

The Variant Effect
PART TWO: RECRUITMENT OFFICER
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CHAPTER 1

Borland was drying out and he didn't like it one damn bit. He had been cooped up in the interview room for two hours with only coffee and cigarettes on the menu. He smoked if he was good and drunk but the coffee was making him the absolute opposite of that one.

His face was feeling numb and hot, and his guts were aching. He had been gulping the coffee and swallowing air between drinks—wishing it was booze. Every time he moved his bellybutton tugged and cramped with pain where a new hernia had appeared after his little escapade with Hyde and the skin eaters. He had suspected it was growing before and there it was. Worst of all the damn thing made annoying squeaky, gurgling noises that were starting to piss him off so much he needed a drink.

That was it.

He needed a drink.

And it looked like he wasn't getting one any time soon.

Back when he was still coasting on the last few belts from his hip flask, Borland asked investigating officer, Tinfingers, if he needed to call in a bloodsucker. Whether it was that kind of investigation. But he was told they weren't trying to prove he'd committed any crime, they were just trying to get the facts straight. Just so they'd understand for future reference how Borland's attempt at recruiting a Variant Squad member out of retirement had resulted in a double homicide. Brass had decided that reviving the squads was a necessary but classified action after reports by Borland and his old partner Hyde said the Variant Effect was *presenting* again. Here we go...memory lane.

That was why Brass was keeping Borland's fat ass out of retirement and giving him the job of training a squad to deal with the new threat. It was Borland's idea to mix rookie

bagged-boys with seasoned professionals—if he could crowbar the latter out of their retirement homes. Pulling old officers back online looked good on paper, but most of them had gone to seed, and hadn't seen a bit of action since back in the day.

But since the baggie recruits were coming from law enforcement, military and emergency response, their skill sets would have to be seriously upgraded to meet the challenges ahead. Chasing a druggie down a back alley was waltzing in fairyland compared to getting on the pavement with a pack of Biters in full ritual.

Brass ordered Borland in for questioning after cruisers and ambulances were dispatched to the scene where he had started the recruitment drive—after the situation went so far south there were penguins on it. Tinfingers had met him at the HQ processing desk and assured him they'd talk, that there were a couple of formalities when deaths were involved during the legal administering of a special officer's duties. There was no reason to worry because Brass was certain that Borland had done nothing criminal.

That was a relief to Borland because he was pretty sure he had.

But instead of preparing a defense, Borland spent the time struggling with the thought that he'd have to talk Tinfingers into getting him a six-pack of something cold if they were going to keep him here all goddamn week. From time to time he looked at his right hand, at the bandages there. The raw flesh across his palm was tender and swollen. That matched the back of his head. It had started to ache like he had termites.

Tinfingers was about thirty so he was playing Tiddlywinks back in the day. He was what they called a "Variant baby." Poor buggers stewed in their mother's wombs, steeped in Varion's many chemical forms and mutations.

While cranking up at the stationhouse, Borland and his baggies referred to Variant babies as *kinderkids* because like the famous sweets with the surprise inside, you never knew how the Variant Effect would present in a Variant baby until the kid had grown enough to act on an impulse. And then it was usually too late.

In Tinfingers' case they didn't know he was Onychophagic until he grew teeth. That was the story Borland remembered. The son of a *baggie* who later got skinned, Tinfingers used to play around the stationhouse with big leather mitts on his hands. He was three when the Variant Effect presented. That morning his mother found him a bloody mess in the playroom, the fingers on both hands chewed down to the second knuckle. His doctors were amazed that baby teeth could do that kind of damage. Nail biters never had it so bad.

So, leather mittens until he was old enough to be fitted with prosthetics. When he chewed the nylon and rubber digits, they replaced them with tin. Supposedly, his compulsion was under control now with other chemicals; but word around the stationhouse said the kid preferred tin fingertips.

The door to the interview room opened.

“Think of the Devil...” Borland grunted

“And he shall appear,” Tinfingers answered. He had a cardboard tray in his hands, balanced on a small pile of file folders. Coffee steamed in two paper cups—two others were empty

“More coffee?” Borland snarled. “We weren’t allowed to use torture back in the day.”

“I heard different.” Tinfingers dropped the files, set the coffee down, then went back to shut the door. When he turned around he pulled a bottle of whiskey from inside his jacket. He smiled. “You prefer *honey* in your coffee, right?”

He uncapped it with amazing dexterity, considering, and poured a couple ounces into the empty cups.

Borland reached out fast and took a deep drink before setting the cup out again and pointing at it.

Tinfingers’ eyebrows shot up as he nodded. “Just don’t get *cranked*.”

“Couple damn drinks.” Borland frowned, turning the taste of whiskey around in his mouth. “Won’t get *me* cranked.”

Tinfingers took a sip of his own as he sat down across the table. The tin fingertips gleamed in the overhead light. He pulled a slim digital recorder out of his pocket and put it on the table between them, then turned it on.

“Everybody go *gay* down here?” Borland shifted in his chair, pressed his hernias back into place. He kept one eye locked on the two-way mirror on one wall. “Drinking milk?”

“No thanks to you, a big initiative started the day after.” Tinfingers took a notepad out of his suit jacket and threw it in front of him. “Not easy drying the squads out after you guys *treated* the last of the Biters.”

“Well, not the last I guess.” Borland drank down half of his drink. The whiskey started heating up his face.

“So I hear.” Tinfingers’ long face looked longer with the balding crown. His eyes gleamed under dark brows. “And that’s what puts us here.”

“Yeah. Building a squad.” Borland pushed his half-empty cup out and pointed at it.

Tinfingers grabbed the bottle, capped it and slipped it back into his pocket. Then he put a tin fingertip over his lips. “I’ll edit before this.” He cleared his throat and began: “Lieutenant Emanuel Ortega interviewing Captain Joe Borland regarding events that occurred, March 12, at the home of retired Squad Captain Marshall Lovelock. The time now is 4:30 p.m.”

He took out a pen and clipped it to the index finger of his right hand.

“You went out to recruit Lovelock.”

“Yeah, one of your uniforms drove me there,” Borland rasped, sipping his whiskey.

CHAPTER 2

He told the driver to wait in the car and dragged himself out onto the sidewalk. Borland took the opportunity to adjust his hernias while he tucked his shirt back in. He couldn't hide being old and forty pounds overweight but he could downplay the fact that he was falling apart. The thought made him wonder if he was sobering up, or if the idea of being called back to active duty had conjured up the notion of self-respect.

He needed a drink and he knew it.

There was no point setting Lovelock off bringing a uniformed driver with him. If he were anything like Hyde, he'd be holed up playing video games and hating the world. Marshall was another Captain back in the day, and a fight specialist. This guy had studied every martial art going, even did a couple of those televised cage-matches before he volunteered for the squads when the Variant Effect came on. His military experience fighting Arabs in the army reserves and the high mortality rate among bagged-boys popped him quickly up the ranks.

Sure he'd be almost sixty now, so had likely left his ninja days behind; but he was the best close-fighter Borland had ever seen. Lovelock knew all the tricks of the hand and foot and fist kill—handy stuff to know in a scrap, if a baggie found himself without a weapon and surrounded by a hunting pack. Borland hoped Lovelock would volunteer to train the new recruits. He didn't want to have to play the pension card again.

The house was one of those crappy condos linked thirty in a row sharing thin pressboard and Gyprock walls located in a tight little suburb jammed between box stores at the city outskirts. All of it covered with fancy brickwork to give the owners the feeling they'd bought something remotely worth the quarter-mill they spent. There'd be three bedrooms and a single john upstairs. Main floor would have dining room and living room attached at the hip, with a kitchen opening off the former.

Borland remembered back in the day four squads cleaning a nest of Biters out of some government-run affordable version of these row house condos. Most of one family had presented as skin eaters, a weak genetic predisposition, and broke through the wall on one side—making their way house by house along the block, killing what didn't end up joining them. There were twenty-one Biters in the pack when the squads flushed them out.

Borland shifted his belt under his gut and straightened his new jacket. It actually was new too, given to him out of the evidence room after that screw up with the Biters and Hyde had cost him his only sports coat. Some juvies had boosted a menswear store to buy the

drug of the day. He was on his way to the cruiser when the driver stopped him and ripped a price tag off the collar.

The night before, Brass held an impromptu debriefing right after the Biter incident. The police chief was there with some muckety-muck from the Mayor's office. Hyde skipped it complaining of chest pains and was taken back to the home. Everyone thought he was goldbricking.

The meeting ran late so Borland stayed overnight at police HQ, sleeping off a bellyful on a cot in the maintenance room. While he slept, samples were taken at the furrier building before the fire crew burned it, and Brass called another meeting for 1800 hours. Borland stumbled into the room that morning chewing flatfoot coffee. And then the whole thing took so long he had to pour shots into his cup under the table.

Finally Brass asked Borland to suggest some names from back in the day—guys that could be called to active duty to consult—who hadn't gone ape and what. Off the top of his head he suggested Lovelock. He hadn't seen him in twenty years, but the man was solid back in the day, and last he heard was still married, which was something.

Brass said, "Go get him."

Borland hitched his pants up and paced over the concrete walkway to Lovelock's front door. The grass was thick and weedy to both sides, with lots of dead patches. The door opened before he got there.

"Joe Borland you sick bastard!" Lovelock chopped the air with a sinewy hand out, wanting to shake. He took short, strong steps, lots of them, giving him a quick and youthful profile. "That moustache makes you look old!"

"Well Marsh, imagine how old I look without it." Borland instinctively squared his shoulders and paced on the spot, mirroring the stance. He hated Lovelock for provoking the ridiculous behavior. It was the sort of thing older men did around younger men—an energetic pretense that involved sucking in guts and lifting chins.

Lovelock was in excellent shape considering. Most of his hair was gone. His deep tan smoothed out the wrinkles in his face and accented the corded muscles at his jaw and neck. He was trim. A dark short-sleeved turtleneck and pleated slacks accentuated the look. His chest still swelled with muscle.

Borland's was swollen by blood pressure, fatty foods and drink. It certainly wasn't pride. He reclaimed his hand from Lovelock's strong grip and deftly did up the only button on his jacket that would close.

"So you got a drink around here?"

"What else?" Lovelock laughed, grabbing Borland's meaty elbow and leading him quickly toward the front door. His teeth were smaller than Borland's but whiter suggesting money, suggesting more than a squad pension.

Lovelock pulled the screen door aside exposing a cool, tight mudroom—a very tidy three by five arrangement of tiles wrapped in shadow. Borland just made out the shape of someone at the far side. It was...

"You remember Tina?" Lovelock turned and gestured. That was it. Lovelock's wife was a teacher. Good pension. A tooth fairy.

Borland remembered more: little Tina with the big breasts. Borland had made several drunken passes at her back in the day, and had heard that he'd made many more.

"Tina!" Borland heaved his face into a smile and spread his arms. He lied: "You look fantastic."

She declined the hug, grabbed his hand and shook it once. That was fine by him. He'd never gotten used to the way women aged, especially the beauties. They went downhill so fast, so far. Standing beside Lovelock now, big silicon tits or not she looked more like his mother than the blonde Borland had tried to screw in several laundry rooms. She was in fairly good shape, but time had sanded down all the curves. She wore a paisley pantsuit that fit whatever form was left. There were silver bangles on her wrists that matched her necklace, earrings and the painted toenails that stuck out of her white leather sandals.

"You're looking well," she said, in a rough-edged voice.

"You never could lie to me," Borland answered entering and following her away from the door. He knew that Tina had egged him on back in the day, despite her protests had really wanted him as much as he wanted her. Otherwise, why would he have made the passes, in or out of a blackout? She was asking for it.

"Well, come on in," Lovelock rasped. "Tina will make up some sandwiches."

“How about that drink?” Borland started after Tina.

He didn't take two steps before Lovelock spun around in the mudroom and fumbled at four deadbolts before placing an iron cross-brace under the knob.

“You expecting Ali Babba's forty thieves?” Borland tried at humor.

“Never can be too sure,” Lovelock replied with a smile, but it fell flat when he focused on his wife. Borland saw it too. Tina's look was sharp, staring at a long steel door chain that her husband had yet to throw.

“Sorry.” Lovelock chuckled nervously. He then proceeded to undo all the locks, open the door and then shut it again, repeating the locking procedure, this time sliding the door chain in place at the last without a pause.

“Come on Joe,” Tina said. Borland turned to see a shimmer of sweat had formed over her thin eyebrows. “Let's get you a drink.”

“You still a whiskey man?” Lovelock threw an arm on Borland's shoulder and gestured to follow Tina.

“Pretty much all there is to it,” Borland growled.

CHAPTER 3

“So, your first impression of Lovelock was positive?” Tinfingers asked. He looked up from his notes and checked the recorder to make sure it was still running.

“Yeah. Hey, can I get another drink?” Borland grumbled, tapping his empty cup.

Tinfingers produced the bottle, poured him a short one.

“I still can’t believe those rookies confiscated my flask on the way in.” Borland laughed. “Jesus, it’s like a church around here.” He took a drink, smiled as the warmth spread over his face again.

“So,” Tinfingers started, “Your impression of Captain Lovelock?” The kinderkid had not refilled his own cup. *Pussy!*

“Good,” Borland said, sliding his fingers along the splintered edge of the table. “He looked *great*.”

“Like healthy?” Tinfingers nodded.

“Course *healthy*,” Borland snarled. “I’m not queer on him.”

“Sure.” Tinfingers jotted that down and then laughed. “You didn’t know about his wife though.”

“Only thing I knew about his wife is I wanted to take a good long poke at her.” Borland shrugged. “Back in the day—long and hard—that’d be me.”

“I see,” Tinfingers mumbled and jotted something in his notebook.

“Hey!” Borland pointed. “You writing that?”

“It’s on this anyway.” Tinfingers gestured to the recorder.

“*Ah*, too late to matter, but...” Borland tapped his cup again. “It’s all like a bunch of boy scouts took over here.”

Tinfingers frowned. “Since the day after we’ve been tightening things up.”

“I noticed,” Borland said, leaning back in his chair, enjoying the spreading glaze of whiskey.

“Back in the day it was understandable,” Tinfingers said. “All hell breaking loose, and everyone was caught off guard.”

“I get it.” Borland straightened in his chair, contemplating a cigarette. *Nah. The hell with it. Who needs cancer too?* “I just think it’s a joke, considering.”

“Considering?” Tinfingers leveled his gaze.

“Considering just before everyone switched to Varion people were counting calories and saving trees while they were gobbling antidepressants and heart pills,” he said. “Here you guys are cleaning up your act the same way and it’s coming back again.”

“The Variant Effect came from Varion.” Tinfingers glanced at his hand. “Varion was unsafe.”

“I know that,” Borland said. “But people took it because it promised happiness without side effects.”

“I see, the easy way.” Tinfingers nodded.

“Right. It’s fake bullshit,” Borland snarled. “I’ll take the hangover and cholesterol any day.” He slapped the table with a swollen hand. “*And* the heart attack!”

“It’s pretty much accepted now that the *cranking* that squads and the public used to combat the Variant Effect did more harm than good.” Tinfingers let his eyes sink to Borland’s heavy lips and sweaty jowls.

“Popular opinion,” Borland rasped, “never climbed into a nest of Biters.”

“Some mistakes were made,” Tinfingers continued, tapping the table with his false fingertips, “that might have been avoided, had there been less *cranking*.”

“Backbiting is 20/20.” Borland tapped his cup and then watched Tinfingers pour him another. “Easy for armchair quarterbacks and kinderkids to criticize.”

Tinfingers glowered at the use of the epithet. “*Cranking* made it harder to determine the right course of action.”

“Yeah,” Borland said, rapping the table. “But writing down I want to poke a friend’s wife.” He laughed. “That’s a *right* course of action?”

“So, you didn’t know about his wife,” Tinfingers said, changing back to safer topics. “That she was still...”

“How could I?” Borland flushed. “Nobody saw them since the day.”

CHAPTER 4

“You boys sit there and tell your awful old stories,” Tina said behind the padded counter, laughing as she dropped hunks of ice in the tumblers. Bottles, glasses and chrome implements gleamed on a shelf behind her. Borland and Lovelock settled into some La-Z-Boys by the bay window. There was a low coffee table in front of them and a couch with side tables opposite that. The heavy acrylic drapes were closed, their hard golden pleats played on Borland’s mind like prison bars.

He watched Tina chatting like a wife of the way back before the day just mixing a couple of fellows their drinks. It was so simple.

“Thanks honey,” Lovelock cooed from his vinyl La-Z-Boy. “But you’ve got to come and chime in sometime. You were there too.”

“I couldn’t stand it back in the day,” Tina said walking carefully over with the drinks clinking and almost sloshing on the yellow plastic tray. She smiled at Borland handing him his. He saw the full red purse of her lips and flashing teeth, and he wondered if she still...

“You boys got as wild as those skin eating things that everyone was talking about...” Tina finished and started back to the kitchen. “It was *awful*.”

When she finally sashayed off to load the dishwasher, Borland and Lovelock traded old looks that were attached to the old days; the days of cranking and blackouts at old Stationhouse Nine.

“So have you heard from Hyde?” Lovelock’s eyes were serious.

“What?” Borland shook his head wondering where that was coming from. “Why would I hear from *him*?”

“After he was attacked...” Lovelock took a sip from his drink. “I figured give it some time... Did things not get right with you two?”

Borland shrugged and then dug into his twitching crotch to arrange his hernias. He cleared his throat while he did it to distract Lovelock’s attention.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Him and me, there’s no love lost.”

“Yeah. Sorry for bringing it up.” Lovelock reached out and smacked Borland’s forearm. “But back before the day, even for the first part of it.” Lovelock started to sense Borland’s steam rising, so he began to stutter. “And his daughter...ah, you’re right, it’s all passed.” He laughed. “You’d think I’d get old enough to know better.”

Borland’s mind had drifted by that point, as his attention was drawn away to the immaculate condition of the dinner table, hutch full of polished plates behind, the living room and...*everything*. It was all *just so*—just perfect. The light bounced off polished surfaces and blinded him. And Tina, he could hear her. She was out in the kitchen fussing and banging and clattering around. Everything went into the dishwasher at its appropriate time and place and angle. She was humming a song too, but it came out tense and high and quavering.

“And you been where doing what?” Borland said finally, turning to Lovelock’s pale blue gaze. “Just screwing like teenagers?”

Lovelock laughed at that, and shook his head and picked at fluff on his pants. “No, I just opted out, Joe. To forget.” His expression fell. “I’m kind’a messed up still.”

“Yeah...” Borland heard this over the last heavy clink of his ice cubes. He lowered the glass, frowning. “What?”

“Well, it’s like it was all yesterday,” Lovelock said, threading his fingers together. “We did some bad things...”

“Like *save the world*?” Borland leaned forward, anxiously unhappy about his empty glass. “We did what we had to do and we’d do it again.”

“But the skin eaters...” Lovelock’s eyes were suddenly weary. “That was bad, and sometimes I shot first and *didn’t* ask questions later.”

“I always shot first!” Borland said, snarling grimly. “Which brings me to this, because now I guess we have a chance to make good, if that’s your want.” He scrubbed his chin with the back of a hand. “Or...we can settle the score with our demons.”

“What do you mean?” Lovelock looked up over twisted fingers, the heavy knuckles looked swollen and raw.

“That’s why I’m here.” Borland lifted his glass and licked the underside of his ice cubes. *Nothing.*

Lovelock stared at him like there as a gun pointed at his heart.

“Speaking of Hyde, which you did.” Borland dug into his jacket pocket, pulled out the crumpled report. “We were both called up on special assignment.” He threw the envelope on the table. “We found Biters in town.”

Lovelock bolted to attention. His shoulders squared, military stiff. For a second he resembled the old Captain and hand-to-hand man, ready for war. Then he took a couple fragile steps toward the report, aging as his knees crumpled. He stumbled back into his chair.

“Biters?” he breathed, hopelessly.

“Just three. They’re tracing the bodies. Managed to find I.D. where the Alpha was hiding his pack. DNA too.” Borland shrugged. “Takes time.”

“Biters, *now*?” Lovelock’s eyes were dismal.

“*You* only need you to talk. *Teach.*” Borland reassured. “Believe me, I’ve had enough of the rough stuff too...that was *then*. But they’re asking us to volunteer, Marsh, before they order us back to active duty.”

“I’m gonna be sixty for Christ’s sake!” Lovelock shouted. “And what about Tina?”

“Like I said, they need us to train new Variant Squads,” Borland growled. “We’re too old for more than that. We’ve done enough.”

“Life doesn’t work that way!” Lovelock said. “I’m retired. *We’re* retired. It’s over!” He stood up and folded his hands in front of him. Then he sat back down on the edge of the La-Z-Boy.

“But here we are.” Borland shook his glass. The cubes rattled noisily. “Brass calls. The old soldiers answer.”

“Joe Borland the *patriot*, r-right!” Lovelock laughed, reached for Borland’s empty glass and then paused shaking his head saying: “It doesn’t matter what Brass wants. Tina needs me every minute of every day.”

“She’ll get used to it,” Borland reassured. “Just like before.”

“No she won’t,” Lovelock warned.

CHAPTER 5

“Didn’t you wonder why no one had seen Lovelock the day after?” Tinfingers refreshed Borland’s drink, grew a pair and had another himself.

“I wondered more why he didn’t have a TV.” Borland scowled. “Everybody has one.”

“A *warning sign*, I guess. You can’t control what’s on a TV.” Tinfingers chuckled. “They liked their quiet.”

“We *all* like our quiet.” Borland relished the whiskey. Things were nagging at him inside, causing his ears to burn red—things that ran deeper than his hernias. “It wasn’t like *I* was out tripping the light fandango.”

“No one had seen Lovelock *and* his wife out in public for twenty years.” Tinfingers leveled that statement after he took a sip. “He’d talk to Psyche Ops Officers on the phone, and would only meet with them at his house.”

“*POOs* gave everybody the creeps.” Borland remembered the shrinks talking to him the day after. “What do they know about the Variant Effect they didn’t find in an eBook?”

“The Psyche Operations Office was created for that reason.” Tinfingers cringed. “POOs were trained to evaluate and maintain the mental health of all decommissioned and retired officers and uniforms—*baggies*—no longer in the field.”

Borland watched, figuring at least the kinderkid had chewed his fingers off in the name of the Variant Effect. That gave him the right to use the lingo.

“POO was created back in the day to brainstorm the Variant Effect! Most squads had their own POOs that rode along to evaluate the situation. *We* lost a couple to Biters,” Borland growled. “The day after, government took control of POO and filled it with doctor’s degrees and social workers and cry babies. All pushing the legal playbook: Keep us veterans too crazy to file a lawsuit!”

“Let’s not get sidetracked,” Tinfingers said, clapping his fingers with a metallic click. “The fact remains that Lovelock isolated himself.”

Borland shrugged. “No one saw Hyde either.” He considered the lapse. “The day changed everybody.”

“Hyde was in seclusion for obvious reasons.” Tinfingers wrote something in his notebook. “Lovelock’s silence was indicative of something more.”

“There was a lot of that Post Traumatic stuff going around... Even I had a touch of it for a while.” Suddenly Borland’s point was made for him.

“The Lovelocks had groceries delivered, only shopped online. The same with their banking and entertainment,” Tinfingers said, his eyes suggested he was coming to *his* point. “Lovelock was seen out in their gardens, but he never strayed off the property. No one had seen Mrs. Lovelock out of the house.”

“Well,” Borland grumbled. “Lots of people went underground the day after. And most everybody is still dealing with the long-term Variant Effect.”

“You had no idea?” Tinfingers regarded him carefully. “Your rank gave you access to all the personnel files. Lovelock’s was the first name you chose.”

“I *cherry-picked* it ‘cause Brass asked for a name in a hurry. Lovelock came to mind because he was dependable and into fitness, and MAYBE alive.” He shrugged. “I didn’t know jack about his wife.”

“You didn’t know?” Tinfingers’ eyes turned to slits.

Borland reached out and grabbed the whiskey bottle. He poured two ounces and then tipped it back before saying: “I was as surprised as anybody.”

“He knew the penalty.” Tinfingers grabbed the bottle and slid it away from Borland. “When the squads were collecting it—destroying it back in the day.” He shifted the sheets in the file and displayed a photograph. Borland counted six cases of Varion in the foreground and more stacked farther in.

“Investigators found these behind a false wall in Lovelock’s crawlspace,” Tinfingers said.

Borland whistled, then stared defiantly across the table.

Tinfingers was quiet, regarding him with crippled knuckles knitted together.

“Hey, I didn’t follow anybody home at night!” Borland said remembering the squads riding shotgun for the fire department burning details. At first they were showing up at factories and just monitoring the safe destruction as companies complied with the order. Later, they were raiding warehouses and destroying Varion shipments at gunpoint when the price of it skyrocketed on the black market. “If Lovelock was collecting the crap, it was *his* problem.”

“But he showed you Varion.”

“*One* bottle.” Borland shook his head, one eye on his cup. “Right before all hell broke loose.”

Tinfingers opened the file folder and flipped a paper for Borland to view. He didn’t have his glasses so had to hold it way out at arm’s length. Luckily he didn’t have to read it.

“They traced the lot numbers of the Varion we found at Lovelock’s place,” Tinfingers explained. “And correlated them with burn raids.” He suddenly looked a bit like a prosecutor resting his case. “You were on most of those raids with him.”

“He could have stole that any time,” Borland said, then craftily. “You said I wouldn’t need a lawyer,”

“You don’t,” Tinfingers said and smiled. “But you’ve already said you had other interests in Lovelock’s wife and *she* was taking the drug.” He paused. “Did you turn a blind eye?”

Borland surged up. “I wanted to screw her and that’s all I was interested in—like you wrote in your notes.” He swept a hand at the files, then his shoulders dropped and he crumpled back into his chair. Things went south all right.

“I just wanted to *do* her. Marsh loved her, if you believe in that shit!”

CHAPTER 6

Tina smiled sweetly at Lovelock when he called her out of the kitchen. She swept into the living room, snatched up the empty glasses, cleaned them, and bathed fresh ice cubes in whiskey in one long continuous action.

When she brought them back in on a bright red plastic tray she hissed and then clicked her tongue when she spied a pale ring of moisture on the table where Borland's drink had missed the coaster she'd set out.

"Well!" she said, voice cycling up to shrill as she set the tray down and dropped to her knees to rub at the stained veneer with her apron. "I can't leave you boys for a minute before you start wrecking the place."

"It's okay honey," Lovelock reassured, creeping up to get his drink. "The mark will disappear when it dries."

Borland heaved himself forward to grab his whiskey and sank back to watch the matrimonial moment with a grin. It was times like this that moved his solitary existence one thin decimal point away from dismal.

"It's *not* okay," Tina said, voice breaking with emotion. She rubbed, angled her head to study the tabletop, and rubbed again. "Look Marsh! We'll have to get it refinished now." She dropped her hands and chin in defeat. "And the man said it wouldn't take another sanding!"

Lovelock got up and knelt beside her, turned his head this way and that. "It's going to be fine."

"Then we'll have to...get a new one." Tina's eyes filled with tears. "I can't Marshall, you know I can't." Her hands traced the sides of the table. "I need *this* one."

"It's okay, darling," Lovelock comforted, with one arm around his wife he pointed at the table. "The mark's dried right out already."

Tina stared at the spot a half minute, and then breathed a sigh of relief.

“Oh Marsh, thank god!” Her eyes worshipped Lovelock a second and then swung down to look sheepishly at Borland. “I’m such a silly goose, Joe!”

“Ah hell, Tina, don’t worry about it.” Borland said, waving his hands. “It’s a beautiful home. You can’t let a couple of old slobs drink in here.”

Tina smiled. “Marshall can drink in here.” Her eyes turned cold, and then filled with venom. “And there hasn’t been any trouble like this for years.” She looked to Lovelock who had tightened his arm around her waist and helped her to her feet.

“Honey.” Lovelock cradled his wife’s elbows in his hands and turned her toward the kitchen. “Can I speak to you?”

Borland watched them go, savoring the whiskey. They stepped inside the kitchen doorway and he overheard a hissing sound, a voice—angry and hateful. That was covered by Lovelock’s crooning comfort. Borland leaned forward listening. *Struggling noises? A grunt. Feet sliding on tiles?* Then there were sudden sobs followed by the rattle and tap of a pill bottle being opened. More cooing from Lovelock, and then tip tap, jiggle—pop! Water poured from a faucet. Glass clinked.

They appeared in the kitchen doorway and walked toward Borland. Lovelock’s arm was slung around Tina’s back. Her eyes were puffy and red. Borland noticed Lovelock stuffing something into his left pants pocket.

“I’m sorry, Joe,” Tina said finally. Her eyes did a hysterical half step at the table before Lovelock reined her in with a hug. Borland followed the look and sighed with relief. The mark was gone. “I’m such a worry wart in my old age.”

“Hell, Tina. None of us are getting any younger,” Borland said and blanched at the look she fired at Lovelock. Her husband’s face pinched with worry.

“I’ll let you two old, *old*...” Tina picked up the serving tray, and wiped it down with her apron. “Old *friends* talk.” Then she spotted a mark on her apron and she ripped the garment off like it was on fire.

“Now I’ve got to do *laundry*!” She turned on her heel and marched toward a door by the entrance. Borland heard her feet clatter on the stairs to the basement.

“Women...” Lovelock said and smiled, trying to pass it off.

“She okay?” Borland asked. Sweat gleamed on Lovelock’s brow.

“Yes. She just worries too much. And that gets me worrying. Then she worries.” He picked up his drink. “We feed off each other.” He took a hurried sip and coughed. “But you can see why I can’t...*couldn’t* leave her.”

“I never met a woman that wasn’t picky, Marsh,” Borland said, not wanting to start threatening over pensions yet. “Besides, if she needs help, Brass could make sure she’s looked after while you’re at work.”

“No. No. No. No.” Lovelock shook his head and took another drink. Then he cautiously placed his glass center to the coaster. “Nobody from outside. I know how Tina works.”

“Is *this* from back in the day?” Borland started to puzzle it together. “The Variant Effect. Everybody got a touch of something, right?”

“Well. Well. Well, I wouldn’t say that.” Lovelock’s eyes leveled as he shook his head left to right before he started nodding. “Yes. Yes, I would say that. But not so much as out there say it.”

“It *presented*?” Borland frowned angrily. “Didn’t you get help after?”

“We tried.” Lovelock shook his head ridiculously, and Borland started to wonder if the former Captain didn’t have a touch of something himself. “The POOs suggested the new drugs but that made her worse.”

“Jesus.” Borland rubbed his bristly jowls, watching the basement door. “She went off Varion cold turkey?”

“Look Joe.” Lovelock suddenly sprang to his feet, nervously patting his pocket. Borland heard a distinctive rattle. “I think you can see why I can’t come back. Tina needs me, and she was there for me all through the day. When you and me were out *cranking* and killing. She needs *me* now.”

Borland scooted forward, pulled himself out of his chair before tipping his glass and sucking the last of his drink from the ice cubes.

“I wish it was that easy, Marsh.”

“What do you mean?” Lovelock remained frozen in place. He watched Borland’s every move, certain the big man would cause some kind of accident or mess.

“This isn’t a request.” Borland thumped his glass down on the table, a good inch away from the coaster.

“Joe!” Lovelock moaned and jumped forward. He set Borland’s glass on the coaster and rubbed at the table with his shirttail. “Maybe you better leave.”

“I’m not asking you to come back to the squad.” Borland watched the man cringing on the carpet beside the table. “*Brass is ordering.*”

He bent and grabbed Lovelock’s arm, started pulling him up.

“Stop that crawling, man!” Borland barked, as the former captain struggled and then gained his feet.

Borland jabbed a hand into Lovelock’s pocket—the material ripped.

“No!” Lovelock reacted instinctively. He chopped at Borland’s windpipe, and the big man tumbled back onto the couch, gasping.

“What have you done?” Lovelock cried, slapping at his torn pocket.

But Borland had already turned the pill bottle in his scarred fist. He was reading the familiar blue and white label: *VARION – Once-daily treatment for...* and he couldn’t read the rest without his glasses but it didn’t matter.

“Ah Lovelock, you’re screwed...” Borland glared.

CHAPTER 7

“You didn’t arrest him right away,” Tinfingers said, shuffling the papers before him. “That’s my problem with your story.”

“That’s not *my story* that’s the *truth!*” Borland grumbled, pointing at his cup. Tinfingers shook his head. “Anyway I wanted to get out with a whole skin and I didn’t know where Tina was in the building at that point. If she was in full Variant Effect—*presenting*—I didn’t know what I was dealing with. She could have been anything. Sure, a *fussbudget* that was clear, but I didn’t know what else she had, and she was still taking Varion to treat it.”

“The results would be unpredictable.” Tinfingers doodled something on a file folder with his pen.

“Ya think?” Borland shouted. “*Varion for over thirty years!* They didn’t test it on monkeys that long. Twenty years on top of the day?” He pounded the table. “She could have been wired for anything.” He chuckled then, finding grim humor. “And Marsh knows the penalty for obtaining, administering, using or selling Varion after the ban. He’d never see the light of day again. I knew he knew that and he knew that!”

“You didn’t have your weapon with you?” Tinfingers asked.

“No.” Borland sighed. “Why would I bring a weapon on a recruitment drive?” Borland had asked himself the same question. He was getting soft, or the booze was making him dull. Back in the day, he slept with a gun belt on, and hid weapons in every room in his apartment. “And I’m not sure it would be legal. At least until I get reinstated to full active duty. Otherwise I’m just a washed out old Biter-fighter with a gut full of booze and a smoking gun in his hand.” He laughed, knowing that situation would have left him wide open to prosecution and trouble. *A scapegoat on a leash.* “And I was there to talk to the guy, not threaten him.”

“Carry your weapon at all times in the future,” Tinfingers said. “The paperwork’s covered. You’re a Captain again. Congrats.”

“Good.” Borland adjusted his hernias and watched Tinfingers from under his heavy brow, absently wondering if Brass would pay to get his guts fixed. He shrugged and nodded, understanding the importance of his reinstatement. It was a good indication that they weren’t coming after him for what happened. The kinderkid’s questions were tough, but he was throwing them hard to see if he could shake something loose.

“You only saw the one bottle of Varion?” Tinfingers sipped his drink.

“Yep, and while it was sinking in, and I was just thinking I might be in a real bad spot, Lovelock starts crying a river.” Borland was relieved to see Tinfingers reach out to pour him another drink.

“That’s when he told you about her condition?” Tinfingers’ eyes looked weak-kneed for a second, like his kinderkid status made him *feel* for poor Tina.

“Yeah, the damn broke or whatever they say. I guess he knew that once his wife was in the basement, she’d pitch a fit and start cleaning and tidying and arranging.” Borland grunted. “He knew she was comfortable down there, felt safe doing that, and he had *some* time to talk.”

“Okay, just for the record.” Tinfingers leveled his gaze. “You didn’t know about the Varion that he’d hoarded from back in the day?”

“You know what else you found down the basement,” Borland snarled. “If I was involved, why would I point you to that?”

“It could hide complicity.” Tinfingers was still testy.

“Ah, shit, you read my record!” Borland’s face burned. “I’ve never been that smart and you know it.

CHAPTER 8

“Tina’s agoraphobic,” Lovelock whispered sliding onto the couch, dragging Borland down beside him. Borland didn’t like the set up; it left his back half-turned to the basement door.

“Let me see...” Borland dug into his memory, wincing. Lovelock had dented his voice box. “Fear of new things, dislike of outdoors...” He laughed improbably. “It’s been a while.”

“Agoraphobia sufferers become anxious in unfamiliar environments where they perceive that they have little control. Tina doesn’t like wide-open spaces, crowds or traveling,” Lovelock said, like he had the web page up in front of him. His eyes were full of tears.

“But, *you* aren’t agoraphobic. Must have driven you nuts.” Borland tried to keep his peripheral vision on the basement door.

“It’s not so bad. It’s not so bad, Joe.” Lovelock’s eyes rolled. “Now, the arranging, the rituals—that obsessive compulsive step-by-step, control the environment stuff...that gets at me, but...it’s not so bad.” Lovelock’s voice slipped back into a comforting tone. “She just wants to stay home. Is that so awful? This is her home, her comfort zone.”

“Fine,” Borland grumbled. “We all got our ticks, but why are you giving her Varion? Do you know how much trouble you’re in?”

“I didn’t know how bad she was until she went *off* the Varion.” Lovelock nodded at the memory, his face full of grief. “When it was first banned back in the day and they took her off it...she couldn’t let me go out to do my work with the squad. She tried to kill herself. The new drugs they prescribed didn’t work—made it worse.”

“So you stole Varion when we were supposed to be destroying it.” Borland’s back was drenched with sweat. His ears had started to prick up at every noise. Where the hell was Tina?

“What did it matter, Joe?” Lovelock gripped Borland’s heavy forearm. “I was already giving up my life to the squad to fight Varion. And it helped her. So what?”

“Look,” Borland whispered. “You got a good point. You’ve worked for the squads. They’ll remember that. So, we turn you both in and they’ll go easy,” he snarled. “They have to.”

“It’s not as simple as that,” Lovelock said, and then flinched when he heard a noise. A rumble, the furnace was turning on. “Tina had some trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Borland scowled.

“She got very defensive.” Lovelock rubbed his hands together. “It wasn’t long after the ban, when we were using Varion on the sly, and I was able to go out for short periods.”

“And...” Borland’s heavy features dropped.

“There was a Jehovah’s Witness—a man who kept coming back. He was persistent. I told him to stop coming around. I even hung a sign; you know the ones? No soliciting...” Lovelock reached out to his drink, took a sip. “When I got home, Tina had him all cut up and stored in a cooler downstairs.”

“Ah Jesus...” Borland breathed the words. “She killed him?”

“He triggered something in her.” Lovelock shrugged. “She didn’t know any better. He was a threat to her home.”

“How the hell?” Borland shook his head. “How’d she get away with that?”

“I helped hide the body, broke up the concrete in the basement and buried him.” Lovelock squeezed his hands into fists. “The regular cops didn’t ask questions when they canvassed the area because they recognized me from the squads.” Tears rolled over his tanned face.

“Well, that’s why they banned Varion, Marsh!” Borland growled. “You worked with the goddamn squads. You *know* that!”

“Another time I was out doing banking, she killed a woman who was working for the gas company who tried to get us to switch from oil. Tina sliced her into pieces and wrapped her in plastic tarps downstairs. I buried *her* too.” A sob of defeat shook the former captain. “I had to do the same with a political pollster—an election years ago.” He

chuckled grimly. “That’s why I can’t come back to the squads.” He swatted Borland’s forearm. “She can’t be left alone.”

“Okay, Marsh.” Borland’s peripheral vision was now divided between watching the basement door *and* studying Lovelock. “We need to just—*go*. They’ll understand your position. But if Tina’s *presenting* neither of us are safe here.”

“Don’t overreact.” Lovelock rolled his eyes toward the basement door. “The best thing we can do is act casual. Tina made sandwiches. We can eat them, then find a way to get you out of here and you come back with some *baggies*.”

“The hell with that!” Borland leaned in hissing, “I’m getting out of here *now*.”

There was a *clunk*. Borland turned quickly. Nothing. The basement door was still closed. But the sound...

Lovelock’s expression twitched all over his face. His eyes looked away from Borland’s to the basement door and back.

“Marsh!” He grabbed Lovelock’s elbow. “Is she up here?”

“What are you boys whispering about?” Tina stood in the kitchen doorway, head down, hair hanging forward over her face. A washcloth dripped in her hand. “You know it isn’t nice to have secrets.”

Borland got to his feet, unprepared. He knew the Variant Effect enhanced everything: psychological illness, strength, dexterity, and homicidal tendencies...

“Oh, honey...” Lovelock laughed unconvincingly, rising beside him. “We were just talking over old times, not fit for the *fairer* sex.”

Tina lifted her head, smiling. Her paranoia was burning the space between them. Finally she turned to Borland.

“Joe Borland,” she said, shaking her head rapidly. The veins in her neck pulsed, the muscles and tendons quivered with steely strength. “You’re a bad influence on my husband. Marshall never lied to me before.”

“What are you talking about Tina?” Borland rolled forward onto his toes, trying to be casual. “We were just laughing about the time a baggie named Marconi shit himself when an Alpha Biter surprised him.”

“You’re a bad liar, Joe.” Tina set the washcloth on the counter. “But you’re not like Marshall. He’s lying to help me. *You’re* lying to help yourself.”

Borland took the opportunity to reach down and grab the glass tumbler. It wasn’t much of a weapon but...

When he looked up, Tina was gone. He turned to Lovelock. “Where’d she go?”

“I’m sorry Joe, but she likes things the way they are...” Lovelock’s face was weak, his lips quivered.

“We’ll clean it up again,” he sighed, defeated. “I can’t stop helping her now.”

CHAPTER 9

“So, that’s when she killed him? It’s strange I gotta tell you, for an agoraphobic to kill her husband first. I mean he was part of her comfort zone and *you* were the threat.” Tinfingers rubbed at his chin with his tin fingers. “It doesn’t fit the literature, and there’s a lot on the subject. Pretty much every psychosis, personality disorder or mood has been the subject of intensive study since the day after.”

“How in hell am I supposed to know?” Borland shrugged. “Ask POO.” He cleared his throat. “Once she brought the knitting needles out all hell broke loose.” He paused as a flush warmed his face. “I guess he could’a had a moment of doubt. Decided to mend his ways. He kind of got in her way on purpose.”

“*Needles.*” Tinfingers coughed a laugh and shook his head. “That’s the nail in the coffin, huh? Knitting the poor bastard a sweater like the model wife and then: BAM! He’s thrown away his reputation and she’s stirring his brains with steel needles.”

“Like I said,” Borland said, shrinking down in his chair. He was going to have to get into the drinks hard soon or sleep. Either way something had to be done. “Things went crazy when Tina came out of the kitchen.”

“Well,” Tinfingers mumbled, making a note. “I’ll say this much, you’ve jumped right back into it. First the Biters with Hyde, and then you’re taking on an agoraphobic in full *presentation.*” He shook his head. “They always said you were a survivor. I had no idea.”

“Lovelock made his bed.” Borland’s face fell. “I helped tuck him in.”

“Still,” Tinfingers muttered, gathering his files together. “To see an old buddy go down, killed by his own wife. And then to have to use the same weapon to take *her* out.”

“Like I didn’t have enough to forget already.” Borland climbed to his feet. His chest felt heavy. His breath was coming in gasps.

“Well, thanks for cooperating, Captain Borland. Everything looks in order. It’s an unfortunate incident.” Tinfingers pocketed the recorder and stood up with the files tucked under his arm. “I’ve been told to make sure you’re fed, then I’ve got to take you to the stationhouse.”

“What? I been going for two days here.” Borland collapsed back into his chair.

“A bunch of new baggies is coming in. Brass wants you to give them the once over. Your old stationhouse, Number Nine, is going live.” Tinfingers looked at his watch. “Captain Hyde’s on his way.”

“*Hyde?*” Borland’s spirit sank. “Listen then. Give me the rest of that bottle and I promise I’ll do a quick review of the troops.” He smiled harshly. “After that all bets are off.”

Tinfingers set the bottle out on the table and then paused by the door watching Borland fumble with the lid.

“I gotta go do a couple things, then we’ll get you some grub. Pizza okay?” Tinfingers looked him up and down.

Borland’s shrug shook his belly. “You tell *me*.”

“You okay?” the kinderkid asked, real concern on his face.

Borland poured a drink. “I’ll wait here.”

Tinfingers nodded and walked out of the interview room.

Borland dropped one of the last two ounces into his mouth and washed it around his tongue. He needed a moment of peace to catch up to himself. He had something else to forget.

CHAPTER 10

Lovelock stood next to him, his face suddenly old and guilty. Sweat poured over his features like he was waiting for the noose.

A *thump* from behind and Borland swung around. He just caught the edge of Tina's pantsuit—the paisley rayon snapped like a flag as she dove behind the couch. Borland threw his glass. It smashed on the wall.

Then Lovelock's hand gripped Borland's left wrist, turned it back with a blaze of pain.

“I can't let you do that, Joe!” Lovelock's technique was stronger than his grip. The old captain from back in the day would have snapped Borland's wrist. But Lovelock's eyes were blank, and his skin was waxy and wet. He was broken. Still, the karate was enough to force Borland down onto a knee, onto the thick carpet beside the couch. Under the side table was a basket with wooden flaps on top. Borland dug a hand into it and got wool. He punched into it and felt steel needles skewer his fist.

“She's my wife,” Lovelock added like a pronouncement of doom.

Borland felt the whiskey ignite in his bloodstream. He didn't recognize adrenaline anymore. He pushed off the couch, surged upward with a pair of knitting needles threaded between the skinned knuckles on his right hand.

He jabbed them easily into Lovelock's left eye socket. Already driven deep in the palm of Borland's hand, braced against bone, they tore into Lovelock's skull and through his brain.

The former captain made a strangled animal noise and dropped.

Then something fell on Borland's shoulders, knocked him down onto Lovelock. Thin little fists thumped on his head, wiry arms stretched around for his windpipe. Teeth scratched at his bristly scalp.

“Marshall!” Tina screamed, wild with Variant. Her teeth snapped, almost got Borland's ear.

He couldn't get his footing, caught between the coffee table and the couch; and his feet were tangled in Lovelock's legs.

"Get out of my house!" Tina shrieked, smashing her jaws into the back of his head. Her hands slid over the sweat on his stubbly cheeks. Her fingernails started pinching around for his eyes. "Leave us alone!"

Borland clenched his fist around the knitting needles, still embedded in Lovelock's brain. He wrenched them free, his eyes shut tight against Tina's clawing fingernails. He reversed his fist and stabbed the needles blindly upward as Tina screamed and snapped closer still.

There was a shriek. Tina shuddered and went limp.

For a second, Borland lay there, sandwiched between the dying couple. He couldn't catch his breath to gain his feet and he couldn't roll away. Blood and cerebral fluid dripped out of Tina's mouth and punctured sinus, slid over his cheek.

Lovelock dying, hissed: "I'll see you in hell."

"Yeah," Borland whispered back, his lips brushing the dying man's ear.

Sitting at the table, the memory played for Borland. He upended the bottle and cleared the last of it off as the door opened. Tinfingers jingled his car keys.

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