

The Variant Effect
PART THREE: BAGGED-BOYS
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CHAPTER 1

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

Up to the point Borland clapped eyes on the old cripple everything was going well enough. The undercurrent of Marsh's death still sucked at him but he was kept afloat by Tinfingers' assertion that he was only doing his job. Lovelock had been in possession of a hell of a lot of Varion. That used to be a capital crime so *didn't he have it coming?* The thought had Borland nervously adjusting his hernias. *Didn't Joe Borland have it coming too?* He snickered uncontrollably.

Reclaiming his flask on the way out of HQ had helped a little, and the painkillers they gave him were having an effect, bubbling and boiling with the half pizza he'd gobbled in the car. He took the codeine to quiet his skewered palm, soothe the raw skin at the back of his neck and deaden the throbbing in his spine. He'd wrenched his back wrestling the Lovelocks to death. Yeah, things were looking up.

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

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

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

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

“I see you’re living up to your threat.” Hyde was a hunched black shadow, a hybrid of skinned human and steel parked center to the broad flat expanse of concrete. He occupied the space where the old transports used to park—their greasy black shadows were etched in motor oil stains. Around him rusted steel girders reached up to a tangle of I-beams, shadows and lights. But Hyde’s negative energy dominated the space. The sick old bastard was heaped into his wheelchair like some dark and twisted incarnation of failure.

Fifty feet behind him, a group of men and women cluttered up a crowd of steel folding chairs arranged in front of a bank of tool lockers across the back wall. They were in their twenties, wore gray and green jump suits. No insignias, nothing to mark the civilian or military organizations from which they’d volunteered. The *recruits* either saw him coming or caught the twinkle on Tinfingers hands because they all suddenly rushed to their feet and waited, not at attention, but at something like it. No one saluted.

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

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

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

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

“No more than you,” Borland answered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They turned toward the bay doors and caught a partial silhouette. The set of the black woman’s wide hips, muscular legs and full chest suggested danger and sexuality. She had a square chin, thin nose with flaring nostrils and dark penetrating eyes. Her hair was cropped close with gray dust at the temples. Her heavy duffle bag dropped from her broad shoulders with a *clunk*.

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

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

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

CHAPTER 2

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

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

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

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

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

Borland flinched when Aggie swung back to him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Shut up!”

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

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

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

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

Tinfingers cleared his throat.

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

The recruits had been standing there the whole time like the United Nations kids in the Disney ride, big round eyes watching the old guard arrive—unable to hide their

excitement at the mix of notorious characters they'd read about in eBook histories from back in the day.

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

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

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

Borland followed, wishing he had something to crank himself up a bit and he wasn't thinking coffee. His flask was half-full of whiskey, but he'd been running on cheap diesel fuel too long. That crap worked fine in peacetime, but if he were going to war, he'd need something to sharpen his edge. A glance at the volunteers showed him a couple of them were young enough and ethnic enough to maybe have the necessary connections. They had the *look*.

CHAPTER 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Variant Effect first response was chaotic at best. Federal and municipal law enforcement agencies and emergency services personnel struggled to deal with what looked like a nationwide outbreak of insanity. First there was a rash of suicides that drew

the eye. Law enforcement statistics showed a spike in violent crime at that time, but crime rates always fluctuated. It was easy to blame that increase on a hundred different things.

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

The first responders to these incidents were worried about homeland security, terrorists and criminals. They had no idea they were dealing with *real* ‘suicide’ bombers. These ones jacked on Variant just wanted to die and they didn’t care who they took with them.

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

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

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

At that time, Borland was still swinging double shifts as a Metro cop: driving rounds all day doing traffic and ticket stops, and walking a beat until the wee hours—napping whenever he could lean his head against something. The double shifts barely kept him afloat, but kept him performing at a level that guaranteed against advancement. He needed the extra shifts for money to grease some palms he owed for personal loans and to calm the many wolves that were attracted to the door by his excessive lifestyle. He was no jetsetter, or lover of luxury cars but once the booze started flowing he stopped understanding basic accounting. And who cared about profit and loss, credit and debt, when any day a cop could find himself wrapped around a bullet. Especially a cop that was deep in debt to loan sharks, one that lost track of who was grafting whom.

Walking the beat was best. It took him through some rough sections of town where he could chat up the locals over free shots—the hell with doughnuts—and where he’d

learned the art of confiscating drugs in lieu of criminal charges. Hell, those guys always just ended up back on the street the next day. What was the point of the paperwork? And if an overworked and underpaid cop got a little extra in the process, who cared? At first it was confiscation and re-sale. That worked until he realized he could bust the guy he was reselling it to, so he started taking a touch from him. Then those guys wanted to pay him outright in cash, because their higher ups were worried that Borland would find his way to them. But by then Borland had already started using some of the confiscated products.

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

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

Then came the flyer.

They had him at *hazard pay*.

CHAPTER 4

Brass had coffee-colored skin and only the slightest haze of gray in his hair that he wore trimmed tight to his scalp. The design opened his ears up like car doors, but he wore enough African-Celtic handsome in his face to make up for them. He smiled broadly at the table after he shut the door, and then turned to Hyde. He had to bend at the waist to speak to the cripple.

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

Borland watched this with a scowl. Brass, like other Varion liaison officers, was a slick operator who could talk his way out of his own grave. He was the public face for Borland’s squad and others back in the day. There was grudging admiration in the ranks because he protected them. It wasn’t until years later that pensioned soldiers like Borland came to realize that Brass’ sugar coating did not follow them into retirement and that back in the day the same silver tongue often shaped the orders that sent them to their dooms.

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

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

Democratically elected governments could not handle the legal ramifications of city police gunning down Variant Effect victims: skin-eating schoolboys, suicidal priests wrapped in C-4 or bulimic runway models gone cannibal. There was no way to make it look good for the six o’clock news and the voting public. And with a pack of Variant Effect obsessive-compulsive lawyers filing civil suits with rabid judges suffering from manic messiah complexes, no one with any real authority wanted the responsibility.

It was a lot easier to hire civilians that you could feed to the wolves. *If* the civilians responsible even survived the ‘legally actionable event.’ Bankruptcy protected the individual squads, and the Variant Effect’s wider impact on the legal and political system absorbed the moral outrage. Any squad members that were responsible for indiscretions could be fired and their motivations blamed on the Variant Effect. It wasn’t until halfway through the day, and after, that the Variant Effect Squads started being properly

recognized for the work they did. Borland knew most veterans would stop short of saying ‘honored.’ But after the day, society came awake with the mother of all hangovers, and viewed the excesses of Variant Effect Squads as necessary evils—and any criminal behavior an unfortunate side effect of fighting a toxic enemy. POOs were deployed to identify insane squad members and help to build back-stories to explain the extreme answer to the extreme outbreak.

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

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

Hyde hissed something and snatched his hand away.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 5

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

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

Long thin jowls streamed down from the chin and tucked into the stiff collar of a dark blue uniform. Tufts of white hair curled from under a tall peaked cap. The external light gleamed off golden epaulets. The man took a step into the lunchroom revealing that the cuffs on his sleeves and pants were wrapped and held tight by thick elastic bands.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Borland thought that was partly right.

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

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

Borland watched for the Old Man's trademark twitch and he wasn't disappointed. Four steps in and his rheumy eyes glanced from face to face and then swept down, flashed to the baseboard, by the electric heaters and into the corners, before sliding along the juncture of ceiling and wall. He was looking for spider webs, dust clouds and conglomerations; anything that might hide one of them—any bug really, could get his anxiety spiking. The set of his shoulders stiffened during the inspection, and then relaxed when he saw that Brass had pulled a chair out for him a good two feet from the head of the table: somewhere defensible, free of corners and overhangs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It is not a pleasure to be here, I assure you,” the Old Man grumbled in a gloomy tone. “It never was.” He bent and swung his riding crop under the chair, inspected it for webs before he turned and sat. The new orientation put him in direct line of sight for Borland, who was leaning forward in his chair, struggling with the room’s sudden claustrophobic dimensions. He felt fresh sweat rings forming under his arms.

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

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

Brass ended the Mexican standoff before it started.

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

CHAPTER 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brass caught it, but shrugged smoothly past.

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

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

Borland lurched to his feet, his chair screeching against the linoleum. He pulled at his necktie before stepping away from the table. His hernias itched. His tongue was thick and

swollen. He needed a drink. Bad. Just a little crank but the room was too crowded to sneak one.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 7

The Old Man's Beta Blocker Applicator bubbled wetly when he inhaled, reminding Borland of a kid slurping up the last of his milkshake. The applicator was a common sight among survivors of the day, especially those who had presented with one of the Variant Effect's milder forms. The plastic tube, designed to look like a cigarette, delivered a mild cocktail of drugs for calming the fight or flight response while keeping various harmful side effects to a minimum.

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

Borland had his own cocktail for that. He'd just recharged it in the can while Tinfingers waited outside the stall. A couple quiet pulls from his flask had settled him out again, kept his fingers from trembling where he laid them flat and heavy on the table. Hyde had whispered something derogatory as Borland re-entered the lunchroom smiling around a handful of peppermints. He shut the door after Tinfingers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Old Man's applicator gurgled.

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

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

Cavalle kept talking while Borland sniggered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

disorder from a tour in the second Gulf War. He was living in the Demarco building basement.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A hiss vented through Hyde’s teeth.

CHAPTER 8

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

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

“I’ll bet the whole town is ‘gated’ now,” Borland snarled, and glared at Brass. His mood was shifting as yesterday’s hangover lurked behind today’s booze and mixed with his painkillers. He looked along the table, stopped at Cavalle. “Well, come on. You must have Parkerville secure. Am I right?” He wiped a broad palm over his sweaty brow. “Nobody in. Nobody out.”

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

“Protocol?” Hyde burst out. “You’re applying Variant protocol to a town?”

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

“You *ziplocked* Parkerville?” Borland almost laughed. “Jesus Brass, and everyone thinks *I’m* an asshole.”

“It’s too early to apply protocol to a town! There’ll be panic.” Hyde continued, “with only one confirmed case...the rules clearly state...”

“Different time,” Brass said, voice firm. “Different rules.”

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

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

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

“You aren’t no downy innocent, Borland,” Aggie rasped and glowered at him. “Acting like you didn’t have a hand in yanking people’s rights away the odd time. God!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Borland let out a great guffaw.

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

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

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

CHAPTER 9

Borland liked Sneak Squads back in the day. They always paid extra and you had a lot of leeway carting around all that authority without any direct control from Brass or *his* bosses. Sneak Squads were sent in whenever they found a high concentration of Variant Effect in a populated geographic area or town. The Sneak Squads were supposed to get in as quietly as they could, take notes, get samples and then make the decision on whether to go to the next stage in the protocol. The idea was that just seeing a Variant Squad transport could send people into a tizzy indistinguishable from actual Variant presentation, so going in quietly let the squad look around and make the call from the site before word got around and panic started killing.

And if a high concentration was confirmed, the *call* often involved high-casualty rates among the affected population. Brass and *his* higher-ups preferred dealing with the quick fix when the bodies were in bags. As he used to put it, “A day’s delay can cost you a neighborhood. How long until you lose the world?” The media and government made their living with red tape. Sneak Squads got around it.

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

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

Borland walked over to Aggie admiring the flex of her powerful backside while she bent over some papers on a desk. He’d always been a fan of that part of her anatomy—especially back when she was barely an adult: *the princess of booty*. Aggie turned when she heard him coming, then posed muscular and rigid in front of the desk making the pseudo-combat gear work for her. Someone had put the folding chairs away. The volunteers were standing in four rows. They’d all gone to parade rest.

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

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

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

“Me either,” Borland said, shrugging. His attention was pulled back to the stationhouse’s big bay doors that had been opened wide to await the arrival of the transports. Brass said they were refitting a pair of the vehicles mothballed after the day. There’d be uniforms, equipment and bag-suits—maybe they even found his old kit if he was lucky.

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

Jesus, give it a break would you?

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

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

“Goddamn bellyacher,” Borland grumbled and turned back to Aggie’s hard stare.

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

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

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

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

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

He glared at the volunteers. There were twenty of them. He would have known that without counting. A part of him chuckled when he realized he'd instinctively straightened his back and shoulders—aped something that resembled a very exhausted attention.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 10

“Beachboy?” Borland glowered.

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

“Why’d you pick that shield-name?” He glared. “You a surfer?”

“No, sir. It’s the name of a character from the Team Omega comic books,” Beachboy said, his blue eyes gleaming. “Dr. Beachboy got his super powers surfing at Bikini Island after the atom bomb was tested.”

“I’m sorry I asked.” Borland looked to Agnes. She shrugged. “Bikini Island?” He frowned at the young man. “And what’s his super powers then?”

“X-ray vision for starters, sir.” Beachboy stayed at attention, but Borland could hear the tension dropping out of his voice.

“To see through bikinis?” Borland smiled, looking along the line of bagged-boys, to see if any of the girls were blushing.

“Enough of that!” Agnes barked. “Captain Borland might care where you get your shield-names. I don’t.” She paused for a second glaring at Borland. “Unless it bares in some way on your performance in this Variant Squad keep the back-story to yourself. To me, it will simply be the name on your visor.”

“Yeah,” said Borland, knowing there’d be time to talk shield-names when the Squad started cranking before a mission. “We’ll keep it short for now.”

Then something caught his eye, he looked past Beachboy at a tall, well built man with short black hair. A tag on his jumpsuit said: “Mofó.”

“*Mofó*?” Borland couldn’t resist a twisted grin. He looked the big man up and down. “I’d have called you ‘Ratpack.’ You need a tuxedo and manicure not a bag-suit. You got a Vegas look to you sunshine.”

“My dad worked with you back in the day, sir.” Mofo’s voice was low. “Fireman Ely Cook, shield-name: Sticky. He used to say you liked his sticky buns.”

There was general snickering until Agnes glared the recruits into silence.

Borland thought back, barely conjured Sticky’s face. He was tall too if he remembered correctly, and always stooped over the oven in the stationhouse kitchen. His death was bad. Borland couldn’t recall specifics, but something felt heavy in his gut about it. *Later...*

Borland squinted and frowned giving Mofo the twice over. He was in his early thirties. That made him a...

“I’m a kinderkid, sir,” Mofo said, reading his look. “Presented in pre-adolescence.”

“Right,” Borland grumbled, rolling his eyes away. It was rare for someone to just up and say it. There were lots of reasons to keep that crap quiet. “So, can we trust you?”

“Sex addict sir,” Mofo smiled as he said it. “Don’t trust me with your wife.”

“I’m not married,” Borland grumbled.

“Or your mother,” Beachboy chimed in, and the recruits exploded with laughter.

“*You* named him?” Borland leaned in to Beachboy’s airspace as they quieted.

“It seemed appropriate at the time!” Beachboy tightened up his stance.

“Did she like it?” Borland snarled, suddenly itching for a bottle to share around.

“Mom didn’t complain, sir!” Beachboy’s lips split in a grin, and the recruits laughed again.

Borland turned a dismal eye to Aggie. She frowned, but was caught up in the general good humor. She knew how big a risk these idiots were taking. If it got as bad as it could get many of them would be dead soon.

“Lilith?” Borland read the name, puzzled and then looked up as an ivory skinned woman with red hair and dazzling eyes nodded. She had to be twenty. “What kind of name is Lilith?”

“It’s a Mesopotamian storm demon, Captain Borland,” *Lilith* said as she straightened her shoulders and flashed her eyes.

“Lilith the storm demon,” Borland repeated, and then shrugged. He didn’t think that name would last past the first cranking.

“Travis?” He cherry-picked the name off the list. A wiry man of average height sprang to attention and caught Borland’s eyes with his. He had sharp, elf-like features. “Seems a little plain after *Lilith*.”

“It’s my name sir,” the twenty-something man said.

A quiet snicker made its way through the volunteers. Aggie silenced it with a glare.

“Did they explain shield-names to you?” Borland shook his head.

Travis nodded. “I was going to use ‘Zombie,’ a character from the same comic Beachboy mentioned.” He lowered his gaze. “But I figured it might be in bad taste.”

“Everybody!” Borland waved his e-board. “This is *Zombie*.”

A wave of chuckles rippled through the group. Borland was too burned out to read the looks correctly, but it felt more like humor than tension.

“Dancer?” Borland asked and heaved his eyes wearily over the group. A woman with straight ash-blonde hair nodded and snapped crisply to attention. “That from a comic book?”

“From my past, sir,” she said and straightened her shoulders. Her body was lean and well muscled and while she was as tall as Borland, the lack of excess gave her a fragile appearance. He guessed she was in her early-thirties—old enough to be a kinderkid, too.
Later...

“Lazlo?” Borland continued, pausing as the name rang a bell. He knew a *Lazlo* back in the day.

The mystery evaporated when he looked up and recognized Jenkins, the black cop from the Demarco furrier building. That was it. Jenkins drank himself into trouble before the day and got pinched... He joined the squads on a prison release program, became a cop after.

“Back from the dead, sir,” Jenkins said, his dark eyes steady.

“Right, like the bible guy.” Borland struggled in the unfamiliar water.

“Yes sir,” Jenkins agreed. “Like Lazarus, I was given another chance.”

Borland frowned as he clamped down on that one. He didn’t want any Christian voodoo on the squad... But he remembered Lazlo wasn’t a preacher. There *was* a *Preacher*...

That name started a parade of dead faces in his mind. *That was then*. His heart thudded.

He looked down at the e-board; his skinned and bandaged hand looked fatal against the smooth plastic. Borland handed the device to Aggie.

“Let’s do this later...” His vision swam. “I gotta sit down.”

Hyde’s hissing voice chased him back to the lunchroom.

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