eyes were wide, childlike.

“Not any more. I’m going to draw them away and then you run. Help is coming,” he said and then, holding her gaze: “I’m sorry I let you down.”

Hyde opened his coat and threw it aside. Immediately, the skin-shell’s display cast an amber glow about the cistern as Hyde’s naked body was revealed.

“SSSKIN!” the Biters screamed and hurtled forward. Hyde shot the biggest in the face. The large-caliber bullet removed most of its head. It staggered and fell.

The pack paused, startled by the noise and flash. Hyde took that moment to cast a final look at Jill. He hurried back into the tunnel, staggering toward the east.

“SSSKIN!” *Click. Click. Click. “Skin!”*

The pack’s obsession quickly overpowered their fear and they followed, moving fast. Hyde fired a shot over his shoulder. The flash blinded them and bought him a little time.

But they were close.

CHAPTER 4

A stroke of lightning sizzled in the air and thunder cracked against the pavement drowning out the background rumble of the T-1's engine.

Borland stood by Aggie. She'd just answered her palm-com.

“More bad news, Captain,” Wizard's voice crackled over the link. Lightning flickered and the radio buzzed. The communications tech was still struggling with the cannibalized T-2 equipment and donated army issue. “Colonel Hazen has relayed a report that one of his M.P. units patrolling the highway found an extended passenger van parked on the soft shoulder. The vehicle belongs to Metro Trafalgar High and was bringing a basketball team home from a tournament. Triple-A received a call about a breakdown around six this evening. No one in the van. Room for twelve. Footprints lead toward Parkerville.”

“What about Brass?” Aggie asked before Borland could react. “Does Midhurst have anything for us yet?”

“What *about* Brass?” Borland blurted.

Wizard continued. “Brass' helicopter left Metro five minutes ago. The storm front puts him here inside of 20 minutes.” She paused like she was checking something. “Inspector Midhurst dispatched a transport with the squad that searched the area around the Demarco Building. ETA from Metro is 50 minutes.”

“And Hazen's crew is in place by the tunnel under the runway?” Aggie pushed.

“Yes ma'am.” Wizard's voice buzzed. “And his squad of army issue baggies is prepped and helping Hazard fix T-2—the damage was worse than he thought. They'll come as soon as they can.”

Borland reached out to get Aggie's attention but her head snapped toward him before he could touch her.

“Brass is coming to assess the situation,” she snarled. “He's talking to the Feds about military action. He thinks *this* Effect's too virulent for us to handle.”

“He *thinks?*” Borland sighed and shook his head. *And Midhurst is sending a wrecking crew to cover their retreat...or stop it.* “Fine then, *Brass* can give the orders.”

“What are you talking about?” Aggie started adjusting her bag-suit. “Our orders stand: *Protocol.*”

“But Brass trumps protocol, and if he has backup...” Borland said and groaned, mind turning. *A military team from a different jurisdiction...to kill everything.*

“He’ll need to know the situation *under* the ground.” Aggie shook her head. “Joe, are you just lazy or a coward?”

“Lazy sure,” he grumbled. “But I don’t have a death wish either.”

“Then stay sharp. Don’t worry, these tunnels are too cramped to allow for speed anyway.” Aggie toggled her intercom on. “Okay squad. Time to go down in the history books.” She walked across the front of the group that had formed ranks shoulder to shoulder beside T-1.

Borland recognized Cavalle in her bag-suit. She was carrying a blue med-pack in one hand and a shotgun in the other. She’d be backing up the med-tech Gordon. He was standing a few baggies down from Cavalle and looking like a stick insect wrapped in cellophane.

He recognized others too: Dancer standing poised and ready, with Slick and Chopper to either side; there was Flattop and the Canadian ex-pat, Mountie, both looking large and homicidal with their hoods in place and weapons held across their chests. Lilith and Zombie were there too; their attention on Beachboy as he took his place beside them. Flatfoot stood at the far end, his dejected stance suggesting he’d rather be back in Metro walking a beat.

Sheriff Marley stood near one end of the squad looking awkward and nervous. He pulled at his bag-suit’s crotch. His hood was already in place with the lamps on low. Aggie must have drafted him after the explosion.

Careful what you wish for Sheriff.

Borland clawed his flask out of his jumper pocket and took a good pull as Aggie stopped center to the squad and began to talk. The intercom faded and crackled as the lightning and thunder flickered and boomed through the heavy charcoal clouds overhead.

“Back in the day, brave men and women volunteered to fight the Variant Effect. Back in the day, they drew a line in the sand and held it. Many of you never knew more than stories of that time because we thought we had it licked,” Aggie said, her voice sharp. “Well ladies and gentlemen we were wrong, and you have all stepped forward to draw the line in the sand again. And we’re gonna draw the goddamn thing.”

Thunder *banged* and lightning lit the baggies. The raindrops that had collected on their hoods and shoulders gleamed, and held the lightning a second longer than the scene around them—giving the squad an otherworldly glow.

“We must assume that anyone in the tunnels is our enemy. Deal with them quickly. Anyone that cannot respond to your orders must be shot. Be careful of any survivors. Treat them as prisoners of war. Bind their hands, feet too if necessary. Talk later. We saw with Mao that while this effect may have 100 percent communicability, it still behaves like the Variant of old, and can present in other dangerous ways.” Aggie went quiet a second. “We must stop it here.”

She let that sink in. Borland took another drink and then slipped his flask away. The whiskey set fire to the scene and he smiled.

“We’re not doing this for personal survival, we’re doing this to save every other human being on the planet. We protect the greater population by treating the Variant Effect here and now.” Aggie straightened, pulling the baggies to attention with her. “You come from law enforcement, the military and EMT. Your capacity to protect the innocent will be put to the test. You will not have time to second-guess yourselves, so don’t. We win this, or everybody loses.”

Borland watched the vinyl-covered soldiers. Wondered if any of them would see morning.

“With the loss of veterans Hyde, Lazlo and Spiko, the duty of my second in command falls to Captain Borland. He will bring up the rear.” Aggie turned to acknowledge him. “It is not my plan to divide this group, but should it be necessary or if the Squad is broken by attack...you will follow Captain Borland’s orders to the letter.” Her voice crackled on the intercom as another sheet of lightning lit the sky. “Stay close to him. He has a bad habit of surviving.”

A few chuckles mixed with the static on the intercoms.

“I passed out stick-tabs on the way. Each tab is marked with the letter ‘A’ or ‘B.’” She lifted her hand and Borland saw that each baggie had one of the waterproof labels stuck to his or her left palm. “I want ‘A’ group at the front going in. ‘A’ is my group. Lucky members of ‘B’ group will bring up the rear with Captain Borland.” She started pacing toward him and stopped a foot away. She nodded before turning to the squad. “If I order the squad to split in an offensive or defensive fashion, you will do so along those lines.”

Aggie set her fists on her hips and paced across the rank as she continued:

“We’ve all had a look at the map. We will move into the tunnel and Flattop will seal it behind us. Don’t worry; the cavalry can open the can when they need in. We will move north until the tunnel branches east and west. The hotlink is basically a big loop, so we’ll move into the western arm and seal it behind us. Then we’ll push through that tunnel until we get to the western cistern at the north end of the loop. Along the way we will seal any side vents, tunnels and holes. Past the cistern, the sewer loops back to the south along a lower eastern arm. At the top of the loop a tunnel branches east under the runways to a second *eastern* cistern. It’s a dead end that leads to smaller and smaller bore collector pipes. We’ll seal that for BZ-2 treatment later.

“We will proceed south in the eastern arm of the loop pushing anything in there toward the entrance. As we move through the hotlink remember that it loops around the army’s underground storage. All vents and maintenance access points to the storage space open into the tunnel. Everything’s supposed to be locked and grated, but we will look sharp just the same and seal any opening we find.”

Aggie tried to keep her tone matter-of-fact, but Borland could see in the squad’s collective stance, that nothing could diminish the growing tension. There was only one thing on their minds: they were going underground to fight skin eaters.

Thunder continued to rumble and lightning flickered deep in the clouds.

Borland remembered the maps showing the storage area linked by an access tunnel to a loading dock where the street burrowed under the main runway. Colonel Hazen’s men would be waiting there. Everything was supposed to be locked and shuttered, but Biters were unpredictable and strong.

“When we find the pack they’ll either fight or run. If they fight, the tunnel will allow two baggies kneeling abreast and one standing firing overhead. It’s tight, but it also narrows

their attack. Baggies in the rear will reload and feed fresh shotguns to the front ranks when necessary.”

Aggie’s voice continued to buzz with static. “Anything that doesn’t fight will run. We will push them back toward the entrance that they’ll find locked. It’s dangerous but simple. Watch for new construction, broken vents, any place something child to man-sized could hide in.” Aggie paused. “We will treat them all ladies and gentlemen and sleep well after, knowing we’ve saved the world.”

A couple baggies clapped; three raised their shotguns and cheered.

Thunder banged, and Aggie looked up.

“Nobody plans for weather. So remember that we’re in a sewer that moves water. Colonel Hazen assured me that it would take a flood to cause dangerous levels in there, but we will monitor that situation as the mission progresses. Remember, if you are uncomfortable, the Biters will be *very* uncomfortable.”

Then Dancer pointed up the slope that led to the sewer hotlink. A couple baggies raised their guns as a man in vinyl clambered out of the tunnel, water pouring around his feet. He slid down the hill.

CHAPTER 5

“Ssskin.” Click. Click.

Feet splashed behind—the noise echoed around him. He tried to shut it out.

It’s happening again!

He stabbed the ground with his cane, swung his leg braces forward. He steadied his balance by pushing against the rounded wall with the gun barrel, but he couldn’t catch his breath.

Have to go faster.

“Ssskin.” Click. Click. “SKIN!” The raw, infected feet splashed after him.

It can’t happen again.

But that thought did nothing to calm him.

He was an open wound. On a certain level what might happen now was worse than what happened before. If in their frustration, in the madness of Ritual, once they’d torn his skin-shell suit apart, the Biters could murder him by tearing away the scar tissue that had formed over his body, or...

Infection!

Once a wound was opened, the Varion-hybrid molecule could enter and he would become...he would be...

“Ssskin!” Water splattered, as the Biters came on.

They would take the only thing they left before.

His mind.

He would become like them, and worse, make others like *him*. Even Jill. Whatever luck was working for her so far would not last forever, and once they were done with him—would they not track her down, only with him coming on as well, at one with the pack?

Ripping, tearing and biting at his daughter!

Then Hyde was at the crossing. The pack was almost on him. He fired over his shoulder. The flash slowed them. They fell back as their eyes flared with pain. As their heartbeats raced with fear and anxiety.

More need for *Ritual*.

He fired another shot wildly, before lurching down the tunnel that led to the east and the second cistern under the runways. If nothing else, he knew the squad's plan was to seal and gas it. If he could lead the Biters far enough. And there was the other baggie—the brain collector. Where was he?

Was it possible that another squad was in the hotlink?

Hyde's body screamed with pain, his muscles clenched in spasms as he lurched through the darkness, the way lit by the aura from his virtual body and his hood-lamps.

There was no help.

This would be the end.

And then he understood Borland's decision at the Demarco building, when Biters cornered him and there seemed to be no escape.

Better suicide than to die by skinning, or worse, surviving it.

But he couldn't do it.

To fight so hard.

To give Jill up to survive, only to kill himself when faced with a terrible death.

And he had sworn to other survivors that he would live.

A terrible death started twenty years before.

A strong hand caught his right ankle and he fell forward.

“No!” he cried, unable to control the fear that pounded in his chest. “No!”

Something heavy dropped on his back and bellowed: “SKIN!”

Click. Click. Click. Others were cramming closer into the tight confines of the tunnel.

Ritual!

Feet splashed around him, water poured over his hood.

Hands gripped. Fingers pinched.

He marveled for a second at the illusory skin on his forearms, where they entered the water.

“Skin!”

Hyde struggled to turn onto his back, as fingers pried under his collar and pulled.

He rolled with the motion, and looked up into a Biter’s face. Its teeth snapped at him, and its eyes burned with desire in the dim light from Hyde’s hood-lamps.

Hyde whipped his cane up and jammed it between its jaws, pushed the wood back into the naked muscle and twisted it, used his leverage to bend the creature’s neck to the right until it barked with pain or frustration. It leapt away, with a wrench of Variant-enhanced muscles pulling the cane from Hyde’s grasp.

Others pushed in. Adults and young, snapping and biting. Exposed finger-bones digging for purchase.

A face came close, a female. Her jaws still covered by cheeks and lips, the skin around her eyes torn away with her nose—the open wound looked like a mask. He pressed his magnum against her face and fired. The brown hair blew out behind her with a gout of red and she fell aside.

Then a young one took her place, a boy, his head and torso stripped to the veins and red. His chubby hands were unchanged as they pinched at Hyde's face.

He swept his magnum at the small head, and was sickened by the crunch of bone. It fell to the side as tears started down Hyde's cheeks.

No more!

He wept.

I can't do this anymore.

Hyde clubbed at a big male's face as it tugged on the display plates covering his arms.

“Skin!” And other hands pulled at his legs, their finger-bones worming under the edges and cuffs of his skin-shell. *Tugging. Ripping.* His display image flickered as he clubbed about in the dark with the magnum, beating a red spray from exposed muscle and bone. They tumbled in the water, rolled in the brown liquid.

“*Ssskin! Ssskin. Skin. Skin. Skin!*” many voices shrieked over and over as the Biters pulled and wrenched at him—set their teeth.

“Stop it! Stop it!” Hyde cried, voice shrill in the dark. “I can't!”

There was another flicker, and then his suit display went black. The Biters froze, uncertain.

A second later Hyde's preset command initiated. The timing was off, but...

The suit display flared in a hot white flash that blinded everything in the tunnel.

Even Hyde.

CHAPTER 6

Borland tripped over Shanju's corpse about a yard past where the tunnel branched. He hadn't expected the water to be so deep and dark, and he hadn't expected the skinned corpse to pop up in his arms.

It was Lilith who identified her.

But Borland was so frazzled, his nervous system so overworked, that he couldn't do more than growl at the thing as he pushed it away. Lilith and Zombie showed genuine fear and revulsion as they helped him to his feet. Beachboy snarled and cocked his shotgun, wanting vengeance.

Vengeance against what?

"Nice," Borland said looking back down the tunnel. Flattop had sealed the hotlink after the squad entered, and had just finished flash-welding a grate over the western tunnel before waving to Borland's crew and dragging his equipment after Aggie. Borland could hear the squad moving up the other tunnel slowly, noisily checking for rabbit holes.

He had already told his small crew to switch their intercoms to a second channel. He knew they'd quickly get sick and tired of hearing their own breathing. No sense listening to the other group as well.

"Come on," he said, and moved cautiously up the eastern branch.

They were on a mission.

After Hyde's driver calmed down, he'd reported that Hyde had gone ahead into the tunnel after hearing at least one civilian voice. They thought it belonged to the hunting pack's captive. Since *one* escaped Ritual, it meant there might be other survivors.

Neither Aggie nor Borland held much hope for that, but she gave him the okay to go into the eastern branch to look for Hyde since he was expecting some kind of help to come that way.

Rescuing one captive and one veteran captain was not enough to risk the entire operation *or* squad so Aggie asked for volunteers to go with him. Borland picked Lilith, Zombie and Beachboy as his team. If they couldn't find Hyde they were to fall back to the hotlink entrance where they could hunker down and kill anything that came through the tunnel that couldn't tell them its name. Wizard had said Midhurst was sending a squad from Metro to back them up. They'd arrive inside an hour.

That was the plan.

Borland snarled and burped up his last drink. Moving in the tight tunnel churned his guts, made his hernias ache and pull. Steam was building up in his hood. It was hot. He was trying to figure out why he'd gotten involved in a rescue operation.

You owe him.

Borland grumbled over that thought as he splashed through the water. His group followed: Lilith, then Zombie and Beachboy in the rear.

Hyde thinks you owe him.

And Borland was pretty sure that Hyde didn't understand the situation. Things were not the way he thought.

He can't suffer that too.

"Not my fault," Borland whispered.

"What's that captain?" Lilith's voice was sharp over the intercom.

"Nothing! Keep your eyes open," Borland snapped, sweeping his hood-lamps up in time to see a small hand reach down from the left.

"Wait!" he barked, hefting his shotgun. The tunnel opened up a yard ahead. When the army built their storage space they'd replaced a length of the circular sewer with a narrow concrete hall. About seven feet up a skinned arm hung out of a vent. It moved slowly, the muscles glistening with pockets of infection.

What the hell?

“Jesus, Captain!” Zombie shouted, getting his shotgun up.

The combined grouping of head-lamps showed the arm was jammed through the bent bars of a vent covering near the ceiling. Inside, they could see the shoulder, and skinned head of a small Biter—a child. It was covered with a waxy sheen. The veins on the skull pulsed slowly.

“Ssskin,” it hissed weakly. The whites of its eyes were yellow. The pupils were dilated despite the light from the hood-lamps. Its fingers made a slow fanning motion, but it could not reach out. “*Skin.*”

“What happened to it?” Lilith asked, her shotgun steady.

“It climbed into the vent.” Borland shrugged and tried to see past it. The body was wedged tight into a ventilation shaft made of sheet steel. “Must be the storage room back there.” He remembered Hazen’s blueprints. He shook his head. “It tried to get out and got stuck—they aren’t geniuses.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Zombie frowned at the thing.

“If we don’t get to them first, Biters die of infection and blood loss—*shock*. They’ve got no skin,” Borland grunted and then started along the tunnel.

“What?” Beachboy called after him. “You’re going to leave it?”

“Can’t risk the noise,” Borland said over his shoulder. “It’s not going anywhere.”

They splashed northward, the water moving against them now, collecting in places, creating eddies that pulled at their vinyl leggings. There was a long section of cramped round tunnel followed by another length of rectangular concrete.

Borland breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it. The ceiling was higher, allowed him to move without crouching.

Then he froze. Ahead on the left, their hood-lamps showed a recessed doorway on the left side of the tunnel. There were two steps up, the lowest covered by water. The door was made of thick boards bound with steel, but it had been splintered and bent, and hung open from a single hinge.

“Damn,” Borland cursed. Held his shotgun on the door as he moved slowly past it.

Lilith and the others did the same, their hood-lamps showed dark rafters leading into a shadowed room. Crates, boxes and drums rested against brick walls.

“Corporal didn’t mention that,” Lilith said.

“They probably had their lamps on low—couldn’t see it,” Borland explained. “Didn’t want to attract attention.”

“Do you think there are Biters in there?” Zombie asked.

“They have been,” Borland grumbled and stepped up to tentatively move the door on its broken hinge—listening. “But it’s too quiet.”

At that, repetitious splashing sounds echoed toward them along the tunnel from the north. Borland turned, took a few steps forward. Their hood-lamps flickered on the concrete walls. Twenty yards from their position the round sewer began again. It was a circle of darkness rising out of the water.

“Is that Hyde?” Beachboy fanned the darkness with his shotgun.

“Moving fast,” Lilith said.

“Too fast for him,” Borland growled, shotgun gripped tight in his hands.

“The corporal said there might be other survivors,” Lilith blurted.

“He said...” Borland squinted into the distance. “Wait!”

At the edge of the light from their hood-lamps they caught movement. Something pink moving fast through the sewer. Red bodies. Teeth gleaming.

Biters!

Five!

“Ssskin! Ssskin! Skin. SKIN!”

Borland fired from the hip. One of the Biters caught the blast full in the face, but kept coming, its torn features wriggling around a single obsessed eye. A blast removed the arm from a second Biter but it barely slowed, ramped up on Variant and the need for *Ritual*.

“Get back! Get back. Through the door! GO!” Borland shouted, pumping the shotgun. A Biter’s chest exploded. Beachboy appeared beside him, firing wildly. Borland elbowed him back toward the doorway.

“Inside!” he ordered. Another Biter died. “Now!”

Lilith and Zombie couldn’t open up without hitting Borland or Beachboy so they hurried up the stairs and through the doorway into the storage area.

Beachboy followed.

Borland kept firing.

Bastards!

Only three left. Two were wounded badly but *Ritual* overrode self-preservation. He fired a final time and glanced into the open door. Inside, Beachboy stood in the underground warehouse; past him Zombie and Lilith scanned the darkness with their hood-lamps.

Borland set a boot on the step and grabbed the mangled door to heave himself in.

His hood-lamps swung into the shadows behind him.

There. A big male in tattered army pants. Skinned from the bellybutton to the top of his head. Somehow it got behind them or they missed something.

“Sssskin...” it hissed.

Goddamn son-of-a-bitch!

Sorrow and horror wrenched him.

Just people!

Get away!

He slammed the door in Beachboy's face. The younger man had turned at the sound and moved to join him.

Too late!

Borland threw his back against the door and raised his shotgun as the Biters pounced.

CHAPTER 7

Hyde's distraction worked too well. True, the Biters were sent into panic and disarray by the dazzling light from his skin-shell suit, but his lidless eyes were blinded too. He'd programmed the suit to flash and promptly lost track of time. He had underestimated the effects of darkness, action and terror.

And Jill. Did she get away?

The flash must have drained his suit's batteries, and while he still had hood-lamps, he could only see painful flares and neon flashes in his mind. Anxiety tightened his chest—was he hallucinating? *Am I blind?* The only real things he had to cling to were the terrifying sounds that crowded close.

The skin eaters were overcome by the display, and after some initial pitiful screams and anxious calls: "*Ssskin! Skin. Skin. Skin.*" The pack began to reassemble in the shadow despite their blindness, rallying around the eerie *clicking* that echoed in Hyde's darkness. He dragged himself away from the sounds, pushing his exhausted body on the memory of adrenaline.

The water was deeper in the tunnel that branched east beneath the runway, and pushed against his forearms and thighs as he crawled into the current. He knew the eastern cistern was a half-mile from where the sewer branched. If he could get the Biters to follow, the squad might have time to seal them in.

Hyde still gripped the magnum in his right hand. There was a single bullet left. A quick clumsy check of his suit showed him his belt with speed-loader and sparklers had been torn off in the melee.

One bullet. Who gets it?

He suddenly noticed orange patterns dancing in front of his face, and he realized it was the amber from his hood-lamps reflecting on the water. His vision was returning.

"Skin!" A shout echoed from behind. "*Ssskin. Skin. Skin.*" It was answered by a chorus of other voices. The Biters were regaining their vision and confidence too.

He heard them clicking, orienting; then came the rapid skip of their feet as they followed.

Hyde mustered his strength, heaved himself to his knees, crawling up the curved wall until he could stand and turn to face the pack. Once he was up, he toggled his hood-lamps and sent a cone of bright yellow into the darkness before him.

“Skin. Sssskin.” And the skipping pelt of their feet drew closer.

Hyde flipped the revolver open and counted the single live round before snapping it shut.

Find the Alpha.

By now the pack would have reestablished some hierarchy; it was all based on ancient genetic primate code. Alpha status was established by skin-fights, simple intimidation and experience in extreme situations—also by luck.

Challenge the Alpha.

On impulse, Hyde toggled his suit’s external audio upward—hoping he had enough power. Then he unsnapped the clasp at his throat. With a wrench, he pulled the front of his skin-shell open and pushed his hood back. The hood-lamps hung by his shoulders and lit his skinned face, throat and torso. Hyde’s naked eyes glared through a yellow haze. The suit’s microphone and biofeedback sensors still clustered over his skull from a plastic rig.

Then he saw the red, raw wounded forms splashing closer. Pink muscle flexed, lidless eyes flashed, and lipless jaws snapped.

“Skin!” they screamed coming closer. *“Sssskin.”*

Hyde focused on the leader, a big male. His eyes were drawn to the creature by a ring of lights, hood-lamps that dangled from a wire twisted around its skinned shoulders and neck.

Oh God.

Hyde recognized the stiff bristle of hair that ran over the head from ear to missing ear.

The Biters approached, there were ten hurtling towards him chanting “*Skin.*”

And the leader rose, snapping his teeth at the air in front of Hyde’s face.

“SSSKIN!” it bellowed, hands clawing outward.

“SKIN!” Hyde roared back, his enhanced voice shook the air around them. He swung the magnum at its head

The Biter ducked, and Hyde staggered forward. The pack was hanging back, regarding him hesitantly with their naked eyes.

“SKIN!” the Biter barked and came in close, snapping its teeth at Hyde’s jaw.

But Hyde howled and snapped back. He swung his magnum, and clubbed the big male across the left temple.

“SSSKIN!” Hyde hissed, and swung the gun again, his enhanced voice echoing in the darkness. The other Biters cowered some way down the tunnel, nervously hissing their obsession.

“SKIN!” the Biter shrieked furiously and charged in.

Hyde knew the creature could overpower him with his weight alone.

So he gambled.

“*Jailbird*, stand down!” Hyde bellowed, the external audio buzzing.

And the Biter hesitated. For a second Hyde was sure he saw something like recognition in the creature’s eyes as it tilted its head to left and right. It reached out, exposed jaws opened monstrously, like it wanted to speak.

“I’m sorry!” Hyde said, and stuck the gun up under the Biter’s chin.

Jailbird’s jaws snapped shut as some kind of realization hit home.

Hyde fired, and the baggie's brains blew out the back of his head.

The thing reflexively raised its hands and clutched at the exposed flesh and muscle of its chest before it pitched forward, dead in the water.

Hyde looked past it to the others. They continued to cower and crouch in the water, obviously showing fear, perhaps acceptance or obedience.

“SSSKIN!” Hyde roared, his heart racing. Were there any more challengers? He had no more bullets.

“Ssskin,” the pack repeated, crouching; their raw exposed skulls nodding in the amber of Hyde's hood-lamps. Their spread fingers passed repetitively over the water's surface.

Ritual! They wanted *Ritual*.

“SKIN!” Hyde shrieked, and staggered forward. His mind reeled.

I am Alpha!

The skin eaters cringed before him.

You are Alpha.

It was clear; they were saying it with their eyes, with their approving clicks, as he staggered among them.

Their hands came up, naked finger-bones and exposed tendons touching first Hyde's heavy leg braces, then running up over his arms and scarred chest in wonder and acceptance. Rotting fingers caressed his skinned face.

Infection. You won't escape it after all.

And he knew the circle was complete.

“*Ssskin,*” he whispered softly, setting a gloved hand on a torn scalp, a child's.

“*Skin,*” it bleated nervously. *Click. Click. Click.*

They need you.

He hissed reassuringly as the hunting pack clambered close, encircled him. Filled with anxiety and fear—driven by Variant to horror and violence—they needed Ritual.

They raised their gruesome hands to accept him, draw him in as leader.

Infection.

He had a hundred abrasions from the fight. The water and the hunting pack, *his pack,* was an open wound dripping the Varion-hybrid molecule.

And there were no more bullets.

CHAPTER 8

The big male grabbed Borland's shotgun by the barrel and heaved. Its blood-slick hands slid on the metal, and Borland's weight worked for him, gave him leverage to turn the weapon. He tried to blast an approaching Biter in the face.

There was a *click* when he pulled the trigger.

Empty.

The big male twisted the shotgun as the other two Biters leapt on Borland, their skinned fingers ripping and slipping over his vinyl bag-suit seeking entry. Their weight hammered him against the door. It rattled in the frame.

Then flashes of light exploded through cracks in the mangled wood and flared on the wall opposite him.

Boom! Boom!

Shotgun blasts! Was Beachboy trying to come through the door? There was shouting now, and *hissing*.

Biters were in the storage space!

But Borland didn't have time to think.

The big male pulled on the shotgun. Borland timed it right, released his grip and the Biter lost its balance, fell hissing and snapping in the water.

The remaining Biters ripped at him. They were torn up and skinned, but not enough to hide the fact that one was a ten-year-old boy with blue eyes and the other a red-headed teen in a cheerleader's sweater and skirt clotted with blood and hanging in threads.

Kill them Borland.

No!

It's happening again!

Fury burned along Borland's fried nerves, turned molten.

Get away from me!

There was no escaping it. Hatred set him on fire.

It was the day.

And Borland went ape.

While the big male howled animal-like, throwing the shotgun down the tunnel, Borland used his bulk to elbow the younger Biters back as he drew his pistol.

He fired the .38 pointblank into the female Biter's chest. She screamed and tore at the air but died when Borland fired another round into her heart.

The big male was back, locking its torn fingertips on Borland's shoulders and pulling him close. Borland gasped as its jaws opened, as it sank its teeth into his vinyl face-shield.

Even through the thick material, Borland felt the Variant-enhanced power of the bite. His cheeks and jaws were scored and pinched into the folds of vinyl as the Biter set its teeth in a grotesque and deadly kiss. It pushed on Borland's shoulders like it was going to rip his head off.

All as the young-boy Biter was pulling and pinching at Borland's left shoulder, sinking its teeth into the vinyl, fat and skin under his arm.

Borland growled.

Bastard!

And he wept.

Not me!

He snarled in the Biter's embrace.

NEVER!

You can't beat me.

He went with the big male's bite, pushed forward suddenly and threw all his weight against its skinned chest.

There was a cracking sound as ribs gave way. The Biter gasped, opened its jaws and Borland frowned at the stench of its breath.

Then his left armpit went white-hot with pain as the young Biter tightened its pit bull grip, wrenching and twisting on the mouthful of vinyl and skin.

But Borland fought the big male, bringing his pistol up and smashing it into the exposed flesh on its face before raking twice across the thing's throat and waxy trachea.

"SSSKIN!" the thing hissed, its stripped muscles clenching with pain and need. With a vicious claw and tear action, it grabbed Borland's hood and started pumping it back and forth, almost shaking him off his feet as the vinyl ripped.

But Borland was angry too. Rage burned up from his armpit with the pain as the young Biter tore and chewed at him. Fury boiled in his heart.

He roared and smashed his .38 into the big male's temple, brought it back hard again. Bits of flesh and blood splattered his mangled face-shield.

The Biter snapped at his gun.

"Stop it!" Borland bared his teeth, snarling through the vinyl. He shoved his pistol into the big male's eye. "Goddamn you, I said Stop it!"

He fired twice, and the big male shook powerfully, its sharp finger-bones tearing at Borland's bag-suit, wrenching it forward—ripping the seams. The Biter shivered, then dropped into the water.

The young Biter was caught up in Ritual, still ripping and tearing at his arm. Borland pulled his gun around and fired.

But missed.

At the blast, the young Biter realizing he was alone, suddenly let go of Borland. It hissed and splashed at lightning speed toward the north.

“No you don't!” Borland growled, buoyed by the echo of pain. *You just killed me.*

His suit was torn. He could smell the damp sewer air. Was he infected?

He started after the young Biter, his heart hot with adrenaline. He made it five steps and kicked his shotgun. His temples pounded when he stooped to sweep it up out of the water. Sparks danced in his eyes.

Then he charged to the north, grumbling as the sewer narrowed and constricted his movements. The light from his hood-lamps was cockeyed. One shot at his feet; the right lamp pointed straight up.

The big male had done a number on it.

Borland smelled damp and rot and mildew. Could feel moisture on his cheeks.

Game over.

Distantly he heard gunshots or thunder.

Was that Zombie and Lilith? Did they run into more Biters? Where's Beachboy?

But the thoughts stoked the flames of his anger. Brought more furious tears spilling over his throbbing face.

It will end soon.

The water rose almost to his knees at times and then...

“*Ssskin!*” The word came from up ahead.

Borland dimmed his hood-lamps.

As the light lowered, he noticed the water twenty yards ahead was glowing. *He was at the crossing!* Then light was flickering out of the eastern tunnel.

Suddenly Hyde and a group of Biters came out of the shadow on the right—moving into the western tunnel. The old goblin’s skin-shell was gone. A ring of hood-lamps hung from his scarred shoulders, lit biofeedback connectors that still dangled from his head. The remains of his suit draped like rags over his leg braces. He staggered ahead of the pack, leading them to the west, toward the cistern—directly into Aggie’s path.

The Biters whispered and clicked around his legs. Cringing, reaching out and touching him like he was the Alpha.

He was the Alpha.

And Borland’s spirits sank as Hyde led his pack into the west.

“*Ssskin...*” whispered a voice—close.

Borland cursed, toggled his hood-lamps to high. When he swung to his right, the light fell on a pair of legs ankle-deep in water. Curled tight to the side of the tunnel was a woman cradling the young-boy Biter in her arms.

I would have walked right past her.

She looked like her mother.

“Hi Uncle Joe,” Jill Hyde said, setting the Biter down and getting to her feet. The skin-eater crouched by her calves. Now Borland could see she was cradling the body of a

small dog in the crook of her arm like some obscene purse. It had been skinned. “Thanks for telling daddy I was here. He rescued *me*.”

“Oh no, Jill.” Borland sighed, moving back. “Not me.”

“This is all a big accident,” Jill said. “Nobody even knew I was a kinderkid.”

As the adrenaline burned away, Borland began to register his wounds. He just hoped they were the old ones acting up. His hernias tugged at each movement, and his navel ached like someone had knifed him. His face and body felt bruised and abraded, and every joint ached. If the Biters broke the skin anywhere, and drooled or bled into it...he could present at any time.

And now this...

“Maybe you can help me,” Jill said, lowering a hand and pressing the palm against the young Biter’s skinned face. It looked up at her and clicked, then centered its gaze on Borland, and hissed: “*Ssskin*.”

CHAPTER 9

Hyde led his pack west through the open area where the tunnels branched and on toward the cistern where he'd left Jill.

She must be gone. She must be safe by now. I won't let them hurt her.

He felt a sudden adrenaline rush as a spatter of footsteps hurtled near. *More Biters.* The seven that appeared had been chased north along the west tunnel and past the cistern. Aggie and squad would be hot on their trail.

In the hood-lamp light, Hyde saw that many of the Biters bore wounds from shotgun pellets and small arms fire. They moved like lightning despite the injuries; charging up to Hyde's little pack with the reckless speed of Variant-enhanced reflexes and strength. They pressed Hyde's group hissing and spitting, pinching and poking.

A pair of large Biters, muscular in life, their faces in tatters, a male and female soldier judging by their ruined clothes, pushed in close to Hyde, hounding and hazing him as his guts turned with revulsion, as body fluids spattered over his scarred and naked chest.

But he pushed back, and intimidated with his own focused hate and fury, snapping his teeth in their faces, bellowing “*SKIN*” and biting furiously, even clashing incisors with the female.

With a final scream and display these biggest Biters fell in line. Terrified and wounded, his growing pack was in need of release. They submitted to his will out of fear and weakness, in need of *Ritual*.

He snapped his teeth and clashed his gloved hands pinching the closest Biters, turned them, herded them back the way they had come, toward the cistern and the approaching squad.

If it's skin you want...

The small skin eaters moved close to his knees as the larger Biters either investigated their new Alpha, cautiously stroking his strange leg-braces or scouting through the shadows in the lead.

They soon exited the tunnel and clambered around its opening. The water had overflowed the cistern pool and flooded the cement walkway that ran around its perimeter. It was four feet wide and offered the Biters perilous footing as the most anxious misread its margin and had to cling to their brethren to avoid falling into the bubbling pool of frigid water. Hyde looked up at the chamber's rounded ceiling. It was punctured at intervals by evenly spaced drains that belched rainwater into the central pond. Hyde saw the rusted iron ladder bolted to the wall and leading upward to a portal undoubtedly locked.

“SSSKIN!” one of the males bellowed, and crouched on the flooded walkway. But there was no need to explain to Hyde. He had seen the movement in the adjoining tunnel that opened across from them.

The squad was huddled inside the door with their hood-lamps off. A *reconnoiter* that had turned into an *opportunity*.

If he were leading the squad, he'd let the Biters assemble then he'd hit the hood-lamps and come out firing when the last was clear of the tunnel.

“Skin!” barked a sleek female.

She was answered by a chorus of the same, as the Biters instinctively broke into two roughly equal-sized groups. One started north around the pool's edge, the other followed the circular walkway to the south.

“Now!” Aggie shouted.

The hood-lamps sparked to life.

Hyde and the Biters cowered away from the blinding flare.

And the gunfire started.

Flashing. Blazing muzzles.

“*Skin! Ssskin! SSSKIN!*” the Biters shrieked, leaping and running toward the squad. Blinded, reckless with need.

Hyde took two staggering steps and felt a sudden jarring blow to the chest.

He looked down, and an inch below his skinned sternum, a bullet hole had appeared. Blood poured out.

It doesn't even hurt. Well that's...

Hyde took another step and toppled through the gunfire into the cistern pool. He sank but rebounded from the bottom, lifted by the current that exploded from grated drains that opened on each point of the compass.

The cistern was four feet deep. Hyde coughed, clamped a numb hand on the cold concrete lip long enough to hook his naked chin over it.

And he watched.

The southern group was cut to pieces when the baggies followed Aggie's orders and concentrated their fire on the frontal assault. The action destroyed almost half the hunting pack, though it did leave the squad open for what came next.

Faster and stronger Biters hurtled around the cistern's northern rim and got in close with the loss of only two of their number. Those absorbed further shotgun blasts as the Biters behind pushed into the squad like battering rams. The close confines knocked two baggies into the water where they foundered in their suits, their struggles sending waves over Hyde.

The Biters pressed the attack, fouling the squad's shotguns by charging close and forcing the violence to brutal proximity. Big or small they were fast, impossible to hit.

Aggie recognized the danger, understood the need to clear some space around the squad. She stepped forward and broke the knee of the closest Biter. She snapped its neck as it fell.

With a whirling kick to the ankles she knocked two of the closest Biters onto their backs where one was shot by the baggie, Dancer. Aggie smashed the other's skull with her gun butt.

She followed through with a flying kick in the face of a big male. His naked finger-bones snatched at Aggie, but a single motion of her hands folded his forearm midway.

Other Biters, male and female, caught at Aggie. One in a ragged dress and nylons set its teeth in her shoulder. She drew her pistol and shot it in the forehead as the others used brute strength to grip her suit, pull her limbs aside and push her down.

The squad clambered to help as a male leapt on Aggie's chest. His claw-like hands gripped her face-shield and battered her as the others pulled.

The squad hesitated, unwilling to fire so close to her.

Then they screamed her name, reversed their shotguns and charged the pack with the weapons raised like clubs.

They don't know.

Hyde watched from the water—the cold complete.

Only Aggie.

The Biters charged and started ripping.

Only Lovelock would dare fight them hand to hand.

“SKIN!” the Biters howled, focusing their intent. “Sssskin!”

They brought the battle to the squad.

Some guns flashed. Bones broke. Skin ripped.

It's over.

Hyde took a final breath. Shivering uncontrollably he lost his grip, sank beneath the surface.

CHAPTER 10

“It was just something I did to calm down. You know people who *love* to eat turkey skin on the holidays? That’s how I thought about it. Christmas and Thanksgiving were my favorite: I just didn’t know why. Mom used to complain that I had to eat some meat too.” Jill Hyde’s eyes darkened. “I started hiding the skin in napkins and sneaking it up to my room to eat when everyone else was in bed.” She shrugged. “Later I got inventive and started peeling hotdogs, even pickles. I’d strip the outer covering off to eat. It felt good.”

“Your parents didn’t notice?” Borland’s temples throbbed as his anxiety and adrenaline built toward a stroke.

“They were too busy fighting.” Jill paced across the tunnel. The young Biter moved by her knees in a crouch. “And when they shouted, I did it more. They’d yell, and I’d *skin* something.” She laughed at Borland’s expression. “Nothing *living*, Uncle Joe—things like thin-sliced meat and candies: Fruit Roll-Ups, or taffy. Sometimes I’d go for anything I could flatten out and pick into mouth-sized bits.” She went quiet and then smiled. “Just rolling it between my fingers was sometimes enough. Mom and dad would be fighting, but that *rolling* would calm me down. *Eating it* made everything right in the world.”

BANG! BOOM! BANG!

Gunshots erupted in the air, rattling down from the north. Borland dropped to a knee and waved his weapons defensively.

The young Biter cringed, wrapped its arms around Jill’s right thigh. She stiffened, looked down at the Biter then pinched a loose piece of skin off the back of its neck. She considered Borland a second before anxiously popping the morsel into her mouth. Jill’s stance softened as she chewed.

BANG! BOOM!

Still the gunfire deafened them. Crouching, Borland felt water pouring in the left side of his suit, but he kept his eyes on Jill and the little Biter.

The gunshots continued a minute more, and then slowed. There was other noise now, quieter but distinctive. Violent blows were being struck.

More shots.

“Do you think daddy’s okay?” Jill asked, taking a step toward Borland.

“Stay there,” he ordered, holding his shotgun by the barrel and pointing his pistol at her. “I know what you are.”

She smiled and started talking. The singsong quality of her voice was unnerving.

“Remember when mom would bring me down to Stationhouse Nine to see dad, I was just little, and you always put me up on your shoulders and ran around the transports?” Jill’s voice softened. “And we both knew daddy didn’t like it, but we did it anyway. Every time—we teased him.”

Borland nodded, remembering the bright-eyed girl running to him—open and innocent, unable to judge him, no matter how badly he was cranked. Hyde always scowled.

“When daddy got hurt, and he went away, I was just a kid. But later I learned what happened, and I kind of understood why he stayed away and why he wouldn’t return mom’s calls or mine. I always thought I’d grow up to be a doctor and help him one day.” She smiled. “So we could be a family.” Jill looked downcast. “But I was too nervous for university. I couldn’t take the pressure, you know, I spent a lot of time in closets eating chicken skin. I flunked out after a couple years and got a job at a lab. “

“Medcor,” Borland said, as he struggled to his feet.

Jill smiled brightly and nodded. “We tested tissue samples from everywhere, research facilities and special clinics.” She looked down, almost embarrassed. “I really tried to control it, but sometimes dermatologists sent things in for classification and *disposal*. *Skin*. When there was enough of it, well, I couldn’t resist taking some home—just to touch when I got nervous.” She put her hand over her mouth to cover her smile. “One time when I was really nervous I ate a little bit.” A smile spread over her face. “It just happened, but...*boy*, it was like the feeling before but multiplied a million times.” She shook her head. “It was dreamy. But after that, I took specimens whenever I was going through a rough time. It’s a craving I can’t explain.”

“Yeah,” Borland growled, and gestured with his gun. “No closer.” He’d noticed that Jill was slowly moving toward him.

She smiled and then froze, shoulders locked, as another riot of shotgun fire echoed down the tunnel. It tapered quickly to silence.

“I felt ashamed about eating it, Uncle Joe. I knew it was wrong, but I couldn’t stop so I built a special room in the basement where I could do whatever I wanted with the skin without feeling guilty. I wasn’t hurting anyone.”

“I saw the room,” Borland said, realizing his shotgun was empty. *The .38 will be messy.* One bullet? No chance of reloading.

“Just me and Lilly would go down there.” She smiled and hefted her dead dog as a flush came into her cheeks. “About a month ago we got some frozen brain, glands and skin samples from a company that was only numbers on the return address. The samples weren’t in solution like the other specimens. I couldn’t resist the idea of *real* skin without that ethanol taste so I took some and thawed it. I was—*over the moon.*”

“Stop moving, Jill.” He held up his guns. The shotgun had extra shells stored in the stock but he’d never load them fast enough. “I’m trying to think of a way out of this.”

“After that, the cravings got worse. I started dreaming about it and when I looked at people I only saw their skins. I never considered the pain it would cause. I just imagined their skin in my mouth, warm and soft. The idea felt *sexual*, and the more I looked at people, the more I wanted their skin. I would get so nervous worrying about calming down. And it made me so excited.

“Then one morning, I woke up feeling like I was outside myself, *watching* me. A voice whispered about the skin, and it told me how to get some. It told me to get the Taser I carried for muggers and go to a convenience store that night. When a man came out of the store the voice told me to talk to him.

“I told the man my car wouldn’t start, so he came over and got in, and the voice Tasered him, and pushed him over into the passenger seat. Then I drove him home and tied him up in my secret room. You see, I used rope then, and I should have used chains.” She smiled looking inward. “I took a cab back to the store and got his car and hid it in my garage.”

Her face twisted with emotion.

“The voice just took a little skin at a time, in places that his clothes would cover. I don’t know how long he stayed but before he got away we got excited and instead of using a

knife and fork and plate, the voice licked at the skin and pulled it off with my teeth.” She shook her head. “It all *felt* so good, but the voice had to do it...or I’d know,” she gasped, eyes growing wide with terror. “Otherwise, Uncle Joe, *I* was hurting that man.”

“Does your father know?” Borland asked, aware that Jill had moved another step closer. He could have reached out and touched her with the butt of the shotgun. There were still sounds echoing up the tunnel: the clatter of gunfire, and then splashing violent action.

She shook her head and looked down at the Biter. “What’s happening to us?”

“All I can figure is you got the new Variant from the samples at the lab. It beefed up your own kinderkid presentation and passed to your captive from your saliva. He took his car when he escaped and presented as a Biter when he got to Metro. He must have gone there for help,” Borland sighed. “Before he left town he touched something or someone—left blood or body fluid somewhere public. Someone in Parkerville got it from there. *If you haven’t passed it directly, Jill.*”

She dropped the dead dog, put her hands up to her face and moaned.

“*Ssskin?*” asked the Biter poking the dog’s body.

“There’s nothing I can do,” Borland said, gasping raggedly.

“Don’t let daddy know,” Jill pleaded, and then her eyes centered on him. The pupils dilated out, black absorbed her irises. “Get ready Joe, the voice is coming.”

The young Biter hissed up at Borland.

When he looked back at Jill—at the *stalker*—her—*its* face was hard and white. Her lips were pulled away from her teeth and her body shook in muscular spasms as the stalker bellowed: “SSSKIN!”

Borland shot the young Biter with his .38 as it leapt across the distance. Its brain blew out in a scarlet fan. And the stalker was on him, its hands around his wrist pushing it back until something snapped. The .38 disappeared with a *plunk!*

Borland grimaced, smashed the shotgun barrel into the stalker’s face. There was a hard *clink* and *gasp* as teeth flew.

Scowling the stalker swung him by his broken wrist, bones grating, and he tumbled along the tunnel. His head struck the concrete. His vision flickered as he fell face-first into the water.

He struggled, got a knee under him and turned...

The stalker was squatting in the water, an intent look on its face as its hands trolled the liquid by its knees. It clicked its tongue and lifted a small white object: a tooth.

Snarling at the pain, Borland clenched the shotgun under his right arm and pried a shell out of the stock. He jammed it into the breach and cocked the weapon.

The stalker turned to him, blood dribbling over its chin, and smiled.

Borland aimed the gun as it charged.

The shotgun roared, and half of the stalker's torso exploded in a haze of torn meat and blood. It staggered back snarling, slumping to the left. Its fingers still ripping at the air like claws.

That's enough! It's got to end.

Borland growled beast-like, dragged himself to his feet and lurched toward the stalker. Blood flowed from its torn body, flooded down its legs.

He bit back tears raising the shotgun, fingers wrapped around the barrel.

The first blow cracked her skull with a sickening crunch. Blood sprayed.

Borland wept as he pushed Jill down and beat her brains out.

CHAPTER 11

He threw the shotgun away; its stock shattered, then he dredged around in the knee-deep mix of water and blood until he found his .38. He stuffed it into his holster and staggered deeper into the tunnel, slowing as it narrowed to open his flask and drain it in three hard pulls.

He slapped at his hood-lamps to turn them off. Darkness closed in. He knew it could be full of teeth and death, but he didn't care.

Hyde was right.

He *was* worse than the Variant Effect. Borland's toxic spirit poisoned everything it touched—warped it and pulled it down into the gutter. People died whenever his dark soul presented.

Flushing with shame and whiskey, Borland moved slowly forward in a half-crouch. His face and back aching, his abdomen a throbbing mass of wrenched muscle. He paused at the concrete crossing, a culvert where the tunnel forked. He bent forward to investigate a submerged light.

Hood-lamps hanging from a skinned corpse. The face behind the shield was stripped of expression. It didn't seem to mind that someone had opened its skull and taken the brain out. The meat in the water sure didn't look like the shield-name: Lazlo.

“Jesus, *Jenkins...*” Borland said, and then chuckled maniacally at the way that sounded. “Jesus Jenkins!” He laughed again. “Poor bastard.”

Then, he heard noises where the tunnel branched to the left. Voices shouting: frightened, anxious, some commanding. The last was Aggie's barking orders. *Did she just say Hyde? A Biter now, was that for the best?*

His gaze drifted down to the corpse floating at his feet.

“Jesus Jenkins...” he muttered and then giggling turned to the right, away from the sounds of life, walking into the darkness unable to imagine forgiveness or death. “I should call you *Bob.*”

The water rushed noisily around his knees. Deep *gurgling* sounds came as he trudged against the current.

He caught something else, too. His hood was ripped from the fight, so he could smell the damp and the echo of rot, but there was something more, a breeze coming in from the open air. He kept going through the dark, unaware of time and then...

There was light up ahead.

The second cistern...

He stopped. A circle of orange hung in the black; spangled reflections flickered atop the floodwater. Someone was talking. The voices were echoes of nothing at first before he heard....

“That should be enough.” It was Brass. His normally unshakeable tone had a noticeable quaver. He was panting too.

“You know it is,” Spiko said, his voice louder as Borland crept close.

There was splashing as they moved around, grunts and groans of exertion.

Borland pulled his .38, opened it to clear the cartridges and slipped fresh bullets in place with the speed-loader from a pouch in his belt. His broken wrist throbbed, made him fumble, almost drop the gun. He cursed, realizing he’d have to shoot left-handed.

The constant dripping splash covered his movements as he waded forward. Ahead, he caught shadows moving along the circular wall that enclosed the cistern pond. He froze when Spiko’s stocky form backed into view dragging a heavy drum marked: BZ-2. Then Brass heaved a second drum into place beside it. The big man was wrapped in vinyl, but wore none of the insignia that went with rank. It was a simple bag-suit that any baggie would wear. Brass might wear it for...

Anonymity. Black Ops. Murder.

“What do I set the timers for?” Spiko asked, as he knelt and worked the controls on top of the fogger. That was a funnel-shaped unit bolted to the BZ-2 drums designed to deliver a

killing fog for set periods of time. “The gunfire stopped. Somebody won and somebody lost.”

“Set them to fog in ten minutes. Don’t worry about shut-off times,” Brass said matter-of-factly.

“You sure about this? We got what you want.” Spiko looked up, one hand brushing the canisters slung over his shoulder, the other poised by the controls. “The squad hasn’t ziplocked yet. Without a shut-off time you’ll fog the whole town.”

“Whole town’s got to go anyway,” Brass snarled, stabbing a finger at Spiko’s face. “Look, you know what you’ve got riding on this...”

Borland leveled his .38, moved to the end of the tunnel and stepped out onto the concrete walkway. Brass saw him immediately.

“*Borland?*” The big man peered across the collection pond. “You look like hell.”

The pool was fifteen or twenty feet across by now. The water glimmered from Spiko and Brass’ hood-lamps. Behind them, a rusted iron ladder climbed up out of the cistern. A circle of bright light suggested a halogen spot pointed through an open hatch.

Brass’ helicopter must have landed on the runway up there. A clean-up crew.

“Jesus Jenkins wants his brain back,” Borland grumbled, and then chuckled. Brass and Spiko watched him warily. The latter lifted his hands and slid the canisters from his shoulder. They fell with a clatter.

“That’s Lazlo’s real name. *We* got a joke going.” Then he hardened. “Sounds like you want to treat my squad *and* the Biters. *Why?*”

There was a *click* and Spiko had his pistol centered on Borland’s chest. The barrel looked swollen—a *silencer*.

Brass wore a gun in a holster on his right hip. His hand hovered close, but he was a talker not the quick-draw type.

“Put that gun away, Borland,” Brass ordered. “Now!”

“Not yet.” Borland kept the .38 pointed at him. “*Why?*”

“We don’t have time for this,” Brass said, giving Spiko a glance.

“Life’s getting shorter by the minute,” Borland growled.

Brass snarled impatiently and then started, “There was an accident, and a sample from Research was sent to the wrong lab.”

“Bezo’s still working on Varion?” Borland asked.

“You sure you want to know?” Brass eyed him carefully.

“We’re already ghosts in the fog.” Borland gestured at the BZ-2 drums and chuckled. He was giddy with destruction.

Brass hesitated, and then: “We’re developing treatments for people with the Variant Effect Syndrome.” The *syndrome* was a wide range of psychological and behavioral problems left over from the day—a hangover from having body chemistry permanently altered by Varion-hybrid molecules. “*And* a vaccine—insurance against the *Effect*’s reappearance.”

The big man took a couple steps away from Spiko. Borland watched them perform the old trick: divide and conquer.

“Medical research has to work with the cause to find the cure: smallpox, lethal strains of influenza, whatever...” Brass went quiet a second before continuing. “We started on it back in the day. Our researchers needed a Variant form that presented every time in a predictable way. From that, they could learn how to turn the *Effect* off. If we solved the puzzle, Bezo could redeem its corporate image *and* save the world. One of our scientists, Dr. Gregory Peterson, hypothesized a stable thirteenth Varion-hybrid molecule, and he developed something that was close, but it was unstable. There was an accident.” He smiled ironically. “Peterson lived in the Manfield Building.”

Borland glared at Spiko. The man’s expression was calm and cool, but his eyes and the sweat on his brow suggested a frantic inner dialogue.

“Parkerville’s another accident?” Borland asked, scowling at Brass.

“We went back to the drawing board, and have worked on it since the day. Ironically, it took the banning of Varion and the remission of the *Effect* to find our breakthrough. With Varion dropping below toxic levels in the population, the Varion-hybrid molecules became dormant. The presentations either disappeared or became manageable.” He shook his head slowly.

“We produced the thirteenth Varion-hybrid molecule by injecting Varion into volunteers suffering from the Variant Effect Syndrome. In all cases, we saw the reactivation of their Variant presentations; but a small percentage also began producing new Varion-hybrids. The scientists believe the non-toxic levels of dormant Varion in our subjects gave the new infusions of the drug time to form the thirteenth by bonding and making new hybrids from the twelve configurations we knew back in the day.” Brass cracked a grin. “Once it formed, it dominated all other configurations. Parkerville proves it—infecting so quickly, with 100 percent communicability and presentation. We never dreamed we’d get test results like that.” He nodded thoughtfully. “The new data will prove that we’ve produced the stable thirteenth Varion-hybrid molecule. From it we can reverse-engineer a vaccine for the *Effect* and redesign Varion to fix the problems it caused—an upgrade to Varion 2.0.

“The public won’t go for it,” Borland growled.

“The public wants easy answers and sporty cars.” Brass smiled. “We’ll re-brand it.” He rubbed his hands together, either from cold or to warm them up for the pitch. “They do the same thing with computer technology. Add patches and fixes as they go along. We were so close to perfect on the first version of Varion. Imagine the world with a pill to fix every psychiatric illness—every social problem.” He gestured at the canisters by Spiko’s feet. “With *these* sacrifices, we’ll design a 2.0 that works.”

Borland’s eyes shifted from one to the other, his gun stayed on Brass.

“Look Borland, you’re practical. A survivor has to be.” Brass shook his head impatiently. “With the stable molecule, we’ll have a vaccine *and* a new Varion.” Brass opened his hands like they were holding invisible blocks of gold. “We’ll cure the world. “

“You mean *treat* the world for a good profit,” Borland said and shook his head. “What if you’re wrong again? Varion worked for the first couple years. If 2.0 tanks, the world goes ape again and that’s the end of Bezo.”

“Shut down Bezo and millions of voters are out of work at its factories, billions of voters no longer have medical treatment or access to the Bezo products they depend on. Look, Bezo cut a deal with the Feds at the end of the day. It happened every place there was a

democratic government that considered itself a good global trading partner. Politicians knew they couldn't shut us down without causing economic and social ruin. So the Feds suggested Bezo create a company that they could punish. *Their* idea. They shut that company down and Bezo paid its fines. We're too big to punish." Brass chuckled. "And, there's always Varion 3.0."

"No!" a woman shouted over the echoes. "It stops here!"

Lilith stepped out of the tunnel on Borland's left, her pistol raised and pointed at Spiko. She pulled her hood off.

Zombie walked out behind her, his gun up. The weapon moved around unsure of its target. He stopped to Lilith's right, close to Borland.

"Put your guns down," she said. "I've recorded it all. You're under arrest."

CHAPTER 12

“I’ll handle this,” Borland said, waving at her dismissively.

“You too, Borland,” Lilith repeated. “Put your gun down.”

“Hey, Sweetpants...” he growled.

“*Put the guns down.* All of you.” Lilith gestured, then barked at Brass and Spiko: “Keep away from the foggers!”

Borland turned. “Who do you think you are?”

“I’m a special agent charged by a federal taskforce to investigate activities in the science wing of Varion’s parent company, Bezopastnost, and the recent covert reactivation of this Variant Squad.” She showed her teeth. “Now put your weapons *down.*”

“The Feds?” Borland glanced at Brass. “I thought *you* were the Feds.”

“Who sent you?” Brass asked, ignoring Borland.

Lilith didn’t answer.

“The party that hacked Bezo’s system caused all this.” Brass took a couple slow steps away from Spiko. “Arrest *them.*”

“What are you talking about?” Borland growled, tracking Brass with his gun.

“Later, Borland,” Lilith said, and then gestured at Spiko with her pistol. “Drop the gun!”

“They’re the only ones who could have tipped you off.” Brass stared at Lilith.

“Save it for court,” Lilith said. Something in her tone told Borland she had a far more personal stake in this than bringing a corrupt corporation to justice.

“What *hackers*?” Borland barked.

“The hackers that broke Bezo’s security systems,” Brass sneered. “Someone was trying to get information about the day and ongoing research. No big deal. Competitors attack us all the time. But there are other groups—*thorns* in Bezo’s side that are certain we’re still working on Varion. To any practical mind it was a no-brainer. Bezo has a responsibility to understand what happened and prepare in the event the Variant Effect ever reactivates.”

“And Bezo insisted the research was being carried out through safe computer simulations.” Lilith’s hand shook. Borland noticed a sheen of perspiration on her brow. “But that’s enough talk!”

“How else can we understand it?” Brass pushed. “Someone broke the law to enforce it,” he spat. “And *we’re* the bad guys?”

“I think testing illegal and dangerous substances on human subjects despite an international ban qualifies you.” Lilith’s voice hardened.

“And two decades of litigation against Bezo have taken a toll on our enemies’ collection boxes,” Brass said. “Enough to force them into illegal activities.” His face twisted into a self-satisfied grin. “But considering our deal with the Feds, there are only one or two groups with the political juice to lobby successfully for an investigation.”

“Two decades defending Variant Effect civil suits have drained Bezo. They’re desperate,” Lilith interrupted. “But leave the evidence for court. *Put your guns down!*”

“The *evidence*, that’s right,” Brass’ voice hardened. “When your tipsters hacked Bezo’s Secure Data Server looking for *evidence* they activated a trip-switch virus that wiped the server clean. All downloaded or copied data files are encoded with the same virus. When the stolen files are opened, the virus wipes the hacker’s machine clean.”

Lilith’s eyes flared, and the set of her lips softened.

Brass continued, “The rest was just bad timing. The virus got off our Secure Data Server on an overlooked automatic update feature that copies log files to the Bezo administrator. Several Bezo servers were compromised, but the network shut down before major damage occurred. However, the Bezo shipping office uses an older operating system that couldn’t run the virus, so it collapsed during the attack. When it restored itself a few

small glitches corrupted the shipping database. Names and addresses were exchanged. It shouldn't have been a big deal.

“Except, tissue samples sent from Bezo's secure research labs intended for cryogenic archiving at our *Cryocor Labs* went to Medcor Labs, a non-secure Bezo company that handles medical tissue testing for hospitals and clinics.” Brass' expression darkened. “There's a Medcor Lab in Parkerville.” His face was grim. “B9Broadband reported a massive cyber attack the morning after Bezo's switch was tripped. We tracked the hacker there but lost him. He had enough time to know what we were doing, but the virus took care of any proof. The only clue *we've* got is B9Broadband's environmentally friendly clientele, but that's enough to guess who did it.”

“Captain Borland,” Zombie said hesitantly. “I just followed Lilith here.”

“I can't believe the Feds would send a lone agent,” Brass probed.

“I couldn't let you...” Lilith looked at the foggers before glancing at Borland. “*None of you* can let him do this!”

“I want to see your badge.” Brass lifted his right hand.

“I *will* shoot!” Lilith repeated. Her voice was steady. Her pistol was on Spiko.

“We might be able to work a deal if you're legit,” Brass asserted. “For a fresh start.”

“You mean another *DAY!*” Lilith shouted, shifting her glare to him.

Thump!

She dropped with a bullet between her eyes, a blank expression riding her face into the floodwater.

Borland shot at Spiko's chest, but got his neck. He fired again, and caught him through the breastbone. The smoking gun fell out of the Variant veteran's hand as he pitched forward into the cistern pond.

Zombie looked down at Lilith, then up at Borland before shifting his aim to Brass.

“What—what do we do, Captain?” he stuttered.

“Yes, Captain,” Brass grated, his shoulders stiff. Borland’s gun was on him. “What do we do?”

“The *math...*” Borland growled.

“Careful you don’t start believing in something,” Brass said, provocatively.

“Everybody but you and Spiko were expendable,” Borland said. “You were going to treat the Biters *and* the squad to cover your accident.” He frowned. “Parkerville too.”

“Wouldn’t be the first squad you lost,” Brass insisted. “You don’t even know who’s left.”

“I never lost a *town* before. Here!” Borland swung his gun and shot Zombie behind the right ear. The young man fell forward into the cistern. A dark red cloud erupted under him.

This is the end.

“Jesus!” Brass shouted, raising his hands and staring at Borland’s gun. “No!”

“I thought: If I shoot Brass, Zombie can’t help me against Brass’ bosses. Can he? He’s already expendable, even more now that he knows too much, like *me*.” Borland’s guts burned with acid and twisted muscle. “And then I think: If I shut Zombie up, Brass knows I’m not talking so he’ll protect me from his bosses, because we’re all expendable. Even Brass.”

He needed a drink.

“Cause Brass wouldn’t fog a whole town unless there was a pretty big gun at the back of his head.” He gestured at the young man’s body. “So *Zombie* puts us back on the same team and buys a pass for the rest of my squad—and Parkerville.” He shrugged again. “Whoever’s left.”

“My *bosses* won’t like it,” Brass warned.

“Once we’re out of the rabbit hole,” Borland snarled, “they’ll come up with a new lie to cover *ours*.”

Brass nodded slowly.

“Let’s go,” Borland said, glancing down at Lilith’s hood where it floated near his left boot. “We’ll be heroes.”

Brass moved, picked up Spiko’s canisters and froze.

“She said she recorded us.” He glared at Lilith’s corpse. “Did she send the data?”

“We’ll find out the hard way.” Borland swept up Lilith’s hood, yanked the power tether free of her bag-suit. He teased the hard plastic digital recorder from its vinyl sheath under the vid-com and pocketed it.

Brass edged around the open pool.

“Do you think they got all the Biters?” Brass stared into the tunnel behind Borland.

“You’re afraid of Biters with *me* around?” Borland scowled, gesturing for Brass to lead the way.

He followed the big man into the darkness.

CHAPTER 13

The overhead lights came on.

Aggie and Borland were in a sterile rectangular room, twenty feet long by ten feet square. They were separated by four feet of plastic couch. There was a hard electronic *buzz* and a voice came over a hidden speaker.

“Just sit still and let the photoreceptive injections permeate, please.” There was a loud *bang*. “You should saturate in five minutes, then we start the ultraviolet.” A *buzz* finished the sentence.

They both wore stretchy pressed-felt pajamas. The garments were permanently wrinkled into ridges and folds from being vacuum-packed and stored in sterile plastic bags. The tops were long tunics with short sleeves and three cloth ties up the front. These fell formlessly over shapeless capri pants. Borland’s thick, hairy feet were jammed into hard vinyl sandals.

Despite her bandages and hangdog expression, Aggie looked sexy as hell. There were no bras on the voyage, and by the swelling contour of her chest, Borland could see she didn’t need one.

He knew *he* looked ridiculous in his sterile gear, and had finally given up closing the middle tie on his tunic when the seam up the right side ripped.

Keep moving.

He hadn’t had a drink all day. The painkillers were keeping his thirst quiet but he could feel it building in him. And something was pulling in his chest, hampering his ability to draw a breath. Guilt gnawed at his guts, he knew that. But could it break his heart too—no, it was Aggie’s face that was getting to him.

She blames herself.

Despite her fighting spirit, perhaps because of it, she was unable to count the living faces that she had led out of the ground. Borland knew she wasn’t that way back in the day. *But she wasn’t a captain when he knew her.*

“You—uh, *we* got most out alive you took in, Aggie,” he said, finally. *She’d kill you if she knew how you paid for her life.* “Sometimes that’s the best you can do.”

Aggie’s full lips quivered and her shoulders clenched. She’d only lost three of the group she took in. Chopper, Slick and Flatfoot were taken by Biters and presented in minutes. She treated them herself. Otherwise there were broken bones and a few wounds from crossfire. What remained of her squad was pathetic, but it was alive. She had found Beachboy too. Or he found her. Everyone was in quarantine.

The squad was tattered and prepping for EVAC when he and Brass staggered onto the scene of the battle at the western cistern. He knew the next part of protocol would cover any tracks, take care of any bodies or physical evidence; but they needed a cover story. Aggie was wounded and ziplocking Cavalle and Flattop for transport. They were both injured and in need of isolation and treatment so Aggie didn’t have time to second-guess him or Brass. Borland explained away Lilith and Zombie, claiming both had presented so he was forced to treat them after they chased him to the eastern cistern.

Brass said he’d opened the hotlink at that cistern to monitor the situation when he saw Spiko in full presentation. Brass’ voice broke when he described treating the rogue veteran. He said he met Borland in the tunnel after that, so it all sounded plausible. Brass had ordered his helicopter to the hotlink entrance to transport wounded back to the army warehouse for isolation. He’d also called in medical teams and more sterile holding cells to quarantine survivors.

They sealed the hotlink after Hazard and Hazen’s army baggies staggered onto the scene. T-2 broke down four blocks away from the action, so Hazard led the improvised squad on a plastic-wrapped and over-heated run. They were dehydrated but ready for action when they took up their positions. Hazen’s other group under the runway reported noises, but zero enemy contact.

Borland looked around the room. Brass had shipped the decontamination units to the Parkerville Army base where engineers built a massive enclosed Variant Squad hospital out of them. Borland thought quarantine was a small price to pay. Especially when the army and second squad from Metro finished ziplocking the sewers to fog them with BZ-2. Then came the flamethrowers and incendiary plasma burn the fire crews applied to the biological remains.

There was nothing left.

The decontamination unit was like a big, empty mobile home with cameras in the ceiling and a door at one end. The walls were padded with white vinyl panels. The floor was made up of white tiles.

Sweat beaded up on Borland's forehead. *What am I doing?* He fidgeted.

Time for a drink.

"Never get used to the decontamination." He shrugged, felt a pressure in his chest. His broken wrist was wrapped in fiberglass and plaster. It throbbed. "Club soda enemas *and* light-activated gamma globulin shots." He watched Aggie. Her eyes were slits, staring at the floor between her sandals.

"I remember a guy back in the day," Borland said. "Got an overdose, and his balls glowed for a week." He noticed his belly was starting to push past his tunic, so he pulled at the cloth until it ripped again. The hernias were a tangle of competing pressures, all painful. Brass said they'd fix him up. "Cheap goddamn pajamas. Same type we used back in..."

"Shut up, Joe! I'm sick of you," Aggie hissed.

Borland looked at her hard, his face twisting into a difficult smile. "She's *alive!*"

"I said *shut up!*" She turned her eyes to him. They were dark, apocalyptic. "It's just another day in paradise for you."

"I don't know about paradise," Borland said and shrugged. "But it's another day."

Aggie shook her head, and blurted: "It's paradise to *you!*" Then her hands came up and she throttled the air in front of her. "I know I didn't lose the whole squad, but I lost enough." She pointed a hard finger at Borland to keep him from speaking. "And that makes me enough like you to turn my stomach, but also enough to keep me from judging."

Borland clenched his teeth.

"I'm terrified to think I'd ever get past it as quick as you!" Aggie snapped. "Or feed on it."

“I’m not past it...” Borland started to speak, but she silenced him with a gesture.

“Don’t think I haven’t seen it, Joe.” She looked away. “You were a worthless drunk, dying in retirement until Brass called you up. All this death and destruction, I’ve watched it bring you back to life.” Aggie lifted her hands and looked at them. “But I killed members of my squad with these.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “And I’m afraid I might get past it.”

Borland got to his feet, shaking his head. Memories of faces he killed flickered through his mind. Countless strangers from the day and now: *Jill Hyde*—and *Zombie...kid didn’t see it coming. More spooks in the halls.*

He lifted his face to the ceiling. A tear trailed down his right cheek as his features contorted with rage and hatred.

“There’s more to *me*...” he whispered and turned.

“What?” Aggie looked up at him.

Borland punched her in the face, and her head thumped against the padded wall. The pain came up his broken wrist in waves, but he relished it and smiled.

“Borland!” She glared up at him, pressing her face.

“It’s *your* protocol!” Borland bellowed and hit her again. His features shone with anger, his eyes filled with tears. He cocked his fist for another punch. There was blood on his cast.

“Enough!” Aggie snarled, spitting red. She was up before Borland could react.

There was a *bang*; the room went dark and the ultraviolet lights turned on. The whites of their sterile pajamas, eyes and teeth blazed to life. Aggie’s skin flared a deep merlot; Borland’s turned a toxic purple.

Borland could use his bulk in the tight confines, while the slippery wall padding and single piece of furniture seriously hampered Aggie’s more gymnastic fight style. And she was injured, hurt as hell. Put toe to toe, Borland’s weight firmly planted, turned him into a formidable weapons platform.

Damn you!

So he fired a couple fists at her.

Kill me!

But Aggie's speed and the strange lighting worked in her favor. Sure, Borland fired a solid right and left, but the glare of ultraviolet white contrasted with Aggie's dark skin—dazzled his eyes and gave her the edge. More than once he swung a fist only to have it strike the padded wall a second before Aggie's solid knee swept in from the side leaving his kidneys and back throbbing. He fell to his knees.

Come on! Kill me! Get me past it!

Aggie moved in for the kill but he caught her solidly on the temple, and it would have taken her down if she hadn't managed to twist out to the end of his reach to dilute the fist's power. It still caught her hard, and she winced, shaking her head as she rolled along the wall away from him.

Borland's breath was already going as he heaved himself upright, sucking in air like a drowning man.

But Aggie heard the ragged intake and built a combination around it. She faked a left and then stabbed the solid fingers on her right hand into his windpipe. Pain shrieked up behind Borland's eyes as he tried to get an arm up. Too late. She pounded his nose: blood gushed, then she caught his jaw with a bone-numbing elbow before giving him a left-right-left knee and fist combination that sent him gagging and reeling to collapse against the wall.

She continued firing at him, stepping in close and closing his left eye with a right before landing three solid punches that sent dark blood spraying as Aggie pulverized what was left of his nose.

Defeated, he rolled away from the wall and across the floor. A half-hearted kick to his belly brought his breath back in one agonizing gasp.

Aggie walked over, fists black and shiny with blood. Her hygienic pyjamas were blood-spattered, in pieces. Her left breast was completely exposed. She caught Borland's glance and tied her tunic shut. Blood stained her white teeth with memories of violence.

She held an open hand out but Borland slapped it away.

“No,” he mumbled, lips tight with swelling.

She smiled down at him and nodded.

“I think I re-broke it,” she said studying the fingers she flexed on her right hand. They were sticking out of a shattered cast. “Feels *good*.”

Borland turned his head and spat blood on the tiles.

Aggie stared down at him. Her expressions went through a complex series: anger, pleasure, pride, *anger*.

Borland realized his own tunic was torn open. He started gathering it together over his blood-smearred belly, and then gave up.

There was a *bang* and the glare of white fluorescent replaced the ultraviolet light. Borland growled and slapped a hand over his face. There was a boom and the door opened.

Someone said: “Jesus Christ, what happened in here?”

Aggie smirked at the door and then her dark eyes shifted down to Borland.

“Just so I don’t get used to killing friends.” She wiped her hands on her tunic, left strange patterns there in his blood.

Borland nodded quietly, snorted in a clot of blood and snot—almost vomited when he coughed.

“Me too,” he growled, voice breaking with either madness or sorrow. His eyes filled with tears as Aggie continued to wipe her hands. She stepped over him and walked toward the door with shoulders squared.

Borland opened his right eye a crack and peered at the overhead lights. He ached all over. His vision swam and then...

CHAPTER 14

“Still making friends I see,” a voice rasped. “Aggie said I’d find you here.”

Borland opened his right eye—the other was swollen shut—and saw that the wheels on Hyde’s chair arched up and away on either side of his head like horns. The old cripple leaned out, head angled to slow the saliva that was dripping from his incisors. He hung over Borland like a rain cloud, dark in his long hooded coat.

His face was a shadow.

Borland shut his eye while a complicated pang of emotion squeezed his chest. He and Aggie had recognized Hyde’s body by the leg-braces, string of hood-lamps around his neck and biofeedback hook-ups stuck to his scarred scalp. The current in the cistern pond was tumbling him, alternately raising and sinking him. They were deciding whether it would be safe to take his body out for a squad burial when the churning floodwater pushed him up, his skeletal jaws opened and he gasped. They raised their guns, aimed at his face.

And hesitated.

There had been something about the look in his eyes that made them pause. When he started ranting about his daughter, they knew he hadn’t presented.

Hyde snarled and sat back in his wheelchair. There was a clatter, and Borland watched the skinned captain struggle with his various tubes and I.V. bags.

The bullet that hit him missed all the vital organs. He was in I.C.U. for two days, while they flushed his system. No Variant Effect—no presentation. Just luck. Abrasions and cuts, and they’d already run two rounds of decontamination on him. He expected a third.

So did Borland.

“You burned my daughter’s house,” Hyde growled. “Beachboy said it was because you found the baggie, Mofo, had presented there,” he grumbled. “You couldn’t secure the site for the neighborhood so you burned it. Unfortunate but necessary.”

“That’s it,” Borland mumbled between bloody lips. “I didn’t know it was her place. And there was no one else there.”

“When I saw my daughter in the tunnels the Biters had not harmed her. They almost seemed to be protecting her,” Hyde said, voice trailing off. “Why do you think that was?”

“Maybe they were keeping her for a midnight snack,” Borland drawled carelessly.

“But, the Biters needed *Ritual*.” Hyde shook his head. “I could tell.”

“Like you say,” Borland rumbled, anxious nausea arriving with Hyde’s line of questioning: “*History*. We never saw Biters in the early part of the day. We don’t know what they were like.”

Hyde was silent, considering Borland’s point and then he said: “That sounds like too convenient an answer. But it will do—for now.” Hyde looked away, his naked eyes glimmering with moisture. “They did not find her body. Many could not be identified. There was no time.”

Borland shrugged.

“Perhaps she got away,” Hyde said hopefully. “There were many holes in that hotlink. They were not all covered at that point.”

His face hung over Borland until a strand of spittle started to fall. Hyde caught it on the back of his hand. The old cripple’s eyes hardened, scanning over him.

“If you’re finished making a spectacle of yourself...get dressed.” Hyde sneered and started to turn his wheelchair. One of the tires thumped against Borland’s temple, scraped over his ear. “Brass wants to meet with us in thirty minutes. He’s bringing the old stationhouses back online and we are to consult.” Hyde fell quiet a second and then... “More presentations in Metro. Those car thieves had busy social lives.”

Borland wheezed and nodded. He coughed and tasted blood.

“Unless you’re finally dying.” Hyde’s voice trailed off as he wheeled away.

Borland watched the overhead light, listened to the tramp of boots on the tile in the hall. More recruits coming in. Somewhere, a transport engine rumbled.

He smiled up at the ceiling and growled, “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

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