

Of the Night

by

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for Val Lewton

“Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh,
Shadows of the evening
Steal across the sky.”

The Evening Hymn
(Sabine Baring-Gould)

1

Someone was screaming, loud enough to wake the dead.

The room gradually filling in around him, growing walls and a ceiling, sprouting furniture and a hideous green area rug. Flood went to raise his head and paid dearly for it, experiencing near lethal levels of pain. A real fucking skull-splitter. He finally managed to roll over...and saw what's her name, Amanda, cradling Conrad's head as he stiffened and trembled, in the throes of some kind of fit. His heels thumped on the floor and she was having a hard time holding on to him.

"Help me!" she cried. *"Oh, God. Wake up, baby, pleeeeeease..."*

None of them was in any position to offer assistance. Stu and Karen were sprawled a short distance away, not moving, and maybe it was his thermonuclear headache but he couldn't see their auras, nothing, not even a flicker.

Amanda kept wailing away. Why didn't she shut up? Flood crawled toward her, making slow progress. By the time he reached them, Conrad was as still and breathless as the others. *"O my God o my God..."*

"Can't...can't..." Can't *what?* Flood couldn't find the words. The pain shortcircuited his higher brain functions. He moved away from them, making for the door, to find help or maybe just to escape (at that moment his motives weren't crystal clear). Amanda was saying something about calling an ambulance. It sounded like she was talking into the other end of a long, hollow tube. He grasped the doorknob, pulled himself upright.

“*Where are you going?*” she shrieked. “Get back here, you asshole—” But by then he was in the hallway, his legs tangling, barely supporting him. His vision was confined to a narrow cone, his depth of field and focus completely out of whack.

Navigating the stairs was like trying to scale K2. *On acid*. His coordination fucked, motor skills completely haywire. He fell twice during the descent, it was a miracle he made it down in one piece. Fortunately it was only two flights to the main floor. He drew stares from an elderly couple, heard the woman say something about “blood”. Reached up and swiped at his nose. Yes, blood and lots of it. He yanked out the bottom of his shirt and used it to staunch the flow. Now he was at the street door, about to push through—

Wait...

Cautiously cracking open the door, peering outside.

It was all right, it wasn't...what was the name of that place? But the memory was elusive. He had a vague, gauzy recollection of a city, acres of ruins and something hiding there but...that was all. The rest of it wouldn't come.

Flood left the building. His head was still killing him but it felt better being outside, in the cool night air. As he got to the front sidewalk, he stumbled again, tripping over his feet.

Fuck. No shoes. Thin socks between him and the ground.

Stupid.

He was lucky it was so late, hardly anyone about, his behavior not attracting attention. Staggering down the alley, his headache so ferocious he felt disoriented, nauseous, retching into the long weeds beside a rusty fire escape.

Need to rest...but the cops would be coming...drugs...jail...got to get away...
run away...run...

Run.

There was no rhyme or reason to his reckless, desperate flight: down refuse strewn alleyways, through courtyards and abandoned lots, seeking out dark places, concealing himself in the long, deep shadows of the night.

Every so often casting an anxious glance skyward, conscious of some threat he couldn't precisely name...

2

It would end up as one of those gory vignettes that lead off the local news, a somber, ageless anchorman like Phil Calvert offering "this stark illustration of the perils of city life, an urban horror story, if you will, the latest in a long litany..."

Fucking thing wrote itself.

A Caucasian male, later identified as Alfred Whitlock, comes sprinting out of a side street and starts telling anyone who'll listen to him that something's after him or tried to grab him (accounts from witnesses vary). The guy acting hyper and excited, laughing, clearly relieved at having survived a close scrape. Then, still distracted or otherwise preoccupied, he steps off the curb, directly into the path of a city transit bus. The bus veers but the side mirror clips him and basically decapitates the poor bastard. Dead in less time than it takes you to sneeze.

Novak questioned those few eyewitnesses who hung around afterward. They weren't much help. Some appeared to be in shock and who could blame them? More

than one speculated on the victim's mental state. "He was really messed up," as one kid put it. Long, lanky dude who was reluctant to give his name. "He was laughing, talking to himself and shit. Saying it was a close call and how lucky he was, stuff like that. Then he walks out and it was fuckin' game *over*."

"Fuckin' wild," his friend Pammy agreed. "His head split open, like *poosh!*"

In the midst of that grisly scene, Novak got *another* call, relayed by Vic Anson, a report of a body in a back alley behind Smith Street. Anonymous phone tip...patrol car already at the Smith Street location...*no further details at this time*.

"Information Age, my ass," Novak muttered.

They made it in just under fifteen minutes. There were two marked cars, both with their flashers going—they lit up the area and right away he saw the body. His stomach gave a funny little jump. Happened every time.

The senior guy, Wiggins, wasn't bad and recognized a crime scene when he saw one, bless his heart. But then he made a nuisance of himself, hanging about, expecting a pat on the ass or word of praise. Disappointed and pissed off when he got neither.

Novak couldn't decide who smelled worse, the dead guy or the bum rambling on about his macabre discovery. He barely listened, letting his partner take down the particulars. Anson was proficient at shorthand and could work a computer like a demon. That said, he had the personality of a gerbil and the deductive powers of a parsnip. Novak could tell he half-suspected the bum, which was a laugh. The guy was too addled. Not the bloodthirsty type. Notice how he positioned himself so he wouldn't have to look at the corpse? Not guilt; *squeamish*.

Novak couldn't blame him. The body looked...pulverized. Like someone had bashed it repeatedly with an industrial-sized hammer. He pointed his flashlight at various sites of interest, letting its beam linger on the upper body--

"I thought somebody rolled the guy," the old derelict explained. "That happened to me last week. Couple of punks. Sheet, those boys stomped me *good*."

"Okay, Andy," Vic Anson nodded, feeding him lines, "that's great. That's the kind of thing we need to hear. It could set up a pattern. Maybe the same guys did this."

"Some people don't like bums." Andy couldn't remember his last name. It was Macleish or Macleod or something like that. He had no fixed address and if they cut him loose there was no guarantee they'd find him again. Not that he'd given them much. Out foraging, trying to get the jump on the competition, he comes across John Doe lying in the middle of the alley, looking like a pressed patty. Goes to the nearest phone booth, dials 911 and makes a report. Waits for the cops to arrive like the good, solid citizen he is and leads them to the body. Didn't see anybody, didn't hear anything, too far gone to do much more than chew gum and walk erect.

Technically they could hang on to him as a material witness, keep him in custody pending further inquiries. In the meantime he could dry out, get cleaned up, have a couple of hot meals, sleep in a clean bed—

Novak released him, a small act of humanity to redeem an otherwise lousy night. He thought he saw gratitude in Andy's eyes as he shuffled away, his knapsack clanking with bottles and keepsakes. Anson didn't like it but Anson's opinion didn't count for squat. The kid was a bubblehead, dumb as a lug wrench. Their very first

ride together, he went on and on about his favorite off-duty activity, singing karaoke with his insufferably perky wife. Their version of “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers” was a show-stopper. Sometimes people in the audience actually *cried*.

Gus Novak was forty-six years old, unmarried, with no immediate prospects (of any kind). He had recently been demoted for various crimes against the system but wasn’t brooding about it. It went with the territory. He was bright, competent and conscientious in his duties. Socially adept, however, he was not. He never tried to fathom the politics that went with being a cop and his manner was too cold and dismissive, perhaps even insubordinate.

Part of the problem was that he had lost faith in quaint notions like “law” and “justice” and no longer believed in the essential decency of the average human being. He was nothing more than a glorified zoo keeper. Minding the animals and making sure their cages were kept clean.

“We could’ve sweated him,” Anson insisted. He was a fountain of clichés and cop speak. Bad guys were “perps” or, his latest favorite, “toe rags”. Private citizens were “civvies” or, more often, “assholes”. Anson worked with cops and drank with cops and thought like a cop. They had been partnered for a little over a month and so far it wasn’t working out. It was nothing personal. Novak never got along with *any* of his partners. He’d lost count of how many he’d had over the years. Anson was merely stupid, that made him one of the better ones.

Kudelka, the deputy M.E., arrived soon afterward and went about his grim work in typical ill humour. “Gonna need a spatula to scrape this guy up,” he bitched.

“That’s why they pay you the big bucks,” Novak cracked. He and Kudelka didn’t get along. It went back a ways. Long story.

“So, Doc, waddaya think?” Anson gestured at the tenderized meat. “Somebody run over this guy with a tank or what? I mean, Jesus, look—” He flicked his light to a sneaker lying about ten feet from the body. “They knocked the guy right out of his shoes.” Kudelka pointedly ignored him. Stung, Anson turned to his partner. “Waddaya say, Gus? Hit and run, by the looks of it.”

“Looks more like he fall down and go boom,” Kudelka quipped and Lorne, his assistant, sniggered sycophantically.

“No glass, no tire marks. I don’t like it, kid.” Novak directed his light at the worst of the damage. “Not a vehicle.”

“So what then?”

Novak exchanged glances with Kudelka. “Use your detective skills, Vic. Look at the body, especially the shoulders and head.”

“Fuck, he’s a mess.”

“That’s because he hit head first.”

“Yeah, but hit *what*?”

“The *ground*, goddamnit. When he hit the *ground*.” Novak was tired of dropping bread crumbs for the dope. “Look—see the road there? The impact was hard enough to actually *crack* the asphalt. Know how far a person would have to fall to do that?”

“Couple hundred feet,” Kudelka supplied helpfully. “At least. That’s why the shoes came off. Happens with jumpers. Force of the impact.”

“Look around you, Vic.” Novak gestured at their immediate surroundings. “There’s a restaurant thirty or forty yards over there and a parking lot and that sporting goods store. That’s it. Nothing near enough or tall enough to account for this.”

Anson nodded. “So where did he fall from?”

“That’s the question, *partner*. That agile mind of yours has leapt to the crux of the matter. I see a bright future for this one, don’t you, Tom?”

“Fuckin’ kid’s a regular Sherlock Holmes,” Kudelka agreed easily enough.

Vic Anson ignored their jibes. He moved a short distance away, the picture of bewilderment. “So where did he fall from?” he murmured. He tipped his head back, scrutinizing the night sky. Airplane? “Maybe he was a stowaway, y’know, hiding in the landing gear. They do that sometimes.” They didn’t bother answering him. *Bastards!* Never mind, he’d figure it out for himself.

Private plane? Helicopter? Easy to check, airports kept close tabs on every flight in and out, especially since 9/11.

It wouldn’t take long to wrap this one up, he predicted, and it would be slow and steady police work that paid off in the end. Not some brilliant leap of logic or fancy shmancy guesswork. *And you can put that in your pipe and smoke it, Detective Novak, you pompous fucking ass.*

3

Gus Novak raised the hinged hatch and retrieved his mail. Fliers, mostly, and a telephone bill. He used another of the stubby keys on his ring to open a box a level above his and collected Darla's stuff. Couldn't help snooping through it: personal letters and a postcard of some Greek amphitheatre; the latest *Utne Reader* and an urgent reminder that it was time for her to renew her *Greenpeace* membership.

Grown up people's mail.

She told him he didn't need to bother but he always knocked. Two brisk taps, then let himself in.

She was waiting for him in the kitchen, seated at a round, cherrywood table. Wearing her floral bathrobe, looking as pretty as the early hour allowed. The coffee was freshly made, brewed strong.

"You're a godsend, Darla," he told her, dipping to plant a chaste kiss on top of her head as he passed. She waved him away.

"It's just that I pity you," she told him.

"The hooker with a heart of gold?"

She made a face. "Ancient history, kemo sabé. And need I remind you, my profession served me better than yours ever will."

An old argument, resurrected on a regular basis. Darla had retired on the spoils of her illegal activities and used her earnings to make canny investments in local real estate. She owned this building and two townhouses in the east end. She was comfortably well off, financially secure, whereas he, well, he had his pension to look forward to and that was about it.

“More honest way of making a living too,” he admitted.

“Yes,” she sighed, “but look at me now.” She raised her arms, as if inviting inspection. She was a large woman, over three hundred pounds. The weight was unevenly distributed. Her head, hands and feet looked diminutive compared to the rest of her. There was something about her, though, that hinted at her former allure. A certain way she held herself, the light that sometimes flashed and sparkled in her eyes. Not a hooker, a call girl, more correctly a *courtesan*. And then Mother Goose to a brood of working gals, banking the proceeds, getting out of the business before it did permanent psychic harm.

Nope, he hadn't been nearly so lucky.

She was looking at him, expert at reading his moods. “Bad one, huh?”

He shrugged. “The usual. Shootings, stabbings...one guy just about got his head torn off by a city bus. That was fun. I may never eat spaghetti and meatballs again.” She didn't react, used to the blood and guts stuff by now. “But the weirdest one...” --sneaking an extra helping of sugar into his coffee-- “...was this guy in a back alley.” He told her about the body Andy found, its condition indicating a fall from a substantial height.

“That's...different.” He could tell she was intrigued. “I assume you've talked to someone at the airport.”

He nodded. “Nothing, regular or private. Radar showed zilch in the vicinity for the past twelve hours. ”

“UFOs? Was he wearing a Spiderman costume?” He shook his head. “Okay, you've got me. I'm officially stumped.”

“I thought you were supposed to be the big mystery maven.” It was easily her favorite genre and Simenon the best of the best in her opinion. His tastes ran more to Elmore Leonard and Charles Willeford. To each his own.

“I need more information,” she protested. “Let’s hear *your* theories, smart guy. Come on...”

He shook his head. “I’m with you: it doesn’t add up. It’s...what would you call it? Death by misadventure? *Christ*. You should see the report I wrote up, Renfrew’s gonna flip. I can just hear him.” He suppressed a yawn.

“Forget about that for now. You wanna borrow my couch?”

He shook his head. “I’ll head home. Thanks, anyway.”

She grinned. “How’s that young kid, your partner. What’s his name? Adams?”

“Anson,” he corrected her, “and he’s dumb as a post.”

“That’s what you say about all of them. You never give anybody a break.”

“As long as they stay out of my way.”

“I’ll bet if you gave him half a chance—”

“He’d fuck things up royally.”

“I think you like being miserable.” He stared at her. “How about breakfast?”

“I need to crash.” On his feet, swaying a little.

“God, look at you. You’re wore out.”

“It’s this fucking night shift. It’s throwing me off.”

“But you’re a nighthawk.”

“That’s just it. Who the hell wants to spend the best part of the day at *work*?”

“Ah,” she acknowledged, “I see your point...”

His apartment was small and comfortless, consisting of one room and a kitchenette. A bathroom the size of a phone booth. Two windows looking out on nothing. Home sweet fucking home.

No pets, no plants: no point.

There were bookshelves along two walls and uneven stacks of magazines and CD's just about everywhere else. No television or DVD player. No computer. Again, why bother? He was either sleeping or working. No time or energy for anything else. Sometimes he watched football with Darla but she was a diehard Cowboys fan and just about insufferable when they were on a tear.

Novak turned on a lamp and went over to the portable CD player. He required Sibelius this morning, some mood music for the terminally depressed and downhearted. The Sixth maybe...

Kicking off his shoes and stretching out on his short couch, giving himself over to the music. It was gorgeous, sublime. Sad as a December funeral. He felt lighter, free of everything that had been burdening him, the things he had seen—

Until the asshole across the hall slammed his door and stomped off to work.

There was a steady increase of traffic in the hallway, people coming and going, the plumbing rattling as tenants fired up their morning showers. Sibelius never had a chance.

“Philistines,” he hissed.

He was drowsy but nowhere near the point where he could sleep. His mind wouldn't shut down.

Where did John Doe fall from? What happened? What fit the facts?

Basic questions for which there were no answers--at least, none that made any sense.

They'd gone through all the scenarios, no matter how ridiculous. Anson had come up with some doozies. Example: some poor shmuck gets loaded with his buddies, they talk him into jumping out of a plane and he's halfway to the ground before he realizes he's forgotten his parachute...etc., etc, *splat*. His pals take, like, this death oath never to divulge what really happened and--

Ah shit, maybe it *was* fucking UFO's.

Something wasn't right here. This one wasn't going to tie up into a neat bundle. No way. It had the distinctive hallmarks of a Class A clusterfuck with all the trimmings attached.

And I'll be right in the middle of it, Gus Novak reflected, *right in the shit*.

Funny how some things never changed.

4

Franklyn Danuta had the best fucking job in the world.

For eight hours, from eleven 'til seven in the morning, all he had to do was guard an empty building. Which basically meant sitting at the front desk reading or fucking around on his laptop, getting up every hour or so to have a bit of a wander and make sure nothing was amiss.

What could happen? The place was locked up tight, no one could get in and even if they did, the joke was on them: the joint was as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard. No tenants, no furniture, no fixtures, no staff, no *nothing*.

Franklyn's presence was a mere formality, a requirement of the Leiber Building's insurers. The new owners, a consortium with a head office in Dubai, footed the bill.

Not that Franklyn was complaining. People wanted to pay him fifteen bucks an hour to sit on his ass and play *Halo* all night long, shit, that was fine with him. When he wasn't at the front desk or wandering the halls, he'd unlock the roof access and check out the scenery. He liked it up there, especially on clear, calm nights, staring up at the stars, stoned out of his gourd.

The Leiber Building was nearly seventy stories tall so the view was fucking *whacked*. A few times he'd even snuck his girlfriend Sandy in and they'd fucked like wolverines seven hundred feet above the ground. Not quite the "mile high" club but nothing to shake a stick at either. Totally against the rules, of course, but that was another sweet thing about the job: nobody *ever* checked up on him. He had the place all to himself until the relief guy showed up in the morning.

The security gig was a contract thing, which meant forget about benefits but, *shee-it*, he was only twenty-four, he didn't need health or dental plans at this point in his life. He intended to string this out for as long as he possibly could.

The elevator arrived and he selected a button at random. Got out on fifty-five and took a piss in the toilet of a condo that had once commanded a seven figure price tag.

Not any more.

The place was like a fucking *tomb*.

Well, okay, that was the one drawback to the job: it got creepy sometimes.

Alone in that huge, deserted building. He'd call or text his friends to get his mind off it. Surf for internet porn.

Three or four times he swore he felt it *move*. But they told him the structure was sound, no problem there. So if that was the case why did all the tenants bail or refuse to renew their leases? What was up with *that*?

He knew there was some kind of history associated with the tower but the details were kind of fuzzy. A hotshot developer used to own it and the condos went for big bucks. But then somebody tried to blow it up. That had been a few years back and he hadn't been living in Ilium at the time, still back at the U of A, partying it up and pretending to work on a commerce degree.

But its notoriety worked against the place. People, even in the 21st century, are superstitious and the tower had been "tainted" afterward (that was the word Ian, his supervisor, used).

Apparently the folks in charge were planning a complete overhaul, including a renaming, but so far it was just talk. If he was lucky, he had six months of steady employment doing absolute fuck all before they got down to business. Who knows, the building might change hands again, another flip, a different name on his pay stubs. Fine with him, as long as the checks cleared, he didn't give a damn.

After he finished, Franklyn conscientiously wiped the rim, lowered the seat and flushed. He left the suite, got back on the elevator and rode it right to the top. As the car slowed, he plucked a doobie from behind his ear, sniffed it appreciatively.

Life is beautiful.

He climbed a surprisingly rickety set of stairs to the access door, pushed it open and stepped out on to the roof. The surface beneath his feet had the look and feel of pebbled asphalt. The big cooling fans were off so it was quiet, peaceful. Far above the city's roar. The perfect time to spark a joint and reflect on the—

Franklyn heard a scrabbling sound and a pronounced *thump* from nearby. It came from over by the air circulation equipment. Which was not, as previously noted, currently in operation.

He moved in that direction, pausing when he realized, *fuck*, he'd left his flashlight somewhere, maybe the john on fifty-five. Probably just a bunch of pigeons—but this high up? Maybe it was those peregrine falcons, they liked to roost in tall buildings. Those things were scary motherfuckers.

Whump.

Fuck, that sounded *big*. Maybe there was a nest in among the ducts. Was that something he should write up? It would show he was doing his job, checking things out. So...check it out, Frankie-boy.

He figured there was probably enough ambient light to see by so he approached that portion of the roof, albeit with some trepidation. If it *was* those falcons, they might not appreciate his presence and they could be pretty savage. Should he be making more noise, letting them know he was here? What was the

protocol for dealing with killer raptors? He couldn't recall that being part of his training and orientation.

Then again, fuck it, this was *his* building and he wasn't going to get all bent out of shape over a bunch of fuckin' birds. He peered around the piping and ducts, some of them wide enough to swallow two men, but couldn't see anything. He didn't fancy climbing up and sticking his head inside. They weren't paying him *that* much.

There was another *thud* and this time it came from over there, by the edge of the roof. But he could see that far and there was nothing visible. He moved closer, conscious of his position, experiencing a touch of vertigo, nothing too bad. He'd spent a lot of time up here over the past couple of months. There was a railing, about waist high. A gap underneath, wide enough to--

More scratching; he hunkered down, listening. Birds?

And then another thought occurred to him, *fuck me, maybe somebody's climbing up the side of the building*. Surely not a thief, more likely some thrill seeker, one of those human fly fuckheads. Wouldn't look too good if the prick made it to the top without anyone noticing or, worse yet, missed a handhold and ended up splashed all over the street. Franklyn could hear Ian Persall: *Where were you, Danuta, while this individual was climbing our building*. So much for the cushy job. Back to being a rent-a-cop, rousting bums at the Spalding Mall. No thanks.

Now he was royally pissed off, the scenario playing out in his head: the guy hauling himself up, pumping his fist and congratulating himself on a job well done. Well, fuck that and fuck him and the mother who shit him out.

Franklyn wasn't armed, not even pepper spray. There wasn't anything around he could use as a weapon. *Fucking useless!*

But the guy was vulnerable, had no idea what was waiting for him. He'd swing his leg over the side, start levering himself up...and there Franklyn P. Danuta would be, ready to either take him into custody or beat the mortal shit out of him. He knew the procedure for making a citizen's arrest, it was part of the training. He was allowed to use some degree of physical force or coercion if it was required. The laws were kind of vague as to how *much* force he could use but that didn't overly concern him. To be honest, he hoped the prick would put up a fight. Make things interesting.

Franklyn knelt and wriggled under the railing, right up to the edge. A rustling sound, maybe a rope dragging on the side of the building. He couldn't tell how close, decided to risk a quick look—

At first he couldn't see anything. Pulled back, momentarily confused. What the *fuck*. He stuck his head over the side, leaned further out. There was kind of an overhang or cornice and he saw a long, black shape clinging to the underside. A flurry of movement, *something lunging toward him*—

He was struck a blow to his face which, in turn, caused the back of his head to smack into the bottom of the railing.

His nose was broken, a jagged furrow gouged in his forehead, blood running into his eyes, blurring his vision. He crawled in what he thought was the direction of the access door but he was dazed, the blood making it hard to see.

Franklyn sensed a figure, approaching from his left. He tried to reach up to clear his eyes but couldn't connect with his hands. It was huge, whatever it was,

towering over him. A sudden bout of dizziness and he found himself face down on the gritty deck. He started to rise—

Something slammed into the back of his head with terrific force. He felt his skull give way, consciousness wavering, flickering, dissipating to a pin point...

Gone.

The morning man found nothing immediately amiss.

Terry Sikking was an older guy, in his early sixties, but wore his years well. He'd worked at a variety of menial jobs throughout his life and now, thanks to a heart ailment, was semi-retired, picking up whatever extra income he could with the help of a placement agency. He was particularly proud of the fact that, as of last month, he was officially bonded, which meant he could now handle and transport large quantities of money. He was urging Franklyn to go the same route but so far his colleague had exhibited little enthusiasm for the notion. Never mind that it opened up a whole host of job opportunities and future prospects...

Terry liked Franklyn but worried the kid lived kind of a dead end existence. All he seemed to do was party and waste his money. He found the roaches Franklyn left on the roof, disposed of the evidence before someone else spotted them. Eventually the kid would grow up and turn things around. Terry was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Franklyn buzzed him in from the desk but didn't come and greet him at the door like he usually did. Odd...he was wearing a hardhat, likely left behind after the building's last series of renovations. His hair was plastered to his forehead, damp and

oily looking. Franklyn watched him approach but there was something wrong with his eyes, one seemed to be wandering off target.

“*Hola*, Frank,” Terry called. “Anything interesting to report?”

“Anything...” Franklyn repeated, that one eye swiveling around independent of the other. Jesus, the kid was stoned out of his tree and not just on pot either.

“Whoa, man, you’re really out of it. Listen, I’m here now so why don’t you —”

“So...so...” It was like Franklyn was still learning how to talk. “I will... show you...yessss...” It took two or three tries but he made it to his feet, teetering, moving with short, abrupt steps.

“What’s with the hardhat, amigo?” Terry joked. “You thinking of joining the working class?”

A blank, uncomprehending glance. “Come...show you...” He led the way toward the elevators. Puzzled, Terry fell in beside him. They stepped inside and, *whoa*, up close the kid smelled like he’d been rolling in something. It was all Terry could do to keep from gagging. The back of Franklyn’s shirt was sticky and the fringe of hair visible under the hardhat matted with slippery, yellow goop—

“You been crawling around somewhere? Shouldn’t screw around in this place, something could happen and nobody would know ’til I got here.” Franklyn pressed a button. “All the way to the top, huh?”

“Yes,” his colleague confirmed.

“And it’s something you want me to see?” A slight dip of his head in acknowledgment. “Any hints?” Another vacant stare. “Or it is a surprise?”

Franklyn blinked, a really...slow...blink. First one eye, then the other. It was freaky. “Surprise. Yes. You will be.”

Moments later, the door opened.

“Surprise,” Franklyn said.

Terry barely had time to scream.

Andre Brossard had the three to eleven shift.

He was a bit unnerved to find both Terry *and* Franklyn waiting for him. For some reason the two of them were wearing head gear, the younger man in a hardhat, Terry sporting a black ski cap with a *Nine Inch Nails* logo.

They greeted him, sort of. Neither seemed capable of formulating a coherent sentence. Andre wasn't impressed. They were eager to show him something and weren't likely to piss off and leave him to his crosswords unless he played along.

“This better not be bullshit,” he warned, following them into the elevator.

The door closed and they turned toward him.

He shrank from their blank gazes and pale, slack faces. “What's with you guys?” he muttered.

But they didn't answer, just kept *staring* at him.

And all the while, the car rose higher and higher...

5

A face of grotesque proportions loomed over him. Flood grunted and the figure squawked and jumped back, retreating to a safe distance. Flood shook his head, recalling...something huge, standing over him and regarding him with cool detachment just before...before...

It wouldn't come. The memory would not be coaxed or drawn forth. Just an impression of danger and menace and needing to get away.

....*run*....

"Jaysus," the filthiest human being he had ever seen remarked, "I thought you was dead. That would make my second one today," he added. "I betcha that would've been some kinda record."

Flood was curled up on a thirdhand sofa parked outside the rear entrance of a venerable-looking apartment building, not far from a dumpster. He could feel protruding springs and smelled moisture and rot. The couch had been there for some time. He squinted up at the sky. Late afternoon. But what *day* was it? How long had he been here?

"Somebody beat on you, man? Huh? 'Cause you're all bleeding and shit."

The flow of blood from his nose had stopped but the front of his shirt was a mess and his face felt like it was crusted in old, dried blood. He likely looked worse than the rummy.

"Can I get something to drink?" he croaked.

“There might be a tap around front. For the lawn.” They found it and Flood turned it on, catching handfuls of cold water and gulping it down. It tasted of old plumbing and rust.

He stuck his head under and the frigid water came away pink. When he was done, he peeled off his shirt, used it to dry himself and scrub his swampy armpits. He rinsed it, wringing it out as best he could. The worst of the stain was gone but he resisted putting it back on while it was still damp. The old bum, who introduced himself as Andy, saved the day by producing a scratchy, long-sleeved shirt out of his knapsack. “Keep it,” he told Flood, “I got another one.” The garment didn’t smell *quite* as bad as its owner but it wasn’t fresh either.

Andy seemed reluctant to leave him, following Flood back behind the building. He was an annoyance but when Flood looked at him, he was framed in yellow light. A good person, no question, regardless of his mean circumstances. He told Flood some disjointed story about finding a body and helping the cops search for the murderer, who had to be some kind of supervillain since he could fly and had no compunction about killing people.

Flood tried to focus on what he was saying but it was hard. He was crashing, big-time. After the high of the drug binge he was plunging into the depths. His dopamine right on “E”. And still a long way from home and flat broke and not only that—

“Where’re your shoes, man? Those punks steal your damn *shoes*?”

“Lost,” seemed the simplest answer. Left at Conrad’s pad along with three dead people and Amanda cursing him as he fled. That part was coming back.

Some kind of bird flew overhead, the flutter of wings amplified by his flayed senses and the relative quiet of the back alley.

Flood started shaking as something clicked into place, a snap recollection, those wingbeats...realizing too late that this memory hadn't been forgotten so much as *suppressed*—

“You guys all right?” Conrad looked shaky but he was the first one to get over the shock of finding himself...wherever. The rest of them were turning in slow circles, trying to accommodate what they were seeing. “All right? Everybody?” He looked at Flood. “C’mon, man, stick with me. I need you...”

“I’m here,” Flood said, “wherever the fuck that is.”

It was a blasted landscape, an untidy topography of rubble and the scattered remnants of unknown architectures, nothing recognizable, everything showing the effects of the depredations of time. Even the sky was old. Off in the distance, hazy and aloof, a tall structure. A tower of some kind--

“What is this place?” Karen was trembling, wide-eyed.

“It ain’t Kansas,” Stu muttered.

“Looks like it was a city,” Flood observed. “It’s big enough.”

A city that had been shattered, reduced to its component parts. But was that the work of endless eons or the product of ancient conflict? Collateral damage from a long ago war. The destruction was so complete it was hard to tell.

The wind was gusting, raising dust and blowing it into their eyes and mouths; they tasted ashes. And they became aware of sounds and movement in the surrounding ruins, low growls and snarls that caused them to edge closer together.

“I want to get out of here,” Karen whined.

“Kind of stating the obvious there, Karen,” Flood snapped.

Conrad shot him a warning look. “Cool it.”

“Yeah, don’t be such an asshole.” Karen’s eyes were darting about, her complexion paling as the full extent of their predicament became apparent to her.

“Oh, God. You guys...I think we’re in Hell.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Stu, the ex-altar boy, spooked at the thought, his voice betraying his unease. “This is...some kind of hallucination—”

That’s when Flood saw it. Coming at them fast, skimming low over the ground. By the time his strangled vocal chords issued a bleat of warning it was too late. The others spun and stood, transfixed, as the thing bore down on them. The creature resembled a super-sized bird of prey and as it swept past them, it extended fearsome talons, sheering off the top of Stu’s head. He remained standing for several seconds, wearing an expression of puzzled consternation. Then blood bloomed out of the wound, spilling over onto his face and he toppled backward—

“Oh, Jesus...Jesus...” Karen’s mouth got wider and wider and she started to scream—but another of the raptors swooped in and hooked her through the back and legs, its talons digging deep, piercing skin and soft tissue, bearing her away while the two surviving members of the party looked on helplessly. But now Conrad was moving, yanking Flood down as a third beast slashed at the air where he’d just been

standing. He dragged Flood along until they were huddling against a low, broken foundation.

“Stay down, stay fuckin’ down, you hear me?” Flood wasn’t listening, nearly catatonic at that point, trying not to believe what he had just seen. But Conrad wasn’t having any of it, shaking him roughly. “We’re gonna get out of here, you understand? We’ll figure out a way. But I need your help.”

“I can’t...the way they...didn’t you see...”

“You gotta fuckin’ help me. I can’t do this alone. I need you, man.”

Flood started to say something but then he looked past Conrad’s shoulder and saw another of those things coming their way. And it was just like before, he tried to warn Conrad but it was too quick—

When it pounced, Flood broke away, leaving his friend, abandoning him, ignoring his screams and pleas for help. He ran blindly, a ridiculous, blundering flight. Tripping, falling, then gathering himself and tearing off again. Running until his body gave out, literally refused to take another step. He keeled over, heaving, gasping, completely spent...

One by one, the creatures descended, dropping gracefully, almost noiselessly to the ground and forming a loose ring around him. He was dizzy, his body starved for oxygen. It was difficult to focus, get a good look at them. One of them broke the circle and approached. Flood pushed up, raising himself to his knees.

It dipped toward him and he gazed into its eyes; large, black ovals, devoid of pupils or irises. They were smooth, reflective, he could see himself in them. He sensed something, not intelligence, more like insatiable curiosity. They stared at

each other for some time. Then it was like some kind of consensus was reached because it reared back and Flood braced for the blow he knew was coming—

--waking to Amanda screaming, trying to hang on as Conrad bucked and heaved in her arms, the two of them watching the life ebb out of him, his exploded brain no longer responding to her urgent entreaties...

“—all right? Huh? Mister?” Andy wore a concerned expression. “You don’t look so good.”

“And I alone survived to tell thee,” Flood murmured.

Then his eyes rolled back and he fainted.

For the second time that afternoon he woke to Andy’s ugly puss. A grubby hand grasped his shoulder. “You passed out, man.”

“Yeah...” Flood’s head felt like it was wrapped in cobwebs. Andy helped him up. A woman was watching them from a ground floor window, her expression inscrutable. Andy glanced about nervously.

“I think we’d better get out of here, mister.”

“I told you,” he mumbled, “it’s Flood. That’s what everybody calls me.” He swayed, woozy. “Listen, I’m really fucked up. I gotta...”

“You want some food, man? You look like you could use it.”

Flood realized he was *ravenous*. “Yeah...maybe that’s it...low blood sugar... only...” He patted his pockets. “Ah, fuck. No money.” His throat closed up and he found himself perilously close to tears.

“Hey, no problemo,” Andy assured him, “I know where we can get something. And it’s free and everything.”

Flood looked at him. What did he have to lose? “Sure. Thanks.”

“Hey, guys like us, we gotta stick together, right?”

Flood managed a smile. “Absolutely.”

“Must be close to five. We’ll go to the Mission.”

“Is it far?”

“Naw, only a few blocks.” Andy stared down at his feet. “Can you walk all right?”

“I have to,” Flood said. His guts felt scraped out. “I haven’t had anything since...” How long had it been? The party started Friday which meant it was either Monday or Tuesday. “What day is it?”

Andy looked mystified. “Beats me. It don’t matter, they’re open every day.”

“But,” indicating his bedraggled appearance, “do I look all right?”

“Believe me,” Andy told him, “they’ve seen a lot worse.” They started off slowly, in deference to Flood’s lack of footwear. “We might even be able to hook you up with some new clothes. Shoes too.”

“You think they’d loan me cab fare home? I’ll pay them back.”

“You could *ask*.” Andy appeared doubtful. “You might have to settle for a bus ticket.”

“That’d be great.” Flood tottered along beside him, mindful of glass and stones. “Better than a kick in the ass, right?”

“They serve good grub too. You’ll see.”

“And you’re sure they won’t give me any trouble?”

“You don’t understand, Mr. Flood,” Andy explained patiently, “it’s people like us they’re s’posed to help.”

The facilities and fare at the 22nd Street Mission were, predictably, primitive. No waiters, no candles, no menus. Flood and his companion sat at a fold up, cafeteria-style table in the basement of a deconsecrated Baptist church. The organization running the place lived by some vague interpretation of the Gospels which prevented them from adopting a formal name. They practiced a simplified, bare bones version of the faith; a brief prayer was deemed sufficient and then their guests were permitted to tuck in.

There were about forty hard luck cases in the room. Most were in fairly rough shape. Threadbare clothes, scraggly beards, matted hair; lean, addict faces. But no matter how bad off they seemed, how far gone, at least *they* had shoes.

As if on cue, Brother Dennis appeared at his side, holding a pair of sneakers. And what a pair of sneakers they were, cherry red, with velcro straps instead of laces. Draped over his arm were a blue cotton t-shirt and lime-green windbreaker, both still on hangers. “Thought you’d like to try these on for size,” Brother Dennis offered.

Flood stood up, glanced around the room, thought *fuck it*. He unbuttoned the smelly shirt Andy had given him and handed it back to its owner. Pulled on the t-shirt, which was too big and the windbreaker which was a tad short in the sleeves. The shoes fit okay, that was the main thing. He thanked his benefactor profusely, almost overcome with gratitude.

“Quite all right,” Brother Dennis said, “please, finish your meal.”

Flood had been too shy so it was Andy who spoke on his behalf. They stuck with the story that he had been robbed and beaten. After he resumed his seat, Flood leaned over and whispered his thanks. Andy waved it off, his mouth too full for a proper reply.

Now fully kitted out, Flood devoured his food with gusto. Someone even came around and refilled his coffee cup.

He found a bus token in the pocket of the windbreaker (bless you, Brother Dennis). Already visualizing the ride home, opening the door to his apartment, curling up in his own bed and sleeping for a solid *week*.

His reverie was interrupted by a commotion at another table. A man whose wardrobe and appearance made Andy look like an investment banker propelled himself to his feet. He pried off the restraining hands of his neighbours as Brothers Neil and Dennis hurried over to intercede.

“—tell you I have seen it and breathed its foul scent. It is the *Beast*, the Beast as foretold in the great books of old, revelations that withstand the ages—”

“Yes, all right, Kenny, we understand,” Brother Dennis interrupted, “now please settle down and stop disturbing everyone.”

“That’s Kenny,” Andy supplied helpfully.

“And? What’s his story?”

“Once he gets going, he’s pretty hard to stop.”

The guy certainly seemed to be working himself into a lather. He glowered at everyone in the vicinity, fending them off with a radioactive glare. “It has the head of

an eagle and six wings and it is written in the Revelation of John, Chapter Six: ‘*And behold I heard the voice of the fourth beast. And yea verily I looked and besaw a pale horse and a rider and the name of that rider was Death...and Hell followed with him. And power was given to them to kill by sword and hunger and death.*’ The self-styled prophet looked across at Flood. “*You.*” Kenny pointed at him. “You know what I’m talking about. You have the mark...” Flood felt exposed, as if the man could see right through him. “It’s coming and you will be among the first to be reaped.”

“Kenny, are you listening to me? C’mon now...”

All at once, Kenny seemed to deflate and allowed himself to be guided back to his seat. But he kept glancing at Flood, the sheer wattage of his gaze unnerving.

After he scraped off his plate and set it in a plastic tub by an ancient Hobart dishwasher, Flood turned and found himself literally nose to nose with, who else, Kenny the kook. His aura was a fright wig of livid reds. Dangerous, volatile, unstable.

“It’s not too late for salvation,” he whispered hoarsely to Flood. “Repent and ye shall be saved.”

“That’s good to know,” Flood humoured him.

The man’s eyes blazed with conviction. “I saw it, last night. *The Beast*. Like a great eagle, coming down to carry off the fornicators and—”

“You saw it?” Flood’s heart was pounding.

“Yes...and heard it pass. It was *hunting*.”

“Hunting?” Both of them speaking in whispers now. “What was it hunting?”

“I told you, the unworthy. Sodomites and sinners. That is why you must repent.” He grasped the front of Flood’s new used jacket, his voice rising. “Hurry, make haste...before it’s too late. Offer your prayers and devotion to the one true God —”

“Hey, hey, Kenny, come on now.” Brother Dennis gently prized the man’s fingers off Flood’s windbreaker. “Respect his space.” Kenny moved off, muttering about Armageddon. Dennis shrugged. “Kenny can be a bit insistent when his passions get the better of him.” He smiled. “We serve breakfast and lunch here too, just so you know.”

“That’s okay, I’ll be heading home right away.”

“You have a place?” Dennis looked dubious.

“Yeah.”

“You’re fortunate. Most of these people...”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why what you’re doing here is, y’know, so important.”

He offered his hand. “Thanks again, Brother Dennis.”

“I live to serve,” the good man responded modestly. With a smile and a wave, he returned to his duties.

Flood watched him go. Dennis didn’t realize it, of course, but he was giving off a brilliant glow. A good person, selfless, motivated by genuine kindness and compassion. A *holy man*, to use an expression that was currently out of vogue, though from Flood’s perspective it seemed perfectly apt.

7

The bus ride home was like an out-take from a Rob Zombie video.

Flood dropped his token into the receptacle and the first thing the driver said wasn't "Thank you" or "Good evening, sir", it was: "Those are some cruel fucking shoes, dude."

He wasn't sure how to react so he just kept his head down and said nothing. He sagged into a bench seat somewhere near the middle and only gradually became aware of the people around him. Was it his imagination or was every single one of them some kind of *mutant*? Had everyone in the world suddenly gained fifty pounds and extra body hair?

The woman across from him was cradling a tattered shopping bag from *The Tool Shed*. Her wig was askew and he could see she was practically bald underneath. The dude next to her had a face the colour of silly putty and a mole the size of a tea cup on his right cheek. Ugly? Like a poor man's ass, as Flood's father had once unkindly remarked.

The bus lurched and there was a *smack* as something struck the front window. The driver cursed and wrenched the wheel, braking hard, narrowly avoiding clipping a row of parked cars. As soon as the vehicle jolted to a halt, the driver opened the door and stormed out, muttering imprecations under his breath. Flood, along with the rest of the passengers, leaned into the aisle, trying to see what was going on.

A crow or some other large, black bird was plastered to the windshield. It had hit hard enough to stick and leave a smear of bright blood as the driver gingerly

tugged it off and let it fall to the street. The window was cracked, a mandala of fissures branching out from the point of impact.

“Ain’t seen that before,” someone grunted from nearby.

“Even the birds are committing suicide,” the bewigged woman marvelled.

The driver returned to his seat. “Sorry, folks. Minor mishap.” He radioed in to report the incident and within moments they were back underway. Not soon enough for the commuters behind them, however, who had been blowing their horns non-stop.

A few sweeps of the windshield wipers and some generous jolts of washer fluid cleared away most of the blood and mess. Flood got off two blocks from his building and made it the rest of the way without further mishap.

When he opened the door to his apartment he found a note from his landlady, Mrs. Tarnovsky, on the floor inside. His rent was overdue *again* (underlined twice) and he was to “remit the full amount without further delay, providing proper recompense”. Her people were peasant stock from some shithole Russian republic—Whogivesafuckistan--and, as a result, she took great pains to write formally in order to cover her lowly origins.

So, let’s see: his rent was overdue, he was failing two classes *and* his part-time job at the bakery was , so to speak, toast. He was broke, facing eviction, starvation, life on the fucking street and what was he going to do?

Unplug the phone, pull the curtains, crawl into bed and sleep.

Yes, for fuck’s sake, let me sleep...

8

The Sanchez Brothers.

You had to love it.

Louis Weiskopf was born in the midwest, Iowa to be exact. His father was an aircraft mechanic and his mother worked in a travel agency. Lou's best friend and partner, Darren Scala, was the son of third generation Italian immigrants. As far as gene pools went, the two of them were about as Hispanic as William Shatner.

They came up with the idea in high school, made it part of their budding comedy act. Played up their roles to the hilt, a couple of dumb spics wandering the halls of Central Collegiate, lost amid a sea of fucking gringos. Stayed in character for *days*, to the despair of their parents, teachers, guidance counsellors...even when faced with threats of suspension from school principal (and arch nemesis) Herbert J. Goss.

They were roughed up by school jocks, called racist by a liberally inclined English teacher, snubbed by fellow students but did that dissuade them? No way, *mang...*

They debuted their act at a local comedy club on Lou's 17th birthday and bombed dismally ("Like a rapper at a bar mitzvah", as Darren quipped at the time). In truth, much of their material was lifted from other sources (scratchy old albums featuring Bill Dana and the inimitable Cheech and Chong) and their timing and delivery left much to be desired. So they dropped the performance angle and became the Sanchez Brothers comedy writing team. And gained instant legitimacy after selling one of their best jokes to *The Tonight Show*. Unbelievable. Jay fucking Leno. A cold sell through the mail. They were flying high for weeks. Jay never

ended up using their gag but, never mind, thanks to coverage in the local media the legend was born.

The Leno thing turned out to be the high point of their comedy-writing phase. After that, they went stone cold, couldn't sell a one-liner to the local public access show. Once they finished high school, the lads pooled their resources and, with their parents' help, bought a half share in a failing sound studio. The Sanchez Brothers would make like the Glitter Twins and become *feelthy* rich producing records. The studio never got off the ground. A newer, better one opened across town, the overhead was murder, so they bailed out.

Then it was "Sanchez Brothers Productions", creators of popular and experimental movies, short subjects and industrial training films. Which was how they met Arnie Peabody, the dean of window washers. Darren called him "the *sensei* of the squeegee" and no way was that a putdown. He was the perfect subject for a documentary—affable, funny *and* he told a great story.

They had some used gear they bought off eBay cheap: a Canon digital camera, tripod and movie lights. They filmed Arnie first in his kitchen, then on the job. He showed them his rig, explained what everything did, then proposed to take them up, give them a bird's eye view.

"Nothing to it, boys," he stated confidently. He explained the safety gear, showed them the harnesses, assured them that in all the years he'd been on the job he had yet to suffer a mishap more serious than accidentally dumping a bucket of soapy water on passersby eighty feet below.

At that time Arnie had a kid named Hector working for him, a warm body sent by an employment agency, the latest in a long string. Arnie could never get good people to stay on; many couldn't get over their fears and others were disenchanted by the (relatively) low pay and menial labour. The work *was* hellishly hard on the shoulders, back and neck, no question.

Arnie was already hooked up at the Plaza and the sturdy, aluminum frame gondola could easily bear the weight of four. They could film him on the job, ask him questions while he and Hector did their thing.

“Okay,” Darren spoke up, “I’m game.”

“Sure,” Lou agreed. “The equipment’s light. And we’ll be wearing safety gear, like you say.”

They showed up at four the next morning and accompanied Arnie to the top of the Plaza. The gondola was attached and in position. Arnie was working alone again, Hector having vamoosed elsewhere. He didn't seem bothered though, as indomitable as ever.

Arnie was a man who took pride in his work. The twenty-foot gondola was well-secured, steady as a rock. Lou shot some footage as Arnie used a morotized winch to lower them into position, at the same time rhapsodizing about life above the city, the silence and sense of peace you experienced when you were removed from the bustle and clamor below.

“You’re up here and you’re on top of the world. It’s the best view money can’t buy. You see the people inside, working in their little pens and, boy, I tell you,

I don't envy them one damn bit. They never look up , you never see them enjoying the view. Sometimes I think I'm the luckiest man in the world.”

Inwardly, Darren permitted himself a whoop of joy. It was the perfect title for their first cinematic effort. *The Luckiest Man in the World*. Handed to them on a platter: thanks, Arnie. He glanced at Lou and saw he was thinking the exact same thing. It was like that between them, nothing weird about it, just a case of great minds thinking alike and all that.

It was too hard for Arnie to talk while cleaning and operating the controls so Darren ended up spelling him while Lou filmed and vice versa. They soon discovered that not only weren't they afraid of heights, they were also fuckin' natural born window cleaners.

Arnie recognized their potential and broached the idea of the two of them coming to work for him, maybe even assuming part ownership in the business. But... wouldn't that mean putting their dreams of being great film-makers on hold? Not necessarily. As a matter of fact, it gave them some coin in pocket to upgrade their equipment, buy a new computer, some state of the art software. Professional quality stuff.

They mulled over the offer but not for long. The agreement was that Arnie would train them and eventually they'd take over the lion's share of the work, allowing Arnie to step back and take it easy. His back was going, his shoulders plagued by arthritis—he welcomed the chance to shift some of the load on to a couple of reliable young go-getters.

The name change was part of the deal and he learned to live with it. *The Sanchez Brothers Window Cleaning Service*. Sure, why not? Eventually they'd be running the show so let them call it what they liked. In his view their *nom de plume* (or whatever) sounded a bit too ethnic but the lads were adamant so in the end he graciously conceded the point.

The Sanchez Brothers still had their eyes on the big prize. Their window-washing business was but one subsidiary of their vast corporate empire. Meanwhile they continued to push their proposed reality TV series (a year in the life of a terminally ill person, working title "Last Gasp"; so far no takers). They were also brainstorming a graphic novel (though neither of them could draw for shit) and were in the process of developing a new board game they'd dubbed *Cadaver*.

It was a heady time. Fame and fortune were imminent or, at least, within reach. Right on the horizon. They were working hard and living their dreams.

Look out Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the fucking Sanchez Brothers are coming...

"—another idea for *Cadaver*," Louis Weiskopf was saying. Ideas were Lou's specialty, he was constantly coming up with refinements, little touches to give their projects and concepts that special imprimatur that said "Sanchez Brothers".

Darren was manning the winch, maneuvering them down to the next floor. Today they were doing the CommerzBank, which was a bit tricky because of long slice carved in its glassine façade by some clever architect who never took into consideration the trouble it would present to honest working stiff's like themselves.

They'd set up early on the east side so they could beat the sun, finish before the glare made their work a living hell. They both wore sunblock, hats, long-sleeved shirts. Arnie Peabody was an excellent mentor. For him, safety was paramount. He didn't want anything spoiling his perfect track record, including malignant melanoma.

Arnie still made the occasional trip up, despite some recently disclosed health problems, namely a troubled ticker. It caused the occasional spell of light-headedness so the boys kept an eye on him and made sure his safety harness was clipped on.

This morning Arnie wasn't with them, though the Commerzbank was one of his favorite jobs. He told them he'd tag along when they did it again in the spring.

Darren glanced at his watch. Not yet four. Plenty of time to finish the top and spend the rest of the morning in the shadows of surrounding buildings. Piece of cake. His partner was musing aloud as he prepared another batch of the *Sanchez Brothers Klear Dry Glass Cleaner* (patent pending). The unmistakable tang of ammonia; it cut the grease and helped prevent streaking.

“—so instead of getting a health card, you have to get some kind of expensive medical procedure. Just to up the difficulty level...y'know, 'tests show you need a liver transplant' and if you don't have health insurance, you're fucked.”

Darren nodded and then stiffened when he glanced up and saw-- “What was *that?*” Fumbling with the switch, bringing them to a stop. Anxiously scanning the area. “There was something, like a big shadow...”

Lou didn't seem concerned, his mind still fixated on *Cadaver*. “Likely bats. This early in the morning--”

“Wasn’t bats. *Batman*, maybe. Fuckin’ big, whatever it was. I just got a glimpse but I’m telling you, it was *huge*.”

“Pedro, mang,” his partner pointed out, “sooner we get this thing done, the better. Otherwise we’ll get our asses fried when the sun comes up.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Fock this shit, Juan.” Darren re-engaged the winch, got them going again.

“Coulda been anything. Shit gets caught in air currents. Newspaper maybe.”

Darren wasn’t convinced. Lou went back to riffing on *Cadaver* and Darren pretended to listen while keeping a sharp eye out for any UFOs in the vicinity.

And then all at once they stopped. *Dead*. Abruptly enough that they were jostled, the platform shuddering and rocking beneath their feet.

“A bit heavy on the hoist there, bro,” Lou complained.

“It wasn’t me,” Darren shot back. “The rigging must be snagged or something.” Darren fiddled with the controls and the gondola started to move again only to grind to a halt moments later, stuck fast.

Darren killed the motor and then restarted it but when he tried to operate the winch in either direction, there was a high keen of complaint from inside the works. He hastily switched off before he did serious damage. “Well, we’re fucked,” he said, pronouncing sentence. “Must be jammed at the top, maybe the outriggers. Can’t go up or down.” He examined the situation from all angles, studied the alternatives but no matter which way he looked at it, “fucked “ summed things up nicely.

“Hell, let’s call Arnie,” Lou, coming up with yet another brilliant idea. Brilliant, that is, except for one small detail.

“I didn’t bring the cell. I think I left it charging on the dash of the truck, unless you grabbed it—” The bleak look on his partner’s face confirmed the worst.

“Aw, *man*. So what do we do? Write notes on paper towels and drop them over the side? Wait for people to show up for work and knock on the window?” Lou snorted in derision. “I don’t wanna make the news, *mang*. That would be *so* uncool if the fuckin’ fire department had to rescue us.”

“I don’t see any other choice,” Darren responded. “It’s not like we can just pop open a window.”

“Yeah, but can’t we—”

Louis didn’t get to finish because the platform was *heaving* as some force wrenched on the steel suspension lines on Darren’s side, raising the rig and dropping it, tossing them about with savage jerks. The gondola thumped and rubbed against the building but the bumpers prevented serious damage.

“I thought you turned it off!” Lou yelled.

“I did!”

“Then what—”

Now the tactic was repeated on Lou’s side, catching them off balance, throwing them to the floor of the platform. Darren landed awkwardly and immediately began thrashing about in agony. “*Aaaahhh, fuck! My arm!*”

Lou could see from his friend’s pale expression and the way he was holding his wounded wing that Darren was in trouble. “It’s right down by my wrist....” He leaned over and retched.

Lou crawled toward him but at that moment something soared past the gondola, appearing and disappearing so quickly it registered only peripherally. And Lou understood immediately that Darren was right, it was no fucking bat. He reached Darren's side and the two of them huddled together. "I saw it too," he told Darren.

"Huh?" Darren was zoning out, dazed with pain.

"There it is again!" Lou gripped Darren's good arm. "I think they're *stalking* us." It became obvious that each pass was bringing them—whatever they were--closer to the platform. "There's at least two, maybe three. I can't fuckin' believe how fuckin' *huge* they are."

Darren was weeping, from the pain and their predicament. "Oh, man, I don't wanna die up here—"

"Fuck off, *mang*, we're not gonna die. We're the Sanchez Brothers. Tough spics. Gimme that thing, reach behind you—*yeah!*" Gripping the five-foot metal extension pole. "Anything gets close I'll fuckin' brain it with this." His show of bravado seemed to partially restore Darren.

"Maybe we can...squirt some of our soap in their eyes." They were tense and scared and the suggestion struck them both as hysterically funny. They laughed 'til it hurt. "You—you think they'll come back?"

Lou shrugged. "It doesn't matter if they do. We're not going anywhere, right? They can't get at us *and* we're wearing our gear." They were both secured by six-foot lanyard to an independent "life line" anchored to the roof. Even if the gondola suffered a catastrophic failure and broke away from beneath them, they were

safe and sound. “We’ll wait it out and when it’s light, maybe another hour, we’ll bang on the—”

The platform gave another lurch, something plucking at the cables again, sending violent tremors through the apparatus. Darren jarred his sore arm and moaned in pain.

“It’s trying to *shake* us out,” Lou marveled. He peeked over the top of the chest high safety barrier but couldn’t see anything.

Darren gawked at him. “Fuck that, man! What do you mean? What are you talking about?”

“Darren...”

“*We gotta get down, man, we gotta get off this fucker and—and—*”

“Take it easy,” Lou told him. “We’ll wait this out, just like I said.” There was a sound, like a garbled growl. From close by, near enough to make them jump.

That was too much for Darren. He grabbed the rail with his good arm and surged to his feet. “Help! Help! We’re trapped up here! Hey! Hey, anybody—”

Something got him.

It came out of nowhere and snatched Darren Scala by the shoulders, pulling him off the platform. The safety tether did its job for about half a second, long enough for him to exchange a look with Lou, each recognizing there was nothing to be done. The winged creature yanked hard and something tore or snapped and Darren was *gone*, his screams trailing off into diminishing echoes until nothing remained of him.

Lou stared after his longtime friend, too horrified to react for several long seconds. He dropped to the floor of the gondola, sick, shaking, having a total meltdown. His mind was a clamour of conflicting voices, most of them shouting or screaming, none offering anything like a coherent plan. He crawled back to the winch, tried to get the platform going: up, down, he wasn't picky.

Nothing. Still stuck.

He felt the platform sway, knew without looking that he had company, something considerably heavier than a bat. He turned slowly, found himself confronted by a creature conjured from dark material, completely and utterly alien in appearance. It had to be at least eight feet tall and left no doubt from its aspect or mien that it was a predator. He couldn't decide if it was a bird or reptile, it was a bit of both.

“What the fuck *are* you?”

It cocked its head, regarding him with cool, frank intent. Its beak was its most prominent feature, long and pointy and he thought he could make out teeth. A ruffle of feathers or fur around its wattled throat. He thrust the metal pole at it. “Keep away from me, you motherfucker,” he whispered.

Another creature swooped in and perched on the side bar, the gondola rocking from the added weight. Lou, recognizing the futility of the situation, began to slide down until he was huddled on the floor. Their wings were folded against their bodies. Both stared at him with malign interest. Finally one of them dropped onto the platform and before Lou could raise his arms it was on him, stabbing with that sharp beak and tearing at him with talons the size of meat hooks. It ripped and

gouged his flesh, eviscerating him swiftly, expertly. The platform was soon awash in blood, a torrent of gore that flowed and dripped through the sides and bottom of the apparatus, falling in slow, feathery rivulets toward the street far below.

9

He really could see auras. No bullshit.

Halos of coloured light, invisibly surrounding every living thing. He could tell if someone was basically good or bad, happy or depressed. Sick people gave off a pale blue or violet glow. There were other things auras revealed. Using his powers, he swiftly divined that his parents didn't love each other and weren't particularly fond of him. It was a shattering epiphany.

A withdrawn child, watchful and guarded around others. A misfit, ceaselessly bullied, indifferent to the status quo. Eye-catching doodles in the margins, caricatures skillfully executed. He got better and better. Portraits and landscapes, oil or watercolour, it didn't matter. He pictured it in his mind's eye and his hands...well, his hands could work magic. Obsessively filling sketch books, ring binders with studies and exercises. Hundreds of images meticulously rendered, that nimbus of light a recurring motif. It gave everything, even the most innocuous scene, an iconographic aspect—when his high school art teacher pointed this out to him, Flood was stupefied. To him, he was only drawing what he was seeing.

He made a name for himself, winning student competitions and awards, some local art prizes, even earning a partial scholarship and a couple of bursaries. Big

things were predicted for him. All that talent to burn, he couldn't possibly fail to make his mark in the world.

Hubris. The downfall of so many.

The Gods decided Flood needed to be taught a lesson.

Enter: Wendy Kiel.

From the moment Flood saw her, he was a) smitten b) head over heels c) twitterpated d) ga ga e) and then some. For seven months she was his muse, his inspiration, his goddess, his whore, his destiny.

And then one day all that changed.

The date: *Black Thursday.*

She walked right past him and he could see her aura was dark blue, verging on black. Like a deep bruise. Not good. She didn't kiss him, hardly glanced his way, anxious to get down to business.

Things had gotten too serious, she needed time to sort it all out. She sounded like she'd already come to a decision. She went around, looking at his drawings and pictures, her face and body as viewed from fifty different angles. Saying goodbye to herself.

He was devastated. Seriously contemplated suicide. Wrote a note and everything. Went to tear it up, decided to save it in case he could turn it into a decent poem later on. Got drunk, skipped classes, phoned in sick...not fit to face the world.

Then for some reason Conrad came to mind. Conrad! Shit, if anyone could blast him out of his doldrums it was the Con-man. It had been ages since they'd had

their last shout. The night of Shelby's funeral. Things got ugly but, then again, that was par for the course when you combined booze and Conrad.

Why not ring the motherfucker up and rattle his cage? And, wouldn't you know it, the man himself answered. Once he knew it was Flood, it was like old times.

So, in a way, all the shit he went through afterward was that bitch Wendy's fault. She broke his heart and Flood felt justified reaching out to the one person he knew would distract him from his woes. They arranged to meet that night. He told Conrad about getting dumped and they both agreed it was totally fucked up. Then Conrad asked if he was in the mood for something heavy and Flood, who at that point didn't give a fuck about anything, went *uh, yeah, sure, whatever. Count me in...*

It started out as a night on the town.

Conrad and the others showed up around eight, already pretty blitzed at that point, laughing at nothing, jittery with nervous energy. The Con-Man's mood was brittle, unpredictable. He ended up changing his mind, too paranoid for clubbing at that point. Instead, he decided they should head back to his place to sample the goods and chill. They piled into Stu's car, Amanda disappointed and miffed but trying not to show it.

The others chattered away, cracking jokes and braying with laughter, tuned to the same private wavelength. Flood felt excluded, isolated, and was grateful when they finally reached their destination.

"Crystal meth, ladies and gentlemen." Conrad held up the baggie for their appraisal, a hundred and fifty bucks worth and they all chipped in to pay their share.

Shit, that was *cheap*, dirt cheap compared to E or even weed. You only needed a pinch, Conrad told them, like a tenth of a gram and, man, for eight, ten hours you'd be flying high, ready to take on the fucking world. Conrad's shady connection promised primo shit, direct from the finest clandestine lab in Bumfuckville, North Dakota.

You've heard about crystal meth, right? *AKA* "ice"?

You know what it does.

No, you don't. You think you do but you can't imagine what it *feels* like when it hits your system. You can shoot it or snort it but they smoked it and, man, it was fucking *unreal*. Like...having your pleasure centre plugged into the main circuit breaker of the universe. Cue a chorus of angels and rows of Benedictine monks chanting hymns of praise. About twenty seconds after his first hit, his limbic system awash in dopamine, Flood couldn't believe he had ever let a stupid bitch like Wendy Kiel get under his skin. Compared to ice, she was a dog licking its balls in the street. He informed the others of this observation and the room erupted into gales of laughter. They were totally in synch with each other and he fucking loved them and they loved him and everything was in its proper alignment.

He was on fire for *hours*, coming up with tons of fantastic insights and revelations. When he started losing his edge a few more passes of Conrad's modified glass pipe, *phhsst, phhsst*, that chemical taste in the back of his throat, his mind blooming again, overflowing with thoughts and odd connections. He borrowed some paper and sketched everything that came into his head. The images flowed, one after

the other. He had never felt more inspired and aware and *alive* in his life. Fuck true love and God and Jesus and Buddha and Jeff Koons, this shit was the real deal.

I sketched like mad and we listened to music, lots of music, and there were movies but they seemed so fucking slow we fast-forwarded through most of them, war flicks and comedies and something with what's his name, the actor I don't like but it was all right, set in Africa or South America but then we got bored so we had another hit and started inventing word games and Conrad figured we should copyright our ideas before someone stole them but then the subject somehow switched and we argued about whether time and reality were fixed or just subjective concepts and which was better, the "Terminator" movies or the "Matrix" trilogy and from there it sort of morphed into whose ass was hairier, Conrad's or Stu's and Stu lost, hands down--

Amanda went to work in the morning and when she returned, cleaned up and fixed them snacks, made sure they had fresh towels when they needed to shower and, at least in Flood's case, jerk off to relieve some of his sexual excitement. Talk about strange side effects. But the dry mouth thing was even worse. You couldn't get rid of it.

The hours blended together and it wasn't until they were running low that they realized how much time had elapsed. Flood was feeling pretty jangled at that point and he imagined it was the same for the others...so he was astonished when Conrad announced he knew of a guy who might have *more*, a real scuzzball named Ferrell. He was wired, wouldn't be talked out of making the run and snapped at Amanda when she tried, ever so gently, to dissuade him.

He insisted Flood come along and ride shotgun because this Ferrell, well, he could be flaky, unpredictable. He was a cooker, well known for the quality of his work. But he'd also had a couple of close calls--explosions, chemical mishaps--proving nobody's perfect. He didn't have an address or phone number but Conrad was a hundred per cent certain he remembered where Ferrell lived. No problem. He'd know it when he saw it.

It was obvious Amanda didn't think much of the idea but when the Con Man got like that you didn't want to fuck with him so she wisely backed off. Instead asked if she could go along too but he shook his head and scowled at her. 'Nuff said.

It was around eleven when they left and Conrad assured her they wouldn't be more than an hour, two at the most.

"Selkirk Trailer Park. In Glencairn." Naming a subdivision way the hell over on the east side.

This is going to be fun, Flood predicted.

And, sure enough, Conrad got lost and then had to double back on the freeway after taking the same wrong turn *twice*. They finally found the trailer park and right away Flood didn't like it. Few of the streetlights seemed to be working, the units shabby and rundown, practically indistinguishable in the dark. They banged on one door and were warned off, tried the next place and this time they got lucky. An outside light was on and they could see the grass around the trailer was dead, parched and untended. The mail box was off kilter but someone had painted "Han Solo" on it, the letters crudely rendered.

“This is it,” Conrad confirmed. Turning to Flood. “No matter what happens, stay cool. This guy...he’s not all there. Let me do the talking. You just smile and play dumb. He makes any sudden moves or acts like he’s going for a gun, we bail, right?” Flood nodded, feeling sick, thinking *how do I get myself into these fucked up situations?*

Ferrell was home and not in the most festive of moods. He cracked open the door and when Conrad identified himself, didn’t seem to recognize him. Not good. “Fuck off out of here,” he hissed, banging the door shut.

“Maybe we should—”

Conrad rapped on the screen door. “Yo, Ferrell, it’s *Conrad*, man. You told me that story about your pet chicken. I was with Maurie, remember?”

There was a snick, which Flood sincerely hoped was a lock turning and not a shotgun being racked. Ferrell opened the door all the way this time. Skinny, thinning hair, wispy goatee, dressed in stained sweats and a *Colts* t-shirt. “I told you about Peeper?”

“You taught it tricks, right? Used to eat right out of your hand. Maurie was wearing that fuckin’ *Broncos* cap, remember? The two of us were razzing him about it.”

“Sure, sure.” Ferrell was nodding, an encouraging development. “I remember now. C’mon in.” When he turned back into the trailer, they saw that he’d tucked a small pistol into the waistband of his filthy sweat pants. Flood glanced at Conrad, who shook his head. They followed him into the long, narrow interior.

Flood couldn't believe how the guy lived, the squalor of his existence. It smelled of food gone bad and mildew. There was also a sharp, chemical scent present, along with the after aroma of primo skunk. Piles of green garbage bags full of dirty clothes took up valuable floor space. Scorch marks on the wall over the stove, a large water stain above the sink. What a fucking dive.

Ferrell seated himself at the built-in nook next to the kitchen and his visitors slid in across from him. A scatter of bullets and drug paraphernalia artlessly arranged on the tabletop between them. Ferrell was not a discreet user and, judging by the tats on his neck, had done some time because of it. He pulled the gun out of his waistband and dropped it on the table.

“Guess I won't be needing this.” It was either a peace gesture or an attempt to intimidate them. “I've been getting hassled. Have to be careful. Poisoned my dog, busted my window, slashed my tires. Fuckers. I see them—” He cocked a finger, his meaning clear.

“What do they expect,” Conrad agreed. “People fuck with your shit, they get what they deserve.”

Ferrell eyed them blearily. “You guys after something? I got weed—” He took in their condition. “Shit, you're *flyin'*. You tweakin'?”

“Like a motherfucker.”

He settled back. “Shoot it?”

“Fuck, no. Smoked it.”

“I got a Filipino buddy calls it *shabu*. Wants to know do I have any *shabu*. Says the shit's all over the Far East.” There was a lengthy pause in the proceedings,

each side taking the measure of the other. “How about we have a little hoot.” Ferrell produced a tightly rolled joint from behind his ear. “Good bud.”

“I wouldn’t say no,” Conrad replied.

Ferrell lit up, had a drag and passed it to Flood. “What’s *your* story?”

“Just a friend.” Ferrell watched as Flood toked. He was right, it was good shit, he could feel it even through the meth buzz.

“You boys gotta come down before you can go back up again.”

There were three passports by his elbow and Flood saw that though each bore a different name, Ferrell’s picture was on all of them. Ferrell saw where he was looking and swept up the booklets, tossing them behind him. Gave Flood a funny look. “Could be I’m thinking about taking a trip. Go somewhere ’til things cool off.”

“Is it bikers?” Conrad asked, trying to draw his attention away from Flood.

“People.” Ferrell shrugged. “People with connections.”

“Wanting you to cook for them?”

“What else?”

“And you prefer to remain independent.”

“These guys don’t take ‘no’ for an answer.” Ferrell’s eyes narrowed in anger. “*Motherfuckers*. They got no class, no sense of...quality control. They wanna set me up to make shit like this.” He produced a plastic ziplock bag and dropped it on the table. Flood and Conrad stared at it—the little rocks inside were dirty grey, embedded with dark blue crystals. “You see? What the fuck is *this*?” He poked it with a grubby finger. “These cocksuckers just don’t get it. They don’t know what they’re fucking with. You should see the precursors they’re using—look, I ain’t no

chemist, all right? I barely got my grade ten. But I know you add a couple more hydrogen atoms to regular, ordinary speed, you get meth. Know what I mean? You fuck with molecules and you can create heaven...or hell. Read Huxley. Reality is just perception, man. What our brain *perceives* and—and takes in. Ask a fuckin' shaman, he'll tell you the same thing. Change perception, you change reality. Snip a molecule, add a different one, mess around with the chain...maybe you see God or *maybe* it's the opposite and you end up brain-damaged and shit. These people don't care. This fuckin' shit here. That look normal to you?" He pushed the baggie closer. "It ain't. It's *wild*. Powerful medicine." He shivered. "Fuckin' wicked."

Flood could see Conrad eyeing the baggie greedily. "Yeah. For sure. That's some weird shit."

"Yeah." Ferrell rallied himself. "Hey, you guys want a drink or something?" He started to rise, froze. "*Did you hear that?*" His visitors listened, simultaneously shook their heads. Ferrell sagged back into his seat. Conrad tried to offer him the joint but Ferrell waved it away. "*Fuck*. It's been crazy, I tell ya. I haven't slept, my head is just..." Conrad made sounds of commiseration but Ferrell grimaced. "You don't understand, man. I *hear* things. Crazy shit. Whispering, out there in the dark. Things creeping around. Nothing used to scare me, I could stare down a fuckin' grizzly bear. ATF? Shit, those guys don't spook me. I got shit in here, I could hold off an army. And once they killed me, my problems would be over." He rubbed his eyes. "You guys should split, you don't wanna be a part of this."

"It's just stress, man, things preying on your mind."

Ferrell shook his head. “It ain’t just that. It’s like I got extra senses. Sometimes I’m sitting here and...I’m floating outside myself. Aw, fuck it.” He pushed himself to his feet, moved toward the back of the trailer. “I gotta crash. Sorry, I’m just...” As soon as he was out of sight, Conrad snatched the baggie. Flood gaped at him but he put a finger to his lips.

“We’ll let ourselves out. Thanks, man.”

Once they were outside and well away from the trailer it was like Flood could finally breathe again. “That guy was fucking crazy, he—he--”

“Yeah,” Conrad agreed, “ol’ Ferrell, he’s something, all right.”

“No kidding. I thought I was gonna die in there.”

“So we got the experience *and* we got the ice.”

“Won’t he be pissed?”

“Ah, he’s so far gone we could go back in there and shave his ass and he wouldn’t notice.”

Flood hoped that was the case. He wouldn’t want to end up on the wrong side of a maniac like Ferrell. He had a feeling the consequences would be dire.

When they got back, they gave a watered down version of events, for Amanda’s sake. The others weren’t really interested anyway, they just wanted to get high again.

This time, the four of them decided to snort it. Conrad broke up some of the rock, then chopped the residue up fine, divvying it into four fat lines. He handed out short straws, started the countdown.

Five, four, three, two, one...

They plunged their straws into the grey ice and pounded the shit down *hard*. It burned like a bastard, bad enough to make Flood's eyes water. There was this *flash* inside his head, like a strobe, and he got a glimpse of some kind of lens or mirror. Cracks marred its crystalline surface, deep fractures leaking gray-silver light.

And then everything got *really* fucked up...

10

"Mr. Peabody?"

"They were good boys." Arnie Peabody didn't turn around to see who he was addressing. "They had big ideas and talked foolishly sometimes..." He raised and lowered his shoulders. Novak recognized inconsolable grief and remained a respectful distance away, giving him time to regain his composure.

Novak took the opportunity to study the platform, which had been lowered to the ground for inspection. There was damage, a good deal of blood, but no sign of Darren Scala or Louis Weiskopf. Their fate undetermined. As in unknown. As in where the fuck could they go five hundred feet above the ground?

"That dent by the end, that wasn't there. Those scratches...you can see where the rig got banged around a fair bit. Something went on up there."

"A fight maybe?" Vic Anson suggested.

Peabody shook his head. "Those boys were like brothers. They finished each other's sentences. And they weren't queer either. Not that it would matter. But they weren't. They went up and..." he faltered, "something must have come after them."

“That’s...one possibility,” Novak allowed.

Vic Anson couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Yeah, well, uh, anyway, I just wanted to report that we’ve got guys going from floor to floor in case they somehow got inside. And we’re checking around the neighbourhood.”

“If they fell you’d see ’em right away. They can’t go far.”

“We’re still obliged to look, Mr. Peabody.” Anson left them.

“They used to do this comedy thing. They’d pretend to be these dumbass wetbacks and they’d be trying to figure out how to drive a car or run a can opener. I used to *laugh*...” He turned his body away and this time Novak heard him sob. “Fucking jokers. Sanchez Brothers.” He leaned forward, gripping the gondola’s safety bar. “Ah, those poor lads. Those poor, sweet lads.” Head bowed, shoulders shaking.

“Sir...we don’t know for sure they’re dead. There’s blood but that doesn’t mean the worst. But we need to get a handle on what went on up there. This is like a locked door mystery—evidence of a crime but we don’t know what happened.”

“Let me show you something.” Peabody motioned him closer. “I trained Darren and Lou and the first rule was always safety. Keep your gear well-maintained and make sure you’re properly secured.” He reached down and came up with a snarl of belts and straps. “These were cut or snapped off. I showed this to that foreign fella too and he barely blinked. I saw you pass him—”

“Foreign—” He recollected nearly bumping shoulders with a guy in a snazzy suit. *The one with the eyes of a hitman.* “Did he tell you he was a policeman? Show you identification?”

Arnie Peabody shrugged. “He talked like a cop. Asked me questions, pretty much the same ones you are.”

The gondola had been lowered to the base of the Commerzbank Building. Crime scene tape marked the perimeter, early morning pedestrians and commuters kept well back. Technically Novak’s shift was over but he didn’t let that get in the way. Peabody had his hands on his hips, head tilted back, staring at a spot high above them. Novak mimicked his pose. “You say something attacked them.” Peabody nodded. “You’ve been in the business a long time. Hell, you’re practically a legend around here. You ever see anything up there? Something that could explain *this*?”

Arnie didn’t need much time to think it over before shaking his head. “All the things I seen involved people screwing or getting ready to kill themselves. One time there was this guy--”

“Let’s talk about the boys, were they—”

“They were the best kids you could imagine. Never late, no bad habits. And naturals, took to it like a couple of Mohawks. No fear, just did their thing and dreamed their big dreams.” His voice trembling. “I thought the world of those lads. I’m not going to let them...” Turning on Novak. “You can see what happened. You’re not dumb. This isn’t right. It ain’t normal and I’m gonna find out what’s going on.”

“What are you going to do?”

“This rig is still good, nothing wrong with it. Maybe some night I’ll take it up, see what I can see.”

“Be careful up there. These things, whatever they are...” Novak glanced around, making sure no one else was within earshot. “You never know what you might find. Or what might find *you*.”

“Don’t worry on that front. I plan on going up armed and dangerous.”

Novak nodded. “Hey, you’re a private citizen. You have a constitutional right to defend yourself.”

“Damn right,” Arnie Peabody agreed, “and *someone’s* gonna answer for what happened to Darren and Lou. I know there might be some people who deserve to die but those two were good ’uns. Maybe not bound for greatness but they made me laugh and that’s saying something. I’ll always cherish and remember their dear souls for that.”

11

The first time was always *fierce*, attacking each other, a collision of flesh, pure carnality. The second time was sweeter; slow, enjoying it, kissing without biting, fucking without bruising.

Then came the guilty afterthoughts, sober reappraisals. This was *definitely* it, the grand finale, a final and fond farewell.

All part of the ritual. Sometimes their mutual resolve lasted a month. Three months was an all time record. Then one or the other would call: Joan or Frank was out of town, how about dropping by for a drink or whatever—

It never took long to get to the whatever.

The problem was they were *too* good together, the perfect fit, as if the Pete Dunham model had been specifically designed with the Sally Nesbit model in mind. Unfortunately, their compatibility never went beyond the physical. Outside of sex they didn't have much in common. He was a geek, some kind of designer at a computer graphics outfit. Crazy about reading. Sally worked in her folks' furniture store, a family run business, laidback and undemanding. She liked country music and reality TV and thought books were a waste of time and energy that could be better spent on other things. Why read about something when you could be out *doing* it?

Pete had come by the store three years previously. Picked up a couple of office chairs, a computer desk...and the cute brunette who sold them to him. They drove directly to a motel and fucked like sex maniacs. Talk about chemistry. It was *scary*.

"This could get habit-forming," she'd moaned as he slid up behind her in the motel shower. It turned out to be an accurate prediction.

Times changed: he got married and she moved in with steady, dependable Frank but that itch just wouldn't stay scratched and so every so often they'd slip off together--once so hot they couldn't wait, screwing in the car right outside her apartment building. In their frenzy, they broke the bucket seat on the driver's side. *Anyone* could have seen them.

The furtive, secretive nature of their assignations only added to their allure and intensity and that itch sometimes became a *burn*...

Did it hurt anyone? They debated that, came to no firm conclusions. But sooner or later they were bound to be caught. They knew it. So it had to stop. They even shook hands on it this time.

She climbed out of bed, making a mental note to wash the sheets as soon as he was gone. Picked up her robe, turning in time to catch him pulling on his briefs. Couldn't help sneaking one last look at his package, the object of so much pleasure over the last few years. *Lovely.*

She forced herself to look away. *Stop that.*

Now that they had finished their second round, it felt awkward between them. *Artificial.* Whereas moments before their thoughts had been focussed on pleasure, in the aftermath they found themselves denied a common frame of reference. They had nothing to say to each another. And, that being the case, she found she was bored with him, wished he'd get dressed, give her a kiss at the door and be on his way. Then she could soak in the tub, have a little cry, get the recriminations over with and move on. Tomorrow she had to be in good shape when Frank got home.

She found Pete standing by the glass door leading to the balcony, framed by the lights of the city. He slid back the panel—

“What are you doing?”

“Gonna cool off, it's a nice night out.” He glanced back at her. “Don't worry, nobody'll see me. Not as long as the inside lights aren't on.”

Still, she fretted as she went into the kitchen to pour herself another glass of the red wine he'd brought. It was Australian, Wolfblass, quite tasty; she'd have to remember to buy a bottle.

A cool breeze from outside curled and twined around her ankles like the ghost of a beloved cat. The balcony was small, not worth the extra rent the management company charged for the privilege of having it. Room for a couple of plants, two chairs and a small barbeque.

“It’s great out here,” he called.

“Keep your voice down,” she muttered, sipping the red wine, her annoyance with him spiking.

“You’ve got a good view. I can see all the way to—”

She waited. “To where?” No answer. “Pete?” She took her glass with her but found the balcony empty. *Please, God, don’t tell me he leaned over too far and*

—

She hurried outside, rushed over to look down, afraid of what she’d see. She felt his hands slide around her from behind, squeezing her tightly. If he was trying to endear himself to her, he was going about it the wrong way. “Goddamnit, Pete, that wasn’t funny.” She tried to turn around but he kept her pinned against the rail. “Let *go* of me—”

“Gotcha,” he murmured in her ear. She tried to push away but he was strong and she didn’t make much progress. Her wine sloshed on her hand; she set the glass on the wall, its position precarious.

“I *mean* it, you asshole.”

She felt something prodding her backside. “I just wanted to get you out here.” He pressed against her with his stiff cock.

“Forget it. I thought we made a deal.” But she noticed she wasn’t struggling too hard to extricate herself, old habits hard to break. “Just...you should let go.” She didn’t sound very convincing, even to her own ears.

“Someone might see us,” he said, his voice low. “This isn’t smart. We could get caught.” And all the while rubbing on her and, damnit, there was no denying it, she was getting hot again. It was bizarre, the effect he had on her. “We’ll have to be careful.” he whispered, his hands opening the sash, parting her robe. Then he went to work on her with his amazing fingers and she gave in to him, no longer pretending to resist. She leaned on the rail, raising her ass to accommodate him. The steel bar was chill against her breasts. Her nipples budded as she brushed them on its metal surface. She heard his shorts drop to the cement deck. He entered her with ease and the added excitement of their exposed location, in full view like this, was too much, she actually moaned as he plunged in and out of her, climaxing after about fifteen glorious strokes, feeling him swell inside her, just about to burst—

There was a sound, like a grunt, and he abruptly pulled out, withdrawing from her with surprising force. She twisted around so she could see back over her shoulder —

He wasn’t there.

“For God’s sake, Pete,” she snapped, straightening and drawing her robe shut. “You should just fucking *leave*, okay? Enough of this.” He wasn’t hiding on the balcony this time so she started toward the sliding doors.

Later she couldn’t explain *how* she knew something was bearing down on her, closing with frightening speed. She threw herself to the concrete deck and felt it pass

directly over her, squawking with frustrated rage as it clipped the balcony and tumbled and flapped out of sight. Then, just as she was about to rise, another one soared past, its momentum carrying it through the partially open balcony door, into the living room. She crawled toward the doorway on her hands and knees, aware that there was only one way out of the apartment, one route to safety.

No lights inside except for the one on the range hood in the kitchen. Visibility almost nonexistent and it was an awfully long way to the front door. *C'mon, Sally girl*, she told herself, *you can't stay out here all night*. Because there might be more of those things about and she was vulnerable in the open like this. She spotted the cooking utensils hanging by the barbecue, tongs and a two foot long fork used for turning wieners and smokies. *Better than nothing*. She reached over and after two attempts managed to tug the fork off its hook. Somewhat emboldened, she rose, moving tentatively, the fine hairs on the back of her neck standing straight up as she edged through the doorway and peered about.

She needed light and there was a switch on the wall about six feet to her right. She could picture it. It would turn on the ugly lamp in the living room. A housewarming gift from Frank's sister Corinne. All she had to do was slide a little further inside, reach along the wall and with one flip--

It's going to be all right, nothing to worry about. Stay sharp, girl, stay frosty, you'll be fine. Gripping the barbecue fork tightly, she began to stretch out for the switch, her fingers questing for it. *Where are you, you sonofabitch—*

There was a skittering sound and something seized her arm, claws raking and gouging her. She screamed and tried to yank her arm back—then remembered the

fork, thrusting and jabbing it at her assailant, trying to get it *off* her. She stabbed blindly and twice bawled in pain when she accidentally speared her wrist and forearm. But her determined defense finally forced it to relinquish its grip and drove it away. She could hear it crashing around the room, colliding with the furniture, splintering the coffee table. Wounded, in all likelihood, making it doubly important to get out of there. Fuck the lights, just *go*.

But her sixth sense was screaming again, something coming up behind her *fast*. She spun and slid the heavy glass door shut just as it appeared over the lip of the balcony, moving with considerable speed. The creature flapped its wings in a desperate attempt to maneuver but its momentum carried it into the door, which shattered on impact, pebbled glass bursting all over the interior of the room. It looked like one of those gargoyles come to life. It scrambled upright, shook itself off and reeled back through the splintered doorway, clearly put out by the treatment it had been accorded.

Her right arm hurt like hell and bleeding pretty badly by the feel of it. She couldn't stop and tend to it, there was no time. She had to make for the hallway and the front door.

Funny, she was already thinking ahead, concocting an explanation for Pete's presence in the apartment, some crazy scenario to tell Frank. Maybe it was shock. She even passed a light switch on the way to the hallway without bothering to turn it on. The long fork was at her side and she could hear someone knocking, rattling the brass door handle. Likely Jill Achebe from across the hall, checking to see if she was all right.

She passed the bathroom, a little warning klaxon going off in her head but, damnit, she was nearly at the door, could clearly make out Jill's voice, her exotic accent--

So tantalizingly close... but there was that funny feeling again, those little hairs going *twing!* as something rushed down the hallway toward her, its claws scrabbling on the hardwood floor, the last thing she thought she would ever hear...

Miraculously, Pete Dunham was still alive.

Alive and, unfortunately for him, conscious. Jarred awake and finding himself alone in the dark with a monster.

He gradually became accustomed to the gloom. Turned his head and almost bumped noses with a woman. A dead woman. Sightless eyes, black, protruding tongue. He pushed her away, finding the task easy since she consisted of little more than a torso. He hiccuped, tasting bile.

The movement drew the attention of the nearest creature. He watched helplessly as it walk-hopped toward him. It was taller than a man, long and thin, emitting strange growling noises as it approached. There was no question of running or even crawling away. Something was wrong with his legs. They were dead weight.

The creature stood over him, a frightful spectre with bird-like features and black, pitiless eyes. With the few seconds of life remaining to him, Pete Dunham reflected on the unfairness of it all. This seemed like an awfully steep price to pay for a sexual peccadillo, a dalliance that hurt no one. In the grand scheme of things, it amounted to little more than a misdemeanor.

I don't deserve this.

Unfortunately for Pete, there was no mechanism for an appeal.

And justice in this jurisdiction, at least, was swift and harsh, the sentence executed without further delay.

12

“Let’s go!” Bryan Yeo made a twirling motion with his index finger but the pilot ignored him, intent on his pre-flight checklist and seemingly in no rush.

Asshole. “C’mon, Wayne,” Bryan urged, “let’s get airborne.”

Wayne Showalter had flown the K-copter for four years, shepherding around five or six different traffic reporters during that time. Bryan was by far the most ambitious. It was always *go-go-go* with the guy and that rubbed easy-going Wayne the wrong way. He liked to fuck with Bryan by dragging out the pre-flight stuff a bit longer than he needed to. Call it payback.

On the other hand, when the station floated the notion of cutting the not inconsiderable expense of maintaining and operating the K-copter, it was Bryan who came up with the idea of selling advertising space on its fuselage to offset the costs. Currently, some local software firm’s logo decorated the bird (ugly as hell but it helped pay the rent so Wayne wasn’t about to quibble).

He could tell Bryan was seething but, shit, it was still dark out. What was the big friggin’ rush?

Wayne finally relented, setting aside the clipboard and firing up the Lycoming, four-cylinder powerplant. The compact chopper quickly gained altitude.

Wayne took them up to two thousand feet, increasing air speed to almost a hundred miles an hour. Ten minutes to the Beltway, tops.

Bryan, meanwhile, was preoccupied with other things besides Wayne's uppity attitude. Yesterday, Fred Avery had called him in for their long-delayed chat and the news wasn't good.

Fred flat out told him the station was happy with the status quo, liked the current "on-air mix" of personalities, the chemistry that had developed. For the foreseeable future, Bryan would be dragging his ass out of bed at 4:00 a.m. so he could be at the airfield in time for the morning traffic report. He'd also occasionally be filling in on the supper and late news for their TV affiliate and would be on call if any of their radio jocks fell off the wagon or was unexpectedly Raptured or whatever.

"Our view, that is the management here at KCUR, is that you need to bide your time, build up some visibility." Fred's manner was so congenial it was hard to bear a grudge even when he was basically telling you to fuck off.

Bryan knew that part of the problem was that they already had an Asian, Sylvia Chow, the cute part-time news girl. A real bubblehead but she was young, had nice tits and fit the station's demographics. Which left Bryan the odd man out.

Tokenism only went so far.

But Bryan behaved professionally, like the consummate team player he was. He was gracious despite the rebuff...while secretly visualizing tearing the asshole's liver out and eating it like a fucking Aztec high priest.

Three years. Three fucking years he'd waited his turn for a crack at the big chair. Taken every shit job handed to him. Part-time sportscaster (he didn't know

football from field hockey), part-time weather man, part-time roving reporter...he'd even donned the station's mascot outfit on the odd occasion, despite suffering from a mild form of claustrophobia.

And then you look at someone like Phil Calvert, KCUR's longtime news anchor, a man *way* past his prime and yet refusing to step aside, make way for new blood. As a result, there was a logjam of people vying for whatever on-air slots were available, either in radio or TV.

Radio. Radio was dead as a fucking dodo bird. It had no cachet, not unless you were a shock jock like Howard Stern, which was definitely not Bryan's style. Radio was where you cut your teeth—TV was the fucking *show*.

Sylvia Chow was Chinese, Felice Carter black and Ron Bluth a Jew (with a name like Bluth? had to be). And Rashid, the sports guy, a brain dead ex-jock with the charisma of a carrot, what was he? Moroccan or some fucking thing. That covered all the bases, race-wise. No more visible minorities need apply--

Wayne waved to get his attention. "I said to 'plug in your headphones, somebody down there wants to talk to you'."

The headphone jack dangled down by his feet and he impatiently jammed it in. "Hey there, Bryan." He recognized Gil Cooper, the morning show's producer. Good guy but high stress, a stroke waiting to happen. "How's the view?" It was the same question he asked every morning.

"Well, Wayne's as ugly as ever," Bryan reported with some accuracy but the pilot didn't rise to the bait.

"Is it still dark out?"

“As the inside of my ass.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Gil chuckled. “Ah, we’re getting reports of an accident on Five Mile Road, might cause a bottleneck once traffic gets heavier later on.” Wayne was nodding, steering the chopper in that direction.

“We’ll check it out.”

“And there’s also a—”

The helicopter shuddered and dipped, sloshing Bryan’s lukewarm coffee all over the crotch of his new cotton twill jeans. “What the—”

“We hit something!” Wayne hollered. “Flew right into the rotor. Hang on!” There was a spackle of black dots on the windscreen. The air frame was vibrating and there was a high-pitched whistling noise coming from directly overhead. Alarms and buzzers were going off and lights all over the console were flashing and blinking. Bryan hung on to the sides of his seat, a helpless spectator, unable to offer the slightest assistance.

“Was it a bird?”

“I dunno but it got the rotor, you can hear it—”

A loud *bang* from above them and they were pitched forward in their seats. The chopper started to spin, the lights of the city a bright blur on the other side of the bubbled windshield. Wayne, to his credit, never took his hands off the control stick and showed no signs of panic. He was tersely summarizing their predicament to someone back at the airport and from what Bryan could make out, it didn’t sound good.

“What’s wrong? What’s happening?” Bryan was dangerously close to losing his cool. The people at the station had caught on that things had gone into crisis mode. They heard the fear and urgency in Bryan’s voice and smelled a breaking news story. Gil Cooper was asking if they could put him on live--

Wayne worked the control stick and pumped the foot pedals and successfully arrested their dizzying spin. The chopper was still shaking like crazy and they were heading for the ground, fast.

Something plastered itself against the polycarbonate windscreen, a flurry of purple and black. It reared back and banged against the glass, snapping at them with its fearsome beak. Then it broke away, reappearing in a flash on Wayne’s side, wrenching open the door with claws that looked like they could peel tin.

Wayne never had a chance. The creature seized him and it was only his safety belt that prevented it from carrying him off. The infuriated beast clamped onto the top of Wayne’s head with its powerful, serrated beak and noisily crushed his skull. Blood sprayed all over the cramped confines of the cabin. Wayne’s arms and legs flopped and jerked and the helicopter was spinning again, falling like a thrown stone.

Bryan was howling, pressed back in his seat, trying to get as far away from the horror show beside him as he could.

Gil was shouting at him but Bryan was incoherent with terror. “—talk to me, Bryan, give us a report...let’s get him on the air, *move, people—*”

The chopper was shedding bits and pieces of itself as it plummeted. The creature, sensing danger, withdrew, disappearing from view. The crown of Wayne’s

head was pulped, the buffeting flinging his body back and forth, splattering gore everywhere.

“—still there, Bryan? We’re going live in three seconds. Can you tell us—”

“*Fuuuuuccckkk yooouuu...*”

The ground rushed toward him. There wasn’t even time to pray. The chopper crashed nosefirst into a parking lot, behind a row of warehouses. The fuel tank exploded on impact, scattering burning wreckage and body parts over a wide area. The fire and extensive damage would later hinder the investigation into the cause of the crash and resulting loss of life.

Mechanical error was initially blamed, a catastrophic failure involving the rotor. There was circumstantial evidence of some kind of aerial impact.

A man and woman arrived at the crash scene immediately afterward, their presence provoking interest and speculation. They acted very officiously, poked around for an hour or so and then left. No one had the nerve to ask what outfit they were with. It was taken for granted they were spooks, probably Homeland Security. They never showed identification, yet were given complete access to whatever they required. Somehow you wanted to help them, though afterwards you’d be hard pressed to explain *why*.

13

Something was happening to him.

His body felt strange. Like his skin was on too tight. His bones were swelling, his skeleton threatening to burst through its soft, flesh sheath. Oh, Christ, it *hurt...*

He'd never binged like that before, three days straight getting fucked up, no sleep and now it all came crashing down on him. Felt like someone had been using his head to break bricks.

Oh, no, now it's my guts...

Flood humped over on the toilet, shaking, stomach churning, his bowels watery and acidic. He wondered if that fucked up ice had been cut with something or if—

--finding himself on the floor, mewling in agony, a thunderous headache, vision blurred, his limbs twitching and jumping involuntarily, a *fit* of some sort—

For a few seconds he was looking at his bathroom floor from a split perspective, two different streams of stimuli confounding him, alien thoughts co-mingling with his own, *cold, remorseless fury, hunger, blood-drenched images of its gruesome appetites...*

But the spell passed quickly and everything seemed to return to normal. He was able to sit up and deal with the mess he'd made. Afterward, he washed his hands, brought some water up to his face, sipping a little, hoping it wouldn't play havoc with his lower intestine.

Flood was the picture of misery as he crawled onto his invertebrate couch. The blinds were down and curtains closed but it was *still* too bright. He felt oversensitized, like his nerve endings had grown extra shoots. Even his teeth were aching like a sonofabitch.

He was definitely in a bad way. Was it the drugs or could he be coming down with something (wouldn't that be perfect timing)?

Within an hour his condition deteriorated even further, to the extent that he gave serious thought to calling someone. Who? Arlene? Would she come? Maybe. But then he'd have to put up with a long lecture from big sis about how it was time to put his nose to the ol' grindstone, everyone was counting on him making something of himself, blah blah blah...

Arlene was a tough nut. Even after all these years she still scared the mortal piss out of him. She'd tell him that moping over a woman, *any* woman, was retarded. Probably kick his ass for acting like such a fool.

But the worst part is she'll keep calling me Harold. It'll be "Harold" this and "Harold" that. And she knows I hate it...

Flood gazed at the study he had pinned over the couch. He'd sketched it full size, on butcher paper, kneeling on it as he worked. Then he switched to pastels, glancing up frequently and grinning at Wendy, posing for him on this very couch, magnificently naked. Her body wasn't perfect and he didn't try to hide it. He resented such sentimental posturing. He showed her the way she was, a marvel of flesh and blood.

She hated it. Hated that he faithfully reproduced her lopsided face and asymmetrical breasts and overlarge feet.

He reached up, plucked at the bottom of the stiff paper, lacking the strength to pull it down.

It got ugly at the end.

He begged. He actually begged. And *cried*. Talk about pathetic. He was ashamed to even think about it. It made his head pound even harder. No, that was the door—

“Mr. Flood?” Mrs. Tarnovsky, with impeccable timing. “Mr. Flood, you in dere? I been trying to call you, okay? The police, dey come and dey wanna talk wid you.” She waited, then knocked again. It was like she was beating her knuckles on his frontal lobes. “You in dere? Hello?” Her heard keys jingling. Was she actually coming in?

At that moment, her cell phone went off. Mrs. Tarnovsky used a Celine Dion song for her ring tone. It said a lot about the woman. “Yeah? I’m kinda busy— *what?* Oh, God. What you wand me to do about it? Hey? Listen, I already tole you, the kid is crazy, she’s in wid some bad people—” She was moving away from the door, temporarily distracted by this latest personal crisis.

His legs were tingling, the sensation spreading until his entire body was literally buzzing. A kind of paralysis gripped him, the slightest movement next to impossible. His chest tightened, a continuous pressure that affected his breathing. He felt light-headed, connected to the world by the thinnest, most tenuous thread. If it broke, he would drift away, drift *forever*...

That's when the hallucinations started.

Images and shapes zipped past, some recognizable, most abstracted or stylized beyond intelligibility. There was no sense of physical space, he was hurtling through a vast, infinite ether, tripping out on the spectacle playing before him, a special effects extravaganza staged for his benefit alone.

It got to be too much. He shut his eyes against the onslaught and felt an instant change, a ripple in the continuum—

--finding himself back there. The dead city. It was called...called...

The ruins an endless, insoluble maze. Kilometer after kilometer of tumbled disorder, a labyrinth of broken stone stretching to the edge of the desert.

There was movement overhead, something stirring the air.

No time to seek cover, he was gathered up and borne aloft by a creature that resembled pictures he'd seen of pterodactyls.

It was clear it was taking him to the Tower. Higher and higher it ascended, effortlessly bearing his weight. Soon the black spire was looming before him, malign energies emanating from it like rays from a black sun...

--everything soaked, his pillowcase, clothes...

Jesus.

At first thinking he'd pissed himself but it was *sweat*; even the couch cushions were damp beneath him. And he was fucking *thirsty*, undoubtedly dehydrated. His lips dry, throat raw. He barely had the strength to make it to the kitchen. Stuck this face under the tap, nearly swooning as he gulped the tepid water.

For a second, he was fine...and then he felt it coming, knew before it hit that it was going to be bad. His head fucking *exploded* and he was on the floor, screaming, the pressure in his skull surging, his eyes bulging, blood streaming from his ears and both nostrils. He made a gagging noise, stiffened, his body jerking in what appeared to be death throes.

A moment of silence ensued.

A babel of outlandish syllables emerged from his slack, unmoving mouth, a breath-defying invocation that was cut off as abruptly as it began. His lips bent into a cruel grin, the leer of a serial rapist or latterday Tamerlane. Then a scowl. Followed by peals of maniacal laughter. Finally Flood blinked, managed to rise to a sitting position, his gaze frantic, taking in the room and environs as if for the first time.

His eyes were black disks.

Face stiff and inflexible, more properly a mask.

Meet the new and improved Harold Nathan Flood.

He had perfect recollection of the images from his fever dreams. Those runes and mysterious symbols. He retrieved his sketch pad, a handful of pencils, flipped to the first blank page and began to scribble, the lead points frequently tearing through the paper or breaking with dry snaps. And so he'd grab another one, shading, shading, blackening the sheets right to the edges. Page after page, working frantically, tirelessly, oblivious of everything but the task at hand.

Hours passed. An unknown interval of time.

It was not missed.

The floor was covered in sheets of 11 X 17 paper, a scatter of dark rectangles. When he ran out of paper, he drew on the walls, using pastels and then tempura paint, grey-black and violet black and *black* black. Never pausing, never sleeping, possessed by a creative mania, filling every inch of the room with runic glyphs and bizarre notations, then covering them over with gloomy whorls and spirals, repeating the pattern over and over again.

Mrs. Tarnovsky came by for one more door knocking session, punctuating her visit by sliding an ominous looking envelope under the door. He was oblivious, utterly consumed by his endeavors. Speech confined to growls and grunts, disapproving bellows when yet another variation fell short of the mark and was discarded. But his determination was superhuman and as swiftly as one effort was abandoned, he started the next, smearing on the paint, often with his fingers, swirling it, creating that vortex effect he was seeking.

Finally, he stepped back to admire his latest handiwork, which took up most of one wall.

There was a sense of depth, a third dimension, a space behind or *beyond* the wall. The illusion was uncanny, giving the impression that a person, the right person, could enter that dark gate and find themselves somewhere else, *otherwhere*.

Flood walked toward it, never pausing, effortlessly passing through the portal he'd created.

And when he emerged on the other side, the transformation was complete.

14

Flea's text message is short and sweet:

High altitude work, anyone? [CU @ my place](#).

So...tonight's the night. What a fuckin' rush. I mean, I'm excited but at the same time I'm scared shitless. Because this can only mean one thing and it's, like, *wow*, a dream come true but also, like, *wow*, we could all die.

We're talking about the Big Smoke.

Picture this great, huge middle finger sticking up three hundred feet in the air, towering over the east side of the city. For fifty years it belched out tons of sulfur and other toxic gases, poisoning everyone within fifty miles. They ran that shithole, like, 24/7, three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Three shifts going at it day and night.

But competition killed it. The equipment was too old and inefficient and it cost too much to modernize it. There were all kinds of rumours about this mysterious Saudi prince who was supposedly gonna, like, sweep in and buy the place and save everybody's ass. That turned out to be bullshit and it closed for good two years ago. They did tests and the ground is, like, *laced* with chemicals—lead, chromium, zinc, you name it. Seriously. They have to treat it like hazardous waste. It'll cost kajillions to clean up.

The CEO fled to Bogota or someplace and the chief financial officer shot himself in the parking lot of a Motel 8.

Everything's still tied up in the courts. In the meantime, they keep the place locked up but we, like, staked it out and as far as we could tell, their security is totally lax. There're no dogs or cameras or guards. It's a fuckin' joke.

I guess since technically it doesn't belong to anybody, there's no one to pay for that stuff. But at least they could install proximity lights. I mean, *come on...*

It's official: tonight we're finally gonna do the deed. Kelly and Jason will miss out on the fun—Flea says they came up with these really lame excuses and I can tell he's pissed at them. I say fuck 'em, it's their loss. And, anyway, they're more, like, associate members of the *Nightcrawlers* so who gives a shit about them? More glory for us!

There's almost a full moon and not many clouds. Plenty of light for some clandestine fun. Scaling the Big Smoke is a tall order but tonight me and my friends are going to kick its ass and live to brag about it afterwards.

Flea snipped a hole in the chainlink fence during an earlier reconnaissance and used twist ties to wire it shut. In the meantime no one noticed or repaired the damage. It's how we get inside.

No need to risk entering the main building. It's possible it's wired. We're up the side and on the roof in two minutes flat; no problemo. It's a good warmup for what's next.

I give Elaine a hand up and we grin at each other, hug impulsively. "Let's do it," she whispers.

"C'mon, you two. " Flea's impatient. He has everything timed down to the minute. It's like that with him. A control thing. No fuckups permitted. Laney and I high five and the four of us scoot across the roof, toward that giant cock of a chimney. I can't stop grinning and once or twice take the opportunity to admire Flea's ass. He's got a great ass. And the rest of him ain't so bad either. We've been

together for, like, months and the sex is still fantastic and we get along and shit. I've never met anybody like him. I mean, he's being a dick right now but that's only because he's in charge.

Otherwise, Flea is a doll, a real cutie. Not a sexist asshole, like most guys I know. He considers me, like, his total equal and he told me I'm the only one he has complete confidence in. Isn't that *cool*?

But as we get closer to that smokestack I start having second thoughts. Holy shit, the fucking thing's way bigger than I imagined. It just keeps going up and up and *up*...

The rungs are about eighteen inches apart, sunk directly into the cement. Sturdy, by the look of it. Near the top they look as small as staples.

Flea crouches down and gestures for us to huddle around him. "Okay, be cool. Nobody's gonna freeze up, got it? Not gonna happen. We go up, we come down. No sweat—well, as little as possible." He laughs. You can tell he's having the time of his life.

The footage will be loaded on to our *Nightcrawlers* website, shots that could only come from one location. The competition will be green. Somebody'll have to come up with a real cool stunt to top us. And they will, eventually.

Like when that guy in the hang glider crashed and his friends managed to swipe the camera before the cops got there. The dude gives this incredible monologue as he's going down, just keeps talking to the camera the whole way. Pretty calm for a guy about to die. It's only about thirty seconds long but it's, like,

this amazingly powerful statement. I put the last lines on a t-shirt, one I've nearly worn out:

*My body will feel no pain,
My soul rushes to God.*

And then *bam!* Everything goes black.

It's fucking *radical* and it got, like, millions of hits. I was *so* jealous. I told Flea if I take the big plunge tonight, I hope I come up with something half as snap on the way down.

To get us ready, Flea made sure we were in shape. Lots of biking and walking up hills to build our stamina. The climb up Big Smoke will be hard on our legs and calf muscles. We have to worry about cramping. Flea told us to make sure we stayed well hydrated, plenty of water and Gatorade to keep our electrolytes up. No drugs or booze (beforehand, that is).

Flea predicted coming down would be a lot tougher, having to search for each rung. "It'll take twice as long, I bet."

It would have been great to rappel down but Niall vetoed that. He was worried about having to hook up with one hand or some bullshit like that. So we'll have to take the long way down. *Asshole.*

"This is gonna be fucking great," Flea says, mainly for Niall's benefit. He's definitely our weak link. If he's on the bottom and freezes, we'll be stuck up there. How would we live *that* down? Never. Not in a hundred years. Flea would kill him and the rest of us would gladly help.

Flea has a strategy to make sure that doesn't happen. He wouldn't tell me what it was, only said not to worry about it. So I don't.

He's called Flea, by the way, not after that asshole from the Chili Peppers or because he's small. He's Flea 'cause he's so persistent, like a flea or a tick. He's had that name since, like, forever. I bet even his parents call him that...on those rare occasions when they're willing to acknowledge they have a son.

As far as my man Flea is concerned, the Big Smoke will be the *Nightcrawlers'* crowning glory. The old tunnels underneath Westgate Station were fun and they kind of made our name, especially when part of it caved in on us. It looks scarier on the DV footage than it actually was. Flea led us back topside, getting everybody out without a scratch. I fucked his brains out that night, I tell you.

Tonight he's wearing a small backpack, while the rest of us make do with utility belts, everything pared down to the minimum, nothing heavy or bulky to throw off our balance.

Flea starts up first and I'm about to follow but he stops me. "Niall next." Part of his strategy, I guess. Keeping Niall close in case he loses it.

"Then me?"

"Then Elaine."

I can't believe it. "I'm rump roast?"

"Trust me."

What can I say? I wait for the rest of them to get a head start then haul myself after them. Flea sets the pace and it's clear he's in no hurry. We get a nice rhythm going. Niall doesn't seem to be having any trouble and eventually I get over my snit and start enjoying myself.

We make decent progress, even with Flea pausing a third of the way up to give us a breather. I feel fine, my legs bearing up well. Heights have never bothered me. I have dreams of flying. While we wait, I have no trouble looking up, down, sideways. You can see a long way, the lake visible off to the right. The moon is big and blond. Although it's a serious breach of security I let out a wolf howl of appreciation.

"Not while I'm filming," Flea complains from above me.

"Call it colour commentary," Laney fires back and we all laugh. Feeling good at that point.

"I think we should get moving, Flea," Niall says, ruining the mood. "Don't wanna chill down."

Chill down? What he means is he's chickenshit and worried about losing his nerve.

I'm not sure how long it takes to reach the top. I never wear a watch and time gets sort of distorted when all you're doing is plodding along, rung after rung.

"Okay," I hear Flea call out suddenly. He sounds out of breath but maybe it's only excitement. He must have the camera out because the next words he says are: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are three hundred feet in the air and the scenery, as you can see, is quite spectacular." He does his thing, gets a panoramic view of ugly ol' Ilium, then returns the camera to his backpack. No rest for the weary, a minute later he calls for me to go ahead and start down. "It's up to you now, Tanya," he adds. "Lead the way."

And I'm just *glowing* because now I see why he put me last—it's, like, this total statement of trust and faith in me. "Make sure you get a good plant with your foot," he warns us. "Tanya, you're doing great."

He wasn't shitting about going down being harder. You have to sort of reach out with your toes until you find the next rung. Totally nerve-wracking. I wonder how Niall is doing. Then my calves start to burn. I call for a break and nobody argues.

"Why the fuck didn't they put in proper stairs?" Elaine snarls.

"This is hardly ever used. Maybe for inspections or something. And we know how often that happened."

"As in never." Niall, chipping in his two cents' worth.

I'm just about to get us going again when Elaine calls out: "Hey, you guys, I just saw the biggest fuckin' bat—" Then she starts screaming. "It's not a bat! It's coming! Oh, Jesus, it's—"

I hear both Niall and Flea shouting and then something swoops past us, veering away at the last second. *Bat?* Not a fuckin' chance.

"There's another one over there!" Niall shouts.

"No, man, it's the same one—"

"*Bullshit!* There's definitely two of them, man—"

"Maybe, three," Elaine corrects them. Then I see one, approaching fast and it seems to be zeroing in on us.

"Look out!" I hug the dirty concrete and it makes its pass without doing any damage. We're all twisting around, trying to see where the next one's coming from,

calling out to each other. Niall is *seriously* losing it. I can hear Flea talking to him, reassuring him.

I'm distracted, thinking *we have to get down*, meanwhile reaching out with my foot for the next rung—

Something grabs my leg and nearly jerks me off my perch. I manage to catch myself just in time. I look down and see there's, like, this gi-normous bird hanging onto my leg. It's the size of a person, maybe even bigger. Triangle-shaped head, big fuckin' beak. Sort of a frilly collar. It makes creepy gurgling sounds and I can hear its leathery skin rustling. It's really fastened on to me and I feel its claws digging into my ankle. I scream and then make myself *stop*. Clamp my jaws shut, furious with myself. *Pussy*.

But the ugly motherfucker keeps flapping away, trying to yank me loose and my arms are starting to feel the strain.

“Niall! Elaine! I'm coming past!” Flea barking out orders. “I'm coming, Tanya! Hang on! You two, shine your flashlights so I can see. Shine your lights, damnit!”

“It's got me—” I try to shake it off my leg, feel something give in my knee, the pain almost unbearable. But I *don't* scream. I'd rather bite my tongue off.

The flashlight beams hit it and, simultaneously:

“*Get away from her!*”

Something streaks past and I twist around in time to see it's Flea, one end of a line snugged around his middle. Brought along in case of emergencies. He collides with the thing on my leg and it's like it's made of paper and smoke. It just

disintegrates. And so Flea, my man, my lover, saves my life but then the line snaps taut and his body jerks to a sudden stop about five feet below me--

But only for a moment.

The force of the drop is too much for the lightweight rope. For one of the few times in his life, Flea has miscalculated. Maybe it was to conserve weight. Maybe the line's rated to, like, two hundred pounds but combined with the drop—and I already told you, Flea isn't small.

He just keeps falling. I watch until I can't see him any more. Hear the awful sound he makes when he hits.

The three of us start screaming, go completely batshit crazy up there. I guess someone hears us and calls the cops. When I see the lights and emergency equipment pulling up, I get myself under control. I make the others shut the fuck up and pay attention. I tell them we're not gonna be *carried* down like a bunch of pussies. "We're the fucking *Nightcrawlers*. That means we make it off here under our own steam. Let's do it. For *Flea*..." I choke up as I say his name. I get to the bottom first but won't let them take me anywhere until Laney and Niall are down too. Flea is still lying where he hit. I don't look. That's not how I want to remember him.

They arrest us and seem inclined to cart us off to jail. Then they change their minds and decide we're in shock and should probably get checked out by a doctor. I guess they're afraid of being sued and being found negligent or whatever. They wrap us in blankets and take us to the hospital. No cuffs, not yet. But I'm informed I'm not allowed to go anywhere, that this is part of a *criminal* investigation. Trying to

fuck with me. But I don't give a shit. At that point I've stopped caring. About *everything*.

I miss Flea and can't imagine life without him. I want to cry but I'm afraid once I start, I won't be able to stop.

15

The darkness had reached out and *taken* her...but apparently hadn't found the repast entirely to its liking because now she was being spat out again, cast back into the light—

It *hurt*. Everywhere. Her body felt like a sprained muscle. She groaned. Someone came over, checked her and hurried away. She had a sense of riding a slow, lazy wave, flowing and ebbing, lapping up on the shores of consciousness a little further each time.

Beached. Shipwrecked. *Lost*.

She remembered someone asking about a rape kit. *What happened to me?* She was confused, fighting a growing sense of unease, something ugly lurking nearby, waiting to reveal itself—

“Hello, Sally,” a voice said. Not God's voice. God wouldn't sound so tired and nasal.

She turned her head. He was paunchy and rumped. His hair was greasy, his glasses dirty and if he had ever touched a hot iron in his life, her name was Aunt Jemima. But his eyes were pretty sharp, you got the sense right away the guy was no dummy.

“If you’re not God, you must be a cop.” She sounded like an old woman. Her throat was parched. The dry hospital air.

“I’m Detective Gus Novak.” He looked around, spotted whatever he was seeking. “I was hoping we could talk, just the two of us. Unless you’d rather speak to a female officer...” He poured water into a plastic cup and approached her, suddenly awkward. She needed help raising her head but he seemed reluctant to touch her. *This guy isn’t used to physical contact that doesn’t involve throwing someone to the ground.* She smiled at him gratefully when he finally summoned the nerve to assist her, felt his hand cradling her neck as she sipped. His aftershave was cheap and strong, with a sharp citrus tang. Serious five o’clock shadow.

He sensed her scrutiny and avoided her eyes. His shyness was sweet. He was probably in his mid-forties, not exactly a blushing rookie. God, her mind was all over the place. It must be relief, sheer exhilaration at having escaped from...from...

And just like *that* she was back there again, grappling with it in the dark hallway, fending off its claws, seeing it rise above her, a baleful, downward gaze—

Light! Blessed light and an impression of the thing rushing away from her, back to the shadows and the night. She and Jill Achebe had swapped keys last year, in case either of them ever got locked out. *It was Jill, Jill saved me...*

“How much do you remember?” He didn’t have a notebook or recorder and there was no one else present. Maybe he had one of those photographic memories.

“There was something...it came at us out of the dark. While we were out on the balcony.”

“You were attacked on the balcony.”

“It got Pete.”

“Peter Dunham.”

“Yes. It got him. Took him...*Jesus*...” Closing her eyes and shuddering as she relived the scene.

“Took him *where*?” His voice was sharp, insistent. “Where did it take him, Sally?” She was crying, her eyes leaking tears. “You have to be clear about what happened. Who attacked Peter? Where was he taken?”

“There were these *things*. They flew at us. We were on the balcony. And then one of them got inside—”

Someone leaned into the room, a young guy with an open, eager face. Novak waved him away impatiently and the eager beaver beat a hasty retreat, looking none too pleased.

“Describe these things. They flew?”

“Big. Like those prehistoric birds. I forget their names...” She was shivering beneath the stiff hospital blankets.

“Easy, Sally. And you’re saying they got Peter—”

“Yes...”

“And then one of these things got inside your apartment.”

“It almost got *me*. I didn’t see it. It must have been hiding in the bathroom. Jill saved me, opening the door. I think it was the light...” She could feel herself drifting again. “I’m sorry, I’m starting to...tired, y’know? I’m kind of...it’s hard for me...”

“We were talking about Peter. We need to know what happened to him, Sally. His wife needs to know. We know he didn’t fall. Believe me, we looked. There’s no body.”

“I told you, they *took* him.” She hated to disappoint him but she was definitely fading. “It was dark...they like the dark.” Her mind seeking refuge in sleep. Part of a defense mechanism eons old. We heal by forgetting...and thank God for beta blockers to speed the process along. Blunt the trauma by reducing the intensity of the memory. Unfortunately that also meant the loss of fine details, critical evidence that could be the difference between success and failure, conviction and acquittal.

But this woman deserved her rest. Judging from her injuries, she’d put up a courageous struggle against her foe. Her account jibed with the physical evidence so well, it was uncanny. “Okay, Sally, that’s enough for now.”

“You really should get that suit drycleaned.” Her eyes were closed.

“Um, thanks.”

“You wouldn’t be a bad-looking man if you took better care of yourself.”

Must be the pain killers.

“You remind me of Columbo, only you’re taller.”

He didn’t know what to say to that.

And, anyway, she appeared to be asleep.

Vic Anson was waiting outside and the vibes weren’t good. Novak felt a twinge of regret for blowing him off. But the kid could be a distraction with his

obtuseness and pushy persona. Would Sally Nesbit have opened up like that with Vic standing there, snorting and rolling his eyes in derision?

Fuck him.

“Anything?”

Novak shook his head. “She was pretty out of it. Sorry, I acted so pissy,” feigning sheepishness, “I was out of line and I owe you one.”

Anson seemed willing to let it slide. “Did she see the guy?”

“She said...it was too dark.”

“You think it was the boyfriend?”

“She claims not. I don’t see a motive. And why would he leave his clothes and wallet behind?”

“So, what, the hubby comes home, pots lover boy, slugs her, then...”

“Wasn’t he out of town?” Stating the obvious.

“Toronto. Took the first flight back, got here less than ten minutes ago.”

“There you go, he’s alibi-ed up the yin-yang.” Novak said.

“Yeah,” Anson conceded, “no way he’s our guy. Wait ’til you meet him.”

“So where does that leave us?”

Anson was stumped. “I dunno. Some kind of home invasion, maybe? Went to snatch the husband and got this Dunham guy by mistake?”

“Sounds reasonable to me.” Trying to keep a straight face. “Can I leave that with you? Ask around, talk to the neighbours, maybe somebody saw something.” It was grunt work, perfect for Anson.

“Okay, but there’s something else too.” Anson moved aside to make room for two nurses. “This woman was attacked on her balcony, way high up, right? Well, they just caught these freaks--*Nightcrawlers*, they call themselves. Urban explorers, if you can believe it. They were climbing the Big Smoke and one of them falls and goes *kersplat*. When they round up the others, they claim something attacked them up there and that’s how the kid got killed. They brought them here thinking some of them might be in shock. They’re downstairs and—”

“Right,” Novak started away, hardly believing his luck. “I’ll talk to them. Might as well kill two birds with one stone.”

“But you still want me to check that other stuff—”

“Of course,” Novak confirmed, “that’s the more likely explanation.”

“More likely than what?” Anson sounded forlorn.

“You’re doing great, Vic. Keep up the good work.”

“Yeah, whatever…”

“Detective Novak?”

He jabbed the button again, impatient to pursue this new development.

Hardly glancing at the guy. “Yeah, look, find the husband and tell him—tell him the attack wasn’t sexual in nature. Let’s spare him that, at least. Poor bastard deserves a break right now.”

“Actually… I’m the husband. Well, common-law. Frank Delorme.”

A beat. “*Shit*… sorry. I thought you were a doctor or one of those, uh, grief counsellors. Hey, my apologies. Sincerely.”

“Don’t worry about it.” The elevator door opened and Delorme followed him inside. “I’m pretty thick-skinned. I try not to let things get to me. I’m in a high stress business and you learn to kind of go with the flow.”

Huh? Novak wasn’t sure he was reading him right. “Still, this must come as a shock to you.”

“Which part? The attack? Sally’s affair? The missing man whose clothes are all over our bedroom floor?” He turned toward Novak. “By the way, am I a suspect in the disappearance of this Dunham guy? The other policeman sort of gave that impression. But, just so you know, I’m not the type to go crazy and do something so extreme. And the fact that Sally got hurt—I wouldn’t do that, detective. *I wouldn’t hurt her.* No matter what she did.”

Jesus, he saw what Vic meant. No way was this guy a killer. Talk about pussywhipped. He couldn’t resist and, besides, the elevator had nearly reached the main floor.

“That’s a pretty tolerant attitude.”

“The affair was nothing serious and, besides, as far as I can tell it was petering out. I doubt it would have lasted much longer.” Delorme’s expression remained placid, untroubled. Something had clearly happened to the man’s balls at some point in his life. The door slid open and Novak excused himself, moving past him.

“Detective, there are certain things that strike me as rather odd—”

“You aren’t the only one, Mr. Delorme.” Thinking to himself *Mister, you have no idea...*

Tanya Frye was quite the piece of work. Completely unflappable. Eighteen years old and tough as a Marine. She led her group off the Big Smoke on a sprained right ankle and twisted knee. Practically hopped the entire way down. As soon as she got to the bottom, she collapsed into the arms of the nearest paramedic.

Technically she was under arrest but the kid seemed unfazed. A trespassing charge? BFD. Not much else they could nail her with. A misdemeanor and lots of free publicity for her and her fellow thrill seekers. She even made him write down the name of their site so he could check out some of their ‘awesome footage’. He made a mental note to pass it on to Vic.

She had icepacks on her knee and ankle but had refused anything stronger than ibuprofen. He liked her already.

There were disturbing correlations between her story and Sally Nesbit’s strange narrative.

“—wish everybody would stop talking about birds and bats. These things... they were more like—like humungous vultures. *That’s* what was hanging on my fuckin’ leg. You think a fuckin’ *bat* can do shit like this?” She tapped one of the ice bags.

“You’re saying you were attacked by a giant vulture.”

“Yeah,” she confirmed, “that’s what I’m saying. And it nearly fuckin’ wasted me. But when—when Flea hit it, it kind of evaporated. Well, it was Flea and the—” Her eyes widened. “Laney and Niall were shining their flashlights and it was kind of thrashing around just as Flea came down. Like it was in *pain*.”

“And there were definitely more than one of these...things.”

“Fuck, yes. One of them was on me and the others saw at least two more.”

“From what I’ve heard, your friends didn’t get nearly as good a look at it as you did. Just a glimpse when they shone their flashlights on it.”

“And, like I said, that’s right when Flea jumped on it and—”

“So you’re telling me, with a straight face, that these things were responsible for the death of your friend Jerome.”

She winced. “No one calls him that. His name’s Flea. And, no, those things didn’t kill him. Like I told the other guy—”

“Other guy?”

She didn’t hear him. “Flea saved me. I should have known—he was so responsible. That was Flea. That Jerome guy...I never knew *him*.”

There were people moving back and forth behind the insubstantial screen, other patients being tended to. “Tanya, I have to tell you the truth. This is how it sounds to me: you and your pals form this club and you basically trespass so you can take a few pictures and promote yourselves. And because of this behavior, one of you dies, a tragedy, but—”

“Mister, you can believe what you want. We’re doing something we love, something that redeems our boring fuckin’ lives. What’s wrong with that?” Her tone remained defiant. “You talk to Laney and Niall? How are they doing?”

“Okay. They’re both pretty sick about what happened to...Flea.”

“But they saw *something* up there, right? And it scared ’em, didn’t it?” He nodded. “You gonna try to make that trespassing bullshit stick?”

“Not up to me. I wasn’t the arresting officer.”

“If those things hadn’t of showed up everything woulda been perfect. Flea, he had it all figured out. And those motherfuckers ruined it.”

“And you say they’re big...big enough to carry off a man?”

“Yeah,” she replied, tired, sore and increasingly cross. “I think that’s what they had in mind for me. *Not* birds. *Not* bats. Like I told that other guy--”

“Tell me about *him*.”

“The Fed. The man in black.”

“Let me guess, dressed to the nines and psycho killer eyes, right?”

“Yeah.” She grimaced as she shifted her sore knee. “Fuckin’ spooky.”

Novak was seeething, beaten to the punch again. “At any point did he threaten you or--”

“He didn’t have to.” She leaned back on her elbows. “Listen, you gotta believe me. Those things are out there and they’re not afraid of us or--or *anything*. We’re like meat to them. Like *mice*.”

He took out his notebook, printed his name and phone number on the bottom of the first blank page. Tore off the strip and gave it to her. “In case anything else occurs to you or you need to talk. I can be reached there.”

She nodded, closing her eyes. Already dismissing him from her thoughts. He paused at the partition, turned back. She was gingerly rearranging the ice pack on her knee, her face never once registering the pain she must have been feeling.

Tough, all right. Like tempered steel.

It made you wonder where she found such strength. How she could be so young and still be able to carry such a heavy load.

16

“You wanted me, Chief?” Automatically clocking the two other individuals present, one of them being the dude with the scary peepers.

Tanya Frye was right: *Feds*. Must be. Dressed too well for regular cops, his suit custom fitted, the cuffs just right. And it had to be an agency capable of giving his normally phlegmatic boss, Chief Vincent T. Renfrew, that glassy-eyed, sycophantic expression.

“Shut the door.” Renfrew’s voice was flat, toneless. There were only three chairs in the large, corner office and no one seemed inclined to offer him theirs so he remained standing. He figured it was part of their strategy; an intimidation tactic. He almost sneered. When it came to the fine art of interrogation, these fuckers were rank amateurs.

The two strangers glanced at each other, something passing between them. The man was handsome, even when you factored in the funky eyes. Coiffed, tanned, buff; Novak hated him instinctively. The persona *she* projected was one of alert competence. Not ostentatious, conservatively attired, sensible shoes. Good legs, muscular. She probably trained with the Navy Seals and could kill him forty different ways. When she shifted around to face him, he saw that she was not a stunner, maybe even a tad plain. Compared to her, her partner was flat out exotic. They made

an odd pair. Novak wondered who was in charge, it was hard to tell from the body language.

Fuck me, he marveled, this keeps getting better and better.

“These people want to ask you some questions. I’ve assured them you’ll cooperate fully.”

“No problem, Chief.” Saluting smartly. “You know me, always happy to oblige my fellow—”

“He’s lying,” the woman stated. “He’s determined to be as obtuse and unhelpful as possible.”

Her companion muttered something in a language Novak didn’t recognize. Not a pleasantry, by the sound of it.

Who were these people? Interpol?

“He knows but does not accept.” The man speaking now. Both of them acting like he wasn’t standing three feet away. Close enough to smell the woman’s perfume.

“He’s...different.” She closed her eyes. “Not within the usual parameters. Asocial. Very pronounced moral and ethical substrates.”

“Not good.” Glaring at Novak.

“We shall have to adapt our initial strategem,” she suggested.

“Indeed. Leave us.” Renfrew got up, nice as you please, and departed with nary a whimper. Novak couldn’t believe it. He’d never seen the Chief so docile. Once again: who *were* these people? “Please, have a seat, detective.” The male Fed got up and offered Novak his chair. Why not? He sat down, aware of the close

proximity of the woman. “I am Marius Turco and this is Petra Mueller. We’re looking into some of the same incidents you are and it seems like our paths keep crossing. We decided it was time for a...chat.” He leaned against Renfrew’s desk. Very fit, agile, probably dangerous. But still not clear who the boss was.

The woman again. “You can see the speed of his thoughts.”

“He can run but he can’t hide.”

“*He’s* sitting here, listening to you two assholes,” Novak snapped. “What makes you think you can act like—”

Turco raised a hand, interrupting. “Let us not have any pretence. Subterfuge is not acceptable, I’m afraid.” He reached into his pocket, withdrew a flat disk, a large coin or token. Began to flip it, catching it easily without taking his eyes off Novak. Neat trick, George Raft would’ve been impressed. “You have suspicions but no proof. You’ll never have physical evidence, we will see to that.” Novak started to retort but appeared to forget what he was going to say.

“Many strange convolutions to this one.” Petra again. “So much repressed. A truly unique mind.”

The coin wasn’t behaving properly. It hung in the air too long, defying gravity. Hovering, turning slowly...

“Tell us about these incidents, Detective Novak. Tell us what you’ve seen.”

He found himself doing just that, providing capsule summaries of the various attacks, including the latest on Tanya Frye and her fellow *Nightcrawlers*. He spoke in short, clipped sentences, affecting a monotone. And meanwhile watching the coin, unable to take his eyes off it.

“He’s holding something back,” she observed cannily. “Built himself a firewall.”

“I have what I need.” The coin disappeared into his vest pocket, Novak’s eyes lingering there. “He’s a cop, it’s natural for him to keep secrets, even from himself.”

“But I’m sensing—”

“Forget it.” Turco leaned in close. “There’s nothing special about this one. Captivated by an ordinary thrall. Look at him, like a monkey with a shiny piece of glass.” His eyes glowed with bright hate. “Listen to me, fuckhead: this meeting never took place. Your Chief won’t remember us and neither will you. He has the impression you’re overworked. You need time off, Detective. Time to relax and forget about this investigation. Got it?” Novak was still staring at the pocket where Turco put the coin. The...what had he called it? *Thrall*? “Observe, my dear, he’s practically drooling. This is a complete waste of time.”

Petra Mueller rose. “We must make our report.”

“And say what? We debriefed a baboon. Now we can get on to more promising leads.”

“Like the Leiber Building?” Her gaze dipped to Novak but his face didn’t change.

“Of course,” Marius Turco replied. “But it’s the *source* we’re after. We can cauterize the wound but we need to know who or what caused the infection.” She went through the door ahead of him.

Turco paused on the way out. “Have a nice day, Detective Novak.” He snapped his fingers and shut the door behind him.

One of the elevators was out of order so there was some delay before they were able to make it down to the parking garage. The door opened and Marius Turco's accelerated senses detected a blur of movement but surprise slowed his response time and as a result--

The punch rocked him but he kept his feet, stumbling into the cavernous sublevel. He collided with a support pillar and used it to steady himself.

"Greetings from the baboon," Gus Novak said cheerfully. "Oh, and, by the way, I've been told I make a lousy subject for hypnotism. Just, y'know, for future reference."

Petra Mueller strode forward, her expression apprehensive. "You must stop this—"

Turco spat out some blood, a surprisingly inelegant gesture coming from him. Now Novak got the full effect of those fucked up eyes: they practically ignited with fury. "Get out of the way, Petra, he's *mine*."

He launched himself at Novak, moving so fast it was unreal. He seized the detective, spun him about and hurled him ten feet. Novak's forward momentum was halted by the rear panel of a pickup truck. One of the department's pricey new four-by-fours. Petra Mueller was shouting but, in an instant, Turco was on him again, raising him up by the throat. Novak could draw in only tiny sips of breath. "I could kill you quickly or make it last a long time." Turco's grip tightened and he watched, his gaze avid, as Gus Novak slowly suffocated.

“Enough.” Petra Mueller’s rage was something to behold. She looked about twice her regular size. “Let him go. *Now.*”

Novak went: “Eep.”

Marius Turco abruptly released him and Novak tumbled to the ground beside the pickup. It hurt to breathe; his windpipe felt like it had been *punched*. She was irate but Turco ignored her, fussing over the state of his clothes. “This coat is an *Alessandrini*. If the oaf has broken a single thread...”

She stomped over to Novak and he gave her a weak thumb’s up. She snorted and rounded on her counterpart. “This is contemptible behavior, Marius. An inexcusable breach of protocol. Your superiors will hear of it.”

His was sulky, unrepentant. “The fool attacked me. I merely defended myself. He’s fortunate to escape with his head still attached.”

“Who are you people?” Novak croaked. “What’s going on?”

“You know what’s ‘going on’,” Turco reminded him, “you’re merely too stupid to—”

“Get the car, Marius.” It sounded like an order and he flared, not used to being addressed in such tones. For several seconds they stared each other down, the air practically crackling between them. But he soon wilted, stalking off, muttering to himself as he fished for his keys.

A car drove by, followed by another. Novak managed to lever himself upright, but still had to lean on the truck for support. There was a fresh ding in the side panel and his left shoulder and back of his head were definitely feeling it. He was woozy and she caught his arm to steady him. He nodded gratefully. “Lucky

thing you pulled your boy back,” he cracked, “I was about to give him a real ass whupping.”

She wasn't amused. “You are a foolish man,” she scolded him, withdrawing her arm. Two cops in uniform passed, neither acknowledging Novak though he recognized them both. “Marius is a dangerous man to antagonize.”

“*Now* you tell me.”

She smiled, sort of. “I knew you were holding back. Marius likes to think he has the powers of a Level Five but he's deluding himself. He needed to be brought down a peg or two.”

“I was hoping you wouldn't rat me out.”

“I didn't expect you to attack him.”

“I improvised.”

Somewhere in the garage a car started. “I shouldn't be talking to you. I shouldn't be telling you how close to the truth you are. But let me also advise you that this situation, these creatures are...beyond your experience. There are other agencies involved. Let them handle it.”

“What agencies? Who are you?” he rasped. It was an effort to talk but he was determined to press her while he had the opportunity. “What jumble of letters do you represent?”

“None you've heard of,” she replied, “and we like it that way.” A car was approaching, a late model Toyota or Nissan. Rental plates.

“Where can I reach you?”

She stared at him. “*Stay out of it*, Detective Novak. Your Chief will explain once you—”

“Tell me.”

Turco pulled up, gestured impatiently. She shook her head in exasperation. “Have a nice day, Detective.” Moving toward the car.

“I’ll be seeing you.” He eyeballed Turco, who gave him the finger.

She paused beside the car. “No, you won’t. This really is good-bye, Detective Novak.” She got in, shut the door.

“Wait...” He tottered forward. “Why can’t we work together on this, why not—”

“Because I don’t associate with baboons,” Turco shot back. He accelerated away with a screech and Novak saw Petra Mueller raise her hand in a sort of apologetic wave.

It took him a few minutes to get back on his pins. He used the time to replay the events of the past half hour, reviewing the relevant details.

He went upstairs and, sure enough, the Chief was recommending—well, it was couched in stronger terms than that. He was basically *ordered* to take a leave of absence, effective immediately. Renfrew approached it as a mental health issue. Novak was under a lot of stress, showing symptoms of burn out. Judging from some of the paperwork he’d filed recently, it was clearly impairing his judgement.

It was a good speech, too bad somebody else wrote it for him.

At one point Renfrew shoved the latest edition of the local rag at him, pointing at the headline: *What’s Going On In The Skies Over Ilium?*

911 operators were fielding dozens of calls, citizens all over the city reporting sightings of giant bats and such. To make matters worse, details had leaked regarding the deaths of the window cleaners and the attacks on the *Nightcrawlers* and Sally Nesbit. If the press ever got so much as a *sniff* of some of the stuff Novak was up to, the department could suffer a serious black eye.

Renfrew held up some sheets of paper. Novak recognized the reports he'd filed over the last few days. He watched, stony-faced, as his superior tore them up before his eyes.

There was no point arguing and, besides, an official investigation of the incidents would have to go through regular channels and result in neat, cosy solutions. If he wanted to make any real headway, he'd have to do it without the department's knowledge or approval.

He walked out of the Renfrew's office and through the bullpen. Heads swiveled as he passed, ripples going through the room. Word was spreading, rumours rife. *Suspension? Misconduct?* Tongues were wagging. But no one said anything and had he looked he would have found no indication of sympathy on the faces of his colleagues.

It was his own fault. Never a team player, too much the lone wolf, brushing off overtures from co-workers, not one for hanging out and boozing it up with the rest of the lads. A glass of sherry with Darla to end the official work day, brandy or her potent 'rusty nails' when the weather turned cold. A good book or something on CBC Radio to put him to sleep.

His mood was dour as he left the building.

It lasted about half a block. And then more pressing concerns asserted themselves, his mind soon absorbed in a variety of schemes and speculations. Any way he looked at it, he couldn't do it alone. He needed help. Good, sound advice to start with and then boots on the ground.

Step one was easy.

Besides, she'd kill him if he tried to leave her out.

"They *suspended* you?" Darla Forbes was incredulous.

"Well...let's call it an involuntary leave of absence."

"Effective when?"

"Immediately. As in *now*." He tried his chai tea. "I like this stuff. It's got pep to it."

"You *always* say that." She was still absorbing the news. "So you won't be working, at least officially. Hmm, *that* should be interesting. You never take vacations. I hate to say it but maybe this is a good thing." There were fresh banana muffins cooling on the sideboard. The kitchen was warm and suffused with delicious aromas. Her hip was bothering her again so he'd fetched her cane.

"I get bored when I'm not working," he reminded her. "Completely miserable. Remember that last long weekend—"

"Don't remind me." A mock shudder. "You were truly rotten to be around. I asked what would cheer you up and you said 'a multiple homicide'." He winced. "But the *worst* is when they put you on surveillance. You go on and *on* about the

morons you're assigned with, all they do is talk about sex and TV shows. The truth is you don't *like* cops, Gus. Whatever possessed you to become one?"

"Crockett and Tubbs," he said, grinning. "Starsky and Hutch. Maigret. Poirot. Sherlock Holmes. Nancy Drew..."

She laughed along with him. Resettled her robe over her ample thighs with her small, delicate hands. "So now you're a private citizen. What's the plan?"

"That's where you come in. I thought I could, y'know, brainstorm with you."

"In other words," she restated for him, "you don't have a clue what to do next."

"Not true. I know the objective, I've got a pretty good idea about the personnel—"

"Oh, god."

"*What?*"

"'Objective'? 'Personnel'? Who are you, General Patton? Should I pull down a map of the world so you can haul out your pointer and—"

"Okay," he reddened, "it's a figure of speech. You know what I mean."

"So what's your *objective*?"

"Find and kill these things." Short and sweet.

"You believe they exist?"

"Nothing else fits the facts." Hedging a bit but Darla wasn't having any of it.

She waved an admonitory finger at him. "That Turco guy is right. You know what's happening but part of you still doesn't want to believe it. It refuses to

acknowledge that the world you thought you had all figured out just got a whole lot stranger.”

“You have to admit, it’s pretty hard to swallow.”

She smiled tolerantly. “That’s the thing. It involves the unknown. The uncanny. *Magic*. Something beyond your experience. It isn’t natural so, by process of elimination, I guess we can call it un-natural. Maybe even *supernatural*.” He nodded, conceding the point. “I know a guy who might be able to help us. At least steer us in the right direction. He’s a professor of metaphysics, used to teach at the university--”

“Metaphysics? Isn’t that like being a professor of alchemy?”

“Don’t pretend to be a moron, Novak, it doesn’t suit you.”

“Okay, okay...”

“Do you want me to call him or not?” He quickly agreed, mainly to stay on her good side. “I’ll see if he’s available this afternoon. He’s retired so it shouldn’t be a problem. Could you get my address book? The one with the fake leather cover.”

He retrieved it for her. “Will he be able to tell us anything about our flying critters? Isn’t that a bit of a long shot?”

“We won’t know until we ask him, will we?” She frowned at him. “Stanley’s one of the most intelligent, open-minded people I know. If he can’t help us, he’ll know someone who can.”

“Where did you two run into each other? A professor and all. I didn’t know you ran with the academic crowd.”

She looked at him. Then he got it, blushed for maybe the fourth time in the past two days. Cripes, what was happening to him?

“Honestly, Novak...” Shaking her head as she tapped in the number and waited for someone to pick up.

17

When it came to her former life, Darla Forbes was a paragon of discretion. There wouldn't be any “tell all” books from her. She had taken a personal vow of silence that would've impressed a 2nd century desert hermit. Even Freud yakked about his clients—Darla never did.

Usually, he respected her privacy but for some reason her relationship with this professor guy piqued his interest. He peppered Darla with questions as he carried out the various tasks she assigned him: dusting, straightening up, buffing her silver tea service. Boy, she was really laying it on.

“Stanley was a client, Novak,” she said finally. “The perfect client in many ways. Gentle and considerate. That's all you need to know. I respect him as a person. After I got out of the business we stayed friends. We get together and talk about the books he'll never write and the cities I'll never see and that's pretty much it.” Her legs were wrapped, her “vee-vees” (varicose veins) acting up. “He's kind, smart and if you listen to him with an open mind, you might learn something.”

After that, he confined himself to questions of a more mundane nature: where she wanted the sugar dish and creamer or which platter she preferred for the cookies and brownies he helped make. Apparently, the professor had quite the sweet tooth.

“Sure going through a lot of trouble for the guy,” he grumbled at one point.

Mistake.

“--says the man who has no friends, no family, about three people in the world who care if he exists—”

He raised his hands, fending her off. “You’re right, sorry, forget I said anything.” What was it about Stanley Polk that was making him behave so foolishly? Could it be...*jealousy*? Was that possible?

Professor Polk, in person, turned out to be something of an anticlimax. When Novak opened the door, he was confronted by a short, dapper-looking man in his early 70’s. He looked like a Kentucky Colonel who had been left in the dryer too long. Couldn’t have weighed more than ninety pounds and that was with lead underpants on.

The hand he thrust at Novak was more rightly a claw, it was like squeezing a bundle of sticks.

“Stanley Polk, at your service.”

“Uh, Gus Novak. Butler and head lackey to her majesty—”

“Get out of the way, Novak.” Darla hobbled forward to embrace Polk. When she stepped back, her eyes were alight with mischief and affection. “Stanley, you old devil. Shall I haul out the ping-pong paddles?”

Ping-pong paddles?

Polk laughed easily, clearly enjoying her company. She was leaning heavily on her cane and he gallantly offered his arm, leading her over to the couch. “You are a trial, Darla, you always were.”

Novak drifted along in their wake, drawing scant notice. Polk got her settled and seated himself next to her. He took her hand. That bugged Novak and, again, he wasn't sure why. He sat in the armchair across from them and tried to keep his mind on more important matters.

After some initial pleasantries, Darla came to the point. "I told you this wasn't exclusively a social visit."

Polk nodded. "I take it this gentleman is the friend of whom you spoke." He angled his body toward Novak. "You're a policeman and you require the services of a broken down metaphysician. Is this part of an official investigation, detective?"

"Sort of," Gus Novak hedged. "The department wants this kept hush-hush for, uh, obvious reasons. Nothing personal, doc. Darla vouches for you and that's good enough for me. But, to be honest, I don't even know what metaphysics *means*."

Polk chuckled. "I rather like to think it 'means' everything. All you can conceive of, all you can't and everything in between. Oh, I could give you more scholarly sounding definitions but they would be equally misleading and unhelpful. To me, it's a philosophy without cant, a way of looking at the world that denies objectivity. It relates to the nature of everything while admitting the irrefutable existence of none of it. Is that helpful?"

"Not really." Novak resisted the urge to scratch his armpits. "But I'm not here to talk philosophy. I need to know what do about this completely crazy situation and these things, these *creatures* that can't possibly exist..." Polk started. "Yeah, I know how it sounds. But these things, they fly around and they—they *kill* people. And yet everything tells me me they're an impossibility, there's no way they could

really...except they *have* to because...because they *have* to. Nothing else makes sense! But it's nuts, right? I mean, it isn't possible but there's no other explanation. You see what I mean? It's completely--"

Darla bailed him out. "Novak's been seeing some strange things lately and it's messing with his orderly cop mind," she translated. Whispering: "He thinks the supernatural might be involved." Teasing him for his timidity but at the same time getting it out in the open.

"Once you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." This time it was Polk who blushed. "Conan Doyle is an absolute passion of mine," he confessed.

"But in those Sherlock Holmes stories there's always logical solutions, right? The Hound of the Baskervilles turns out to be just a big, ugly dog. Holmes wouldn't have believed in...in..."

"—flying creatures," Darla finished for him. "Novak's working on a case where people are being killed or attacked by some kind of unknown being. Definitely not of this earth, if you catch my drift." She gave him a quick rundown of the case so far.

Hearing everything laid out made Novak realize how preposterous the whole thing sounded. As he listened, Polk appeared thoughtful, his eyes half-lidded behind wire-framed glasses. Bifocals, decades of reading had taken their toll.

When Darla finished, there was a pause. A long one.

Finally, Stanley Polk blinked, nodding at the completion of some inner thought process. "Yes, interesting. These beings you speak of...particularly in light

of my discussions with Professor Fuchs...” He elaborated: “Edwin Fuchs is an old colleague of mine. He called me to report some anomalous readings relating to electro-magnetic energies or some such thing. I’m a theoretician, not a nuts and bolts chap. Nevertheless, he seemed very excited.”

“And this happened recently?” Darla prodded him.

“Within the past three or four days. They were, apparently, rather singular fluctuations, attributable to no known cause.”

Darla glanced at Novak. “That would fit your timeline, wouldn’t it?”

He shrugged, confused and not bothering to hide it. “What do these readings have to do with anything? I don’t see how they tie in with our flying critters.”

“These creatures you describe have no earthly origin,” Polk reminded him.

“They come from somewhere else and *that* involves the release of exotic energies that resonate on certain EM wavelengths.”

“O-kay,” Novak tried to keep up. “So that means...”

“These energies are, as I said, exotic. Not naturally occurring. Someone or *something* had to produce them.” The professor paused to sip his tea and Novak fought off an urge to make him eat the fucking cup.

“So *who*? Who would do that?”

“That is the question.” Polk nodded. “And what is their motivation? That is also germane.”

“Yeah, okay, but the most important thing is to stop these fuckers from killing more people.”

“I agree.”

Something else had been nagging him. “But...if these things are supernatural or whatever doesn’t that make them invulnerable?”

“Ah, but you’re forgetting an important, I daresay *fundamental* principle: every entity, regardless of its origins or any powers it might possess, must conform to the physical laws of whatever dimension it inhabits. Which means they are subject to the limitations and restrictions imposed by that particular paradigm.”

“In other words, you can kill ’em,” Darla summed up.

“Yes, my dear. Well put.”

Novak nodded. “I met someone who told me her boyfriend dropped on top of one and it...came apart. I wondered about that.” Things were looking up. “Okay, so we can kill them but who’s to say more won’t show up?”

“Also a valid point. At this time, the infestation is a relatively minor one. Eliminate the current crop before they reproduce—”

“*Reproduce?*”

“Of course. It is a natural impulse. To make more of their kind.”

Novak didn’t like the sound of that. “Two or three of these things are bad enough.”

“Then you must find them and destroy them,” Polk advised. “As soon as possible.”

Novak flashed to Petra Mueller and that toad Turco. Was that their mission? “She also said something about the Leiber Building. Er, the Mueller woman, I mean.”

“You didn’t tell me that part,” Darla complained.

“I was tired, I guess it slipped my mind. It was right near the end. I thought she was blowing me off but...she was actually giving me a clue.”

“‘Giving you a clue’? Why would she do that?” Her tone was sharp.

“It’s hard to tell what her motivations are.”

“So all of a sudden you’re, what, her new partner? Her knight in shining armour?” Scowling at him.

“Uh, I don’t know about that...” He was caught off guard, treading water. Darla finally looked away but it was clear she was fuming and for the life of him Novak couldn’t figure out *why*.

Polk spoke up. “The Leiber Building. Interesting that it should factor into this.”

Novak didn’t think so. “Isn’t it empty? They keep talking about demolishing the place, that it’s structurally unstable since the bomb—” Novak caught them sneaking looks at each other. “Oh, no. You guys don’t buy into that conspiracy shit, do you? It was a *bomb*, okay? Some kind of terrorist thing.”

“These ‘terrorists’ of yours must have been inordinately resourceful and clever, don’t you think? No one has been charged thus far, no one even officially implicated.” Polk shook his head. “On the surface, at least, it seems very odd.”

“No, it isn’t like that. Look, I was in CeeCee—commercial crime--back then. Christ, I’ve never been so bored in my life. But I’ll tell you, hand on heart, I never heard so much as a whisper about a cover up. And, believe me, contrary to what you might think, cops can’t keep a secret worth shit. Headquarters downtown has more leaks than a busted toilet.”

“So many people dead and no one brought to account.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard this stuff before. These people, they operate in cells, all right? Totally self-contained. Hard to infiltrate. It’s how al Qaeda works, for fuck’s sake. They found a breach in security, did their thing and so far haven’t been caught. But something will turn up, you’ll see. Somebody gets pulled over because of a busted tail light and panics and before you know it, the dominoes start to fall.”

“A number of the people killed that night were known to be active in occult circles,” Professor Polk noted. Darla nodded in confirmation.

“So? Some of ’em were probably Baptists and lapsed Catholics. What does that prove?”

“These individuals were powerful and influential adepts--”

“That didn’t save them from getting blown to shit along with the others. So much for the power of the dark side.”

Polk frowned. “I believe you’re missing the point.”

“Not me, doc. I mention the Leiber Building and right away you two start bringing up this occult shit.” Novak found himself on the receiving end of another withering look from Darla. “Okay, I’m sorry. My mind can only accommodate so much.” Polk nodded understandingly but Darla appeared only partially mollified. “So...we’ve got the tower and we’ve got these things. And you’re saying there’s a relationship.”

“I believe the building retains certain ancillary energies released by the... *bomb*.” Darla sniggered and Polk paused before continuing. “It might well attract

these beings. And in its present abandoned state I suggest it also serves another practical purpose.”

Novak was getting sick of wearing the dunce cap but hung in there, gritting his teeth. “Which is?”

“From what I understand, these raptors of yours are only seen at night, is that correct?” Novak nodded. “That means that during daylight they need somewhere to...what would you call it? Roost?”

Novak stared at him, speechless.

Only came out at night. And now he knew where to find them when they were most vulnerable. But who could he tell, who could he rely on? Renfrew? His leave of absence would be extended indefinitely, pending psychiatric assessment.

No, he was dangling in the wind on this one. Lacking official sanction, the protection and authority that conferred. Or, conversely, operating outside the bounds of the law and so not beholden to its many rules and constraints.

Once Stanley Polk departed, they reconvened in the kitchen.

He paced restlessly. “This is too weird. I’m *way* out of my depth. And when I tell your professor about it, what does he do? He turns around and actually *confirms* this crazy shit. What kind of scientist is that?”

“He’s *not* a scientist, he taught metaphysics--”

“Whatever.”

“Stanley’s a sharp cookie, Novak. If there was a flaw in your reasoning, he would’ve found it. And, thanks to him, you learned some important things: first,

these monsters of yours aren't indestructible. Second, they must obey the rules of this dimension. Third, they're probably holed up at the Leiber Building—”

“I would have figured that part out myself,” he protested.

“Don't be so vain.” She appeared pensive. “The first thing is to do some kind of visual reconnaissance of the place, get the lay of the land.”

“Check,” he agreed.

“You're going to need help. But you've already thought of that.”

“Yeah, there are some people I have in mind. They may tell me to jump in the lake. I gotta make some calls.” He rubbed his eyes.

“You're tired. You're usually still sleeping at this time of day. You keep a whore's hours.” She grinned. “And I should know.” She pointed toward her living room. “Go close your eyes for a bit. I won't let you sleep long.”

“I should call these people.”

She struggled to her feet. “Even an hour will do you good.” Prodding him with her cane. “C'mon, Novak, get some rest. You'll need it.”

“I'll go back to my place.” Only half-meaning it.

“You're more comfortable here.” True. The rooms felt warmer and more alive. He stretched out on her couch, hooked an arm around an embroidered cushion — “*Not that one.*” She plucked it out of his grasp. “Rest your sweaty head on this.” Giving him a different one, its lineage not nearly as distinguished. She reached past him, dragged the knitted afghan off the back of the sofa and draped it over him.

Then she surprised him by laying one of her hands on his temple, slipping her fingers into his thinning hair. Neither of them spoke or acknowledged what was

happening. Such intimacy had never passed between them before. Their relationship was respectful, occasionally caustic. Not devoid of warmth but neither of them comfortable with overt displays of affection.

Perhaps she was momentarily overcome by foreboding, some premonitory impulse causing her to behave in a manner that was completely out of character.

The solicitude and concern behind the gesture seemed to draw something out of him, stilled nattering voices and soothed his worried mind. He wanted to thank her, maybe even reach up and take that soft, pretty hand in his. But he waited too long and he was too tired and she drew back. Or maybe the whole thing was a pleasant dream, wishful thinking, a hypnagogic interlude, false right down to the coolness of her touch.

18

The last thing Marius Turco said before he died was *fuck*.

Not very original, surely, and it lacked that certain *elan* one would have expected from him.

Their investigations had brought them here, a trailer park covering a few featureless acres on the city's east side. The area was flat with good drainage. Pour some cement pads, wire it for power, provide the basic services and then bring on your poor, your wounded, your fucked up...

Petra Meuller was picking up all kinds of bad juju. Maybe it was just the general atmosphere of the place, a miasma of despair and threat and impending violence. *Something* was making the hair on her arms stand up.

The contagion was more serious than they'd been led to believe. She was pressing Brussels to assemble a larger team to run down the drug-makers and terminate their operations. So far her appeals had fallen on deaf ears. Resources were tied up elsewhere, she was told—besides, two operatives, regardless of their relative inexperience, ought to be able to deal with the situation.

Turco favoured a heavy-handed approach with Ferrell. He was itching to do serious harm to someone and seemed really pumped up, almost as if he was juiced on something. Where did the Brotherhood find these guys?

But she was here to act as a liaison, *not* police him. Mother had told her as much. “You are an observer,” was how the Great Elder put it. “Assess and report. Some of us suspect the Brotherhood is not the force it once was. If that is the case, perhaps we're in a position to exploit that to our advantage.” She took Petra's hand and the younger woman felt a surge of *wyrd* energy pass into her. Well-being and affection flowed back and forth between them. “Remain vigilant. Men are duplicitous and cruel. He will underestimate you, think you inferior. It will loosen his tongue. Seduce him if necessary. Your body was placed in service to our ancient Order unto death, use it to further our cause.”

“Am I to assume that—”

“Assume nothing. Just because the Brotherhood is accommodating us now does not mean there is a formal understanding between us. We have been and remain rivals. Each with its own agenda. Is that clear?”

So far Turco hadn't shown any interest in her body, thank Athena, so her loyalty to Mother and the Order had yet to be put to the ultimate test. But she had stepped in more than once, going beyond her observer status to prevent Turco from doing something ill-advised or precipitous. It was only a matter of time before the idiot killed someone. She wouldn't be party to something like that.

She had to admit, however, that their investigation had temporarily stalled and something needed to be done about it. She decided to employ the Craft to jump ahead a square or two. Made up a pretext to go out and then, once she was certain Turco hadn't taken it into his head to follow her, drove to the funeral home to pay her respects to the late Conrad Davenport. She picked a good time, there weren't a lot of mourners about. The press would be out in full force for the funeral tomorrow. The deaths of three young people by methamphetamine overdose had been big news locally, especially since the fourth participant in the “Drug Orgy on Diament Drive”, Harold Flood, had yet to turn up.

Something—a hunch, a feeling, all right, damnit, call it *intuition*—told her the tragedy was somehow connected with what was going on in Ilium. And if she was wrong...well, then she'd use the opportunity to explore other avenues of investigation. After all, the dead have access to information denied or withheld from their living counterparts.

Necromancy wasn't one of her strong suits so it took three or four tries to get the invocation right. Her pronunciation was rusty. The last part was tricky, requiring her to lean into the coffin and whisper into his ear. Hard to explain if someone wandered in at that moment.

Conrad Davenport's shade, when it finally appeared, was in rough shape. It looked like something had been *chewing* on it and at times nearly faded out altogether. Much of its central personality had moulted, trailing off vaporously into the ether. She got what she could from it, though the story was as full of holes as Davenport's revenant.

It soon became clear this entire affair was a collision of circumstances rather than the product of malign machinations. A designer drug, unforeseen side effects *plus* there must have been an adept among the group of revelers, someone who inadvertently created a temporary portal. Likely the missing guy, Harold Flood, but Davenport's shade was too far gone to be of much help on that front. The good news was that he remembered the name of their supplier, Ferrell, someone who might be able to lead them to the people at the top so they could close the loop once and for all.

Turco didn't press her for the source of her information nor did he thank her for her assistance. A few minutes on his cell phone secured the particulars on Ferrell. Petra counselled restraint and Turco, as usual, ignored her.

He insisted there was no need to stake out the trailer, they knew their guy was in there. He was a full-time dealer and rarely left home. Stayed holed up for *days*. At least he didn't have dogs, which simplified matters. His plan was to go over there, bang on the door and try to bluff their way inside. And if the stupid bastard resisted,

Turco was perfectly willing to batter him senseless in an effort to make him see reason.

Under normal circumstances that tactic might have worked. However, as they approached the trailer Petra felt increasingly uneasy.

“Marius, wait, I think we should—” Stopping abruptly. “Something’s in there! Not human, it’s—”

“Can you believe this! I just stepped in dog shit! *Fuck!*”

At that moment something *exploded* through the front entrance of the trailer. The force of its exit left the aluminum door hanging from one hinge, bent nearly in half. Turco was taken by surprise, *again*, the thing on him in an instant. He cried out and she heard terrible sounds she would carry with her to her dying day.

But when it turned on *her*, she was ready and translated out of range. She was limited to short distances and the energy drain was enormous. The creature was undeterred, growling and darting toward her each time she reappeared. It couldn’t fly, equipped with only stubby, vestigial wings, but it scuttled along the ground at a good clip and kept her on her toes. After her fourth transit she started to feel the strain. Saw it was advancing on her again, a hybrid of human and avian: bipedal, claws instead of fingers and a beak at least a foot long. She’d never run across anything like it, waited until the last possible second so she could get a good look at it

—

--*flitting*--

Really fagged out now, wracking her brain for spells that might slow it down at least.

Nothing.

One more jump and that was *it*. Maybe only ten feet that time and ugly was already veering toward her.

Sorry, Mother, I tried. Tugging out the Beretta, assuming a firing stance. She loved the pistol, it was short-barreled, light, packing a standard twelve-round magazine. The 7.65 mm bullets were topped up with all sorts of dire spells and banes. It wasn't a tactic Mother would approve of but Petra didn't care. She emptied half a clip into the fucker, the enchanted bullets shredding it, reducing it to a mist of fine powder that was speedily dispersed by the vagrant breeze.

Not very subtle but it felt *damn* good. She went over to Turco's body, resisted an unkind impulse to give it a kick. Instead, dialed for backup, knowing gunshots in this neighbourhood wouldn't necessarily bring the police.

She was adamant that they send someone else to clean up the mess. She told them it wasn't her responsibility. Hung up before they could argue.

Marius Turco was *not* of her kind.

Let the Brotherhood take care of its own.

19

The meeting was set for eight.

Darla offered the use of her living room for the initial strategy session and Gus Novak gratefully accepted. It simplified matters. She rarely went out and when she did, the logistical problems were daunting. They could have used his place, she might have managed that...but when he mentioned the possibility she made a face.

“Too smelly and messy.”

“You came by one time, *one time*, and you keep holding it over my head. I wasn’t expecting you and didn’t have time to air the place out. Big deal.”

“It wouldn’t have helped.” She smirked.

“It’s gotten better since. Some day you should, y’know, pop by. Make sure you call first...”

“Well, if this building had an elevator, I might do that.”

He thought of the pain she’d be inflicting on herself making even that short jaunt. Yet she’d do it, just to see the look on his face when he opened his door.

Tanya Frye arrived first. She’d chucked away the crutches but still walked with a noticeable limp, wincing when she stepped wrong. Novak was impressed she was able to put *any* weight on the leg. “I got a pretty high pain threshold,” she boasted, hobbling past him. “Laney’ll be right up. She dropped me off and went to find a parking spot.”

The others arrived in short order: Tanya’s friend Elaine Froese and then Arnie Peabody, followed by Sally Nesbit (looking tired but game) and, last, Stanley Polk, somewhat out of breath after negotiating three flights of stairs.

The mood was relaxed. A room full of strangers but conversation was politely engaged and enthusiastically reciprocated. Darla was the perfect hostess, well-practiced at putting people at ease.

With Darla’s help, Novak had composed a short speech and written it down in point form on 3 X 5 recipe cards. He raised a hand to get their attention—and at that

singularly inappropriate moment, his cell phone rang. That provoked titters. He made an apologetic gesture, flipped it open:

“Hello?”

“Good evening, Detective Novak. Having a little party, I see.”

He recognized her voice immediately. “Hello, Ms. Mueller.”

“No need to be so formal. Petra will do.”

“What would your partner say about that?” he needed her.

“Marius is dead, Detective Novak.” She seemed...nonchalant?

“Oh. Okay. Shit. Well, I’d say ‘I’m sorry’ except I’d be lying. Killed in the line of duty, was he?” He moved toward the kitchen for more privacy.

“I guess you could say that. It was his own fault. He was stupid and careless and he paid for it.”

“Does that mean your investigation is over?”

“It means I have more latitude to act but only for a limited time. That’s why I’d like to come up and join you. I believe I have something to contribute.”

“We can use all the help we can get.”

“On my way.”

Two minutes later a knock and Novak went to the door, expecting Petra Mueller. Instead:

“Hey, Gus.” Vic Anson had the decency to look sheepish. “How’s it going?”

“Oh, for God’s sake! Vic...you can’t be part of this.”

Anson’s expression darkened. “I *knew* you were up to something. There’s no way you’d let this thing go.” His tone pleading: “C’mon, man, let me in on it. I’ll

do anything, you name it.” Novak was inclined to say *no* but before he could formulate a diplomatic rebuff--

“Why don’t you invite him in, Gus?” Darla called from the couch.

“I got the next two days off. I can help, I swear,” Anson implored. “All along you been trying to shut me out—I know there’s something *weird* about this case. I’m not stupid. Why not treat me like a partner for a change? Waddaya say, Gus?”

Novak wavered. “Are you *sure* you want to do this?” The young cop bobbed his head eagerly. “Well...c’mon in then.”

Anson’s relief was palpable. He clapped Novak on the shoulder and then made the rounds, introducing himself to the others. The door had barely closed before he was opening it to Petra Mueller, who looked out of uniform: blue jeans and a white cotton t-shirt. *Sneakers*, if his eyes weren’t deceiving him. “Officially, it’s my day off,” she explained.

“It suits you.”

“Why, thank you, Detective Novak.”

Darla was giving them the eye so he hastily ushered her inside and got her acquainted with the group.

Gradually, the hubbub died down.

Novak took his place once again.

Everyone in the room attentive, expectant. They had answered the call, thrown in their lot with him and now they wanted to hear what was on his mind.

He forgot about his crib notes. Never gave them a second thought, just started talking, presenting an overview of what had transpired so far. Darla told him to lay it out for them simply and honestly. *Just the facts, man.*

He began with the discovery of the first body and then quickly summarized the subsequent attacks, on Pete Dunham and Sally Nesbit, the two window washers, Tanya and her bunch, likely others--

At that point Arnie Peabody spoke up. “But what *are* these things? And how come we’ve never run across them before?”

“I can answer part of that,” Petra offered. “It’s because until a few days ago, they didn’t exist...at least, not in *this* dimension.”

“So how did they get here?” Sally asked softly.

“Bad luck and unique circumstances. A combination of certain unforeseeable events caused a temporary breach in the continuum.” She shrugged. “Sorry, I really can’t go into the details. Steps are being taken to remedy the situation but in my view the parties involved are moving too slow. It’s imperative to act quickly. That’s why I’m here.”

“Who do you work for?” Tanya challenged.

Petra shook her head. “Again, I can’t answer in any detail, it would violate very strict rules of disclosure. The less you know about certain things, the better.”

“That’s not exactly helpful,” Darla retorted. “We need full disclosure of *everything* if we’re going to have any chance, Ms. Mueller.”

Petra was unmoved. “Forgive me, but the identity of my employers is not relevant to this present discussion.” Addressing all of them. “I can help you, advise

you. But time is pressing. These creatures *must* be stopped. Some of you have seen what they can do and know firsthand the threat they represent.”

Secretly she was worried. That she was forced to enlist their aid was a direct consequence of the reluctance of the proper authorities to enforce their mandate. Even the Order had offered little by way of help—were there competing interests involved, political in-fighting she wasn’t privy to?

Urgent notes to Mother went unanswered. Then a sudden, terse command to return home within twenty-four hours. No further elaboration provided.

Stanley Polk was confirming strange goings-on at the Leiber Building. His colleague, Edwin Fuchs, had been patrolling streets in the vicinity of the tower with some kind of E-M device and the readings he’d taken were both impressive and alarming. Polk reached into his attache case. “I won’t bother you with the numbers but there are a few pictures I’d like you to see.” He brandished photos printed on slick paper stock. “I would say they provide us with all the confirmation we require. The creatures *are* there.” They gathered around him, everyone jockeying to get a look.

“Huh?” Tanya had snagged one of the pictures but didn’t see anything untoward. “I don’t get you.”

“Note the windows near the top.” Heads dipped for a closer look.

A moment passed. Then:

“Sonofabitch,” Novak said.

The windows were blacked out. Painted over.

After that, they got down to business.

The tower had to be considered hostile terrain. Closely watched and possibly encircled by a dozen different warding spells and maledictions—well, okay, Petra left off the part about the spells and maledictions. She didn't want to spread her credibility *too* thin.

Tanya said: "We gotta slip by their defenses somehow. Get into the building without them knowing. That's gonna be tough. Who knows what kind of special powers they got."

"It's a good point," Petra agreed, thinking *smart girl*.

"So we'll trick them," Sally said, her voice stronger, more confident.

"Yes...employ a ruse to gain admittance," Professor Polk mused aloud.

"Yeah, a scam," Vic Anson nodded. "Some way of getting in there for a little recon."

"Hey, wait a minute.," Tanya broke in. "You're cops, aincha? Why not just go up to the door and wave your badges or whatever? They'd *have* to let you in, wouldn't they?"

"Not necessarily," Novak pointed out. "Why should they respect our authority? And there's no guarantee what would happen if we *did* manage to bluff our way inside, what we'd be facing."

"If there *are* human agents in the building, they'll be compromised," Petra predicted.

“So we need to get in there quietly, without anybody knowing and—” Novak paused. Elaine and Tanya were grinning at each other. “Is there something you gals want to share with the rest of us?”

“Trojan horse?” Tanya Frye ventured, pretty sure that’s what her friend had in mind.

“We’ve *always* wanted to try it,” Elaine reminded her.

They would need a van, preferably one with markings, something roomy enough to transport three or four big crates. A couple of guys, full coveralls, had to look like movers. Maybe some bogus paperwork to make everything look legit.

“I...” Sally coloured, “might know somebody. This guy I live with owns a moving company. Frank has three trucks. He might let us use one.” She looked over at Novak. “I might not be the right person to ask him. We...I guess we’re kind of estranged right now. Could *you* call him? It might be better coming from you.”

He nodded. “I’m sure he’d be glad to help. He struck me as a pretty decent sort.”

“That might get you in the front door but then what?” Darla asked. “You have to sneak around, somehow find these things and then kill them. How are you going to manage *that*?”

Petra Mueller looked like she was about to say something but changed her mind. “I got a Winchester pump action shotgun,” Arnie Peabody announced. “It’s not liable to lose many arguments.” The rest chuckled. “And I know a guy runs an army surplus place...”

“All right!” Vic Anson crowed, subsiding when everyone looked at him.

“So we’ll have weapons? Like...*guns*?” Elaine sounded doubtful.

“Conventional armaments should be effective,” Stanley Polk stated.

“You want us to go in there, a bunch of amateurs, blasting the place up?”

Novak couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “*That’s* the best we can come up with?”

“I think we should use light,” Tanya interjected. “It worked on the one that was after me.”

Sally nodded vigorously at her suggestion. “She’s right. Tanya, is it? They definitely hate light.”

Novak liked the sound of that. “So we pack flashlights, flares...”

“How about flash grenades?” Arnie inquired mischievously.

“—or even flash grenades, regardless of their legality or how you happen to obtain them.” Novak joined in the laughter. “So we have two teams and it’s really just a matter of coordinating our timing, getting everybody inside without the bad guys finding out. Then we make our way to the top, nuke ’em with light, haul ass and make our getaway. Is that about it?”

“It’ll never work like that,” Sally Nesbit predicted. “It sounds good in theory but something *always* goes wrong.”

“That’s why we’ll keep it simple, stick to a basic plan. Two teams, the classic Trojan Horse—”

“Are we going over it again?” Tanya groaned.

“Yes.”

“Cause I really gotta pee.”

Darla gave him a look. “I think it’s time for a break, Gus.”

“It’s all that chai tea. Right now I’m practically floating.” Tanya got up stiffly. “It’s gotta be worse for you old folks.” Limping off to the bathroom while the others stared at each other, holding their laughter until she was out of the room.

20

The first calls came in around 3:00 a.m. Joe Lunchbucket rolls out of bed to take a leak, flicks on the light in the john, nothing happens. Ends up pissing on his toes in the dark. Not a happy camper.

So the complaints piled up and eventually Eric Lefsrud’s phone rang, rousing him from his warm bed. “We’ve got an outage at Substation 8,” the dispatcher told him. Eric groaned. It meant a twenty-five minute drive to one of the crummiest neighbourhoods in the city. When he asked if he was getting any backup, Roy Philpot came on the line and told him none too gently to quit yapping and get his ass out there ASAP. In other words, *no*.

Eric climbed into the cab of his company truck and immediately cranked in a Metallica CD as an eye-opener. *Ride the Lightning*. By the time he got to “Fade to Black”, he was ready for anything.

The substation was located behind a slummy housing development, a neo-Stalinist warehouse for the poor and forgotten, those consigned to the margins by circumstance or stupidity. The crime rate and social problems that resulted from combining that cross section of society should have been obvious. Gangbangers and

drug dealers proliferated, almost everyone between the ages of fifteen and forty either armed to the teeth or fried on aggression-enhancing drugs (usually both). Someone had likely taken his popgun out for some target practice and scored a lucky hit on a transformer. Eric's radio crackled, Philpot sounding as impatient as a horny bridegroom, asking if he was "on site" yet.

"I'm here. Looking things over. Any word on backup?"

"I'll see what I can do," his supervisor snapped. "Just get on with it. People will be waking up for work soon and if their power's still out we're in the shit."

Eric snorted. Philpot was a management blow-boy all the way. Always pinching pennies. No way had he called anyone. It was all up to him.

He kept his headlights on but there didn't seem to be anyone lurking about the fenced enclosure. The substation wasn't big, not even half a city block. Everything appeared secure. He grabbed his heavy duty flashlight and climbed out of the truck, approaching the gate warily. It was locked up tight, no signs of tampering.

Still, he reflected as he inserted his key, every so often some kid loses his ball or climbs the fence on the dare and they fuck around until they touch the wrong thing and *zzzap!* It was almost always a boy, usually between nine and fourteen (race didn't seem to be a factor).

Coming across a scene like that was a power guy's worst nightmare so when Eric stepped through the gate and got a whiff of something really *rank*, his first inclination was to call it in and get the hell out of there.

But the stink wasn't what he imagined burning flesh would smell like. It was an acrid, exotic odour. Likely a combination of melted plastic and fused wiring. An

overload of some kind. He switched on his flashlight. The control shed was to his right but before heading there he decided to do a quick visual inspection.

The guts and wiring were mostly self-contained, hidden behind panels, impervious to the weather. He didn't see any signs of scorching or smoke, indications of "hot" spots. He flicked his light up to the current transformers, then along the lines running in and out—

What the fuck...

There was something caught on a wire, loosely flapping, and at first he thought it was a kite. It was large and dark and he couldn't see any streamers or—

He felt a disturbance in the air behind him and the next thing he knew, he was on his knees, everything spinning, his wits scrambled. His first lucid thought was:

holy shit, I've been shot.

The scalp at the back of his head had been rudely uprooted, peeled away from the skull, leaving a dangling flap of torn flesh. Blood was *everywhere*, soaking his jacket and shirt, trickling down his back. Still in a daze, Eric reached up and traced the wound with his fingers, astonished at the extent of the damage. Then adrenaline kicked in and he was on his feet, running like a motherfucker back toward the truck. He could hear something in the air above and behind him, heavy wingbeats and croaking noises. Eric sprinted through the gate and tripped on the uneven ground, sprawling in a heap. He was weakening fast, everything going fuzzy. So disoriented he actually reversed directions when he got up and found himself back at the entrance of the substation.

He turned around and gamboled toward the truck, lurching and weaving. Thank God he'd left the lights on. He could hear the radio crackling as he wrenched open the door and pulled himself inside. Blood saturated his bomber jacket and smeared the vinyl seat. He managed to snag the—the thing---the waddayacallit--on the third attempt, thumbed the switch:

“Dispatch...dispatch...” He didn't remember to take his thumb off the 'send' button, at that point barely cognizant of what he was doing. He raised his eyes and gazed in horrified fascination at the *thing* squatting on the hood of the truck, looking in at him. It had a elongated snout or—or beak, black eyes, wings...yes, this demon could *fly*. Thin filaments of yellow drool pooled on the windshield and the creature's harsh breath misted the cool glass.

He lapsed in and out of consciousness. It was like he was looking up from the bottom of a well that was getting deeper by the second. He needed a rope and he kept repeating that over and over again until it was impossible to make out what he was saying: “...me down a line...somebody...down here...help me...help...”

Roy Philpot, to his credit, sounded the alarm: police, paramedics, fire trucks, anyone who would answer the call. By the time they got to Eric, he was barely alive. He saw flashing lights, faces, *human* faces...but they seemed high above him. Too far off to do any good. He had almost given up hope when he spotted something dangling in the air, reflexively reaching for it, missing, trying again--

A rope! He was saved! He grabbed hold of it, held on tight.

Waited for them to pull him up.

21

The attack on the power worker led off the morning news. Few details were being released but Novak had a strong hunch the flying critters were involved. They cut to a live shot of the scene, the reporter clearly frustrated by his inability to secure an interview with anyone involved with the investigation. Which meant either the cops were hiding something or else didn't have a clue what was going on. From what Novak could gather, this Lefsrud guy was lucky to be alive.

Later, near the end of the newscast, a bemused Sylvia Chow related a rather bizarre story, "what appears to be an old fashioned case of rustling". An overnight raid on a well-known local petting zoo resulted in the theft of nearly a dozen tame, domesticated animals including a young deer, a calf, some goats and a beloved pot-bellied pig named "Fanny", spirited off by persons unknown. Police left with few clues as to the identity of...

Our friends had a busy night.

Frank Delorme came through with a truck, no questions asked. He even helped them with the necessary props: crates and dollies, ropes and straps and smart coveralls sporting the company logo. Novak found himself revising his earlier estimate of the man. Not pussy-whipped, *devoted*. He and Sally would get back together again, no question. It was only a matter of time.

Everyone was supposed to meet at Darla's place by noon but at 12:30 there was still no sign of Arnie Peabody. That was worrying. Turned out he and his army surplus buddy were combing the city for certain specialized pieces of equipment, in

the process coming across a treasure. When Arnie finally showed up at Darla's, he was too excited to pay any heed to Gus Novak's sour expression.

"You're late," Novak grouched.

Arnie held out a sizeable duffle bag. "But I got the goodies, skipper...and then some."

"Let's have a look," Vic Anson urged and Arnie obligingly unzipped the bag and showed them his haul.

There were ten silver canisters, a bundle of about thirty flares, a couple of heavy duty flashlights...and something tube-shaped, about eighteen inches long, swathed in bubble wrap.

Arnie plucked out one of the canisters. It was slightly smaller and slimmer than a soda can. "Flash grenade. I guess it's more like a flash-bang grenade. The light is meant to dazzle and the pop is supposed to get your attention."

Novak took it from him. "I've seen these used a couple of times. It's bright but what I remember most is how fucking *loud* these things are. Be ready for that. Pull the pin and get rid of it *fast*."

"And remember, they're *grenades*," Arnie emphasized, safety conscious as always. "I saw this guy stick one in a pumpkin once. Blew it all to hell and back."

"What's that?" Elaine pointed at the bubblewrapped package.

Arnie winked at her. "Insurance policy."

"*Arnie...*"

"Don't worry, skipper," Arnie hastened to assure him, "it's perfectly safe. Nothing to worry about." A beat. "Just nobody *drop* it."

Everyone glanced at each other and then, simultaneously, took one giant step backward.

It was time.

“Have we forgotten anything?” Novak wondered out loud.

“Once we get there, we just *bull* our way inside,” Vic advised, turning the key and starting the van. “My brother-in-law in Cincinnati, he’s a mover. Always in a rush, hustling to get to the next job. That’s the way we’ll be.”

“We’ll get there, what, around two. That gives us maybe five hours. What time is sundown? Anybody know?”

“Seven-thirty maybe?” Arnie Peabody guessed.

“You took too long with those army freaks.”

“You’ll thank me later.”

“We’ll see about that.”

They made good time despite the afternoon traffic but once they got to the Leiber Building they ran into an unexpected snag.

They couldn’t get anyone to come to the door.

Supposedly there was a 24-hour guard. After about ten or fifteen minutes of knocking and banging, they were frustrated, uncertain how to proceed. Arnie thought he could use a pry bar and—

“I think I see someone,” Vic Anson said suddenly. “Two of them. What are they waiting for?”

The guards stared at the team of movers cooling their heels outside. Vic gestured at the van they'd backed up close to the entranceway and the clipboard he was holding. "I got a delivery! Open up!" Finally one of them, a kid in a hardhat, shuffled forward and unlocked the door. "Shit, boys," Vic complained amiably, "I thought I was gonna have to take a *can opener* to this place."

"Yesss...you are?" The older guard had a Yankees ballcap snugged down low over his ears and eyes made of glass.

"Like I said,," Vic explained patiently, "I got a pickup and a delivery--didn't anybody call you guys?"

The two guards were behaving...oddly. Their eyes bulged and they were noticeably wobbly and unsure of themselves when they moved.

"I...do not..."

"Listen," Vic told them, "ten minutes and we'll be out of your hair." Arnie and Novak tilted a crate onto a dolly. "Routine stuff, boys. Got the paperwork right here." He pretended to search his pockets, adlibbing like crazy, some bullshit spiel about inventory control and the perilous state of warehouse space and, meanwhile, Novak was wheeling his crate through the big front doors.

"Stop..." the young guard commanded. Novak rolled over his foot and kept going. The kid followed him into the foyer, bleating ineffectually. And meanwhile Vic kept up his non-stop banter, asking if there was some place they could put this stuff, *time is money, lads, and where's the other box for pickup, says right here, call number 242-946390...*

They brought in four crates, parking them in an empty room not far from the front desk. Judging from the loose wiring lying about, it had once been some sort of security monitoring station.

Anson nudged Novak. A third guard had appeared, older than the others but just as out of it. Wearing a black toque of all things. “What’s with these guys?” The trio were conferring and seemed to be having trouble deciding how to handle this unforeseen situation.

Once the crates were stowed, Vic dispatched his two lackeys to find the package they were supposedly picking up.

“Remember, it’s a ‘242’, which means it should have priority green stickering all over it—”

It was an Oscar worthy performance.

Two of the guards trailed after them but they were too slow and uncoordinated to keep up. Arnie and Novak had free run of the place. They poked around, did their thing and headed back to the lobby. Vic couldn’t believe they returned without the package, berating them mercilessly while at the same time allowing the guards to herd them toward the front doors. He even wrangled a semblance of a signature from one of them just prior to being ushered out

They sauntered back to the van. Once the doors slammed shut, Vic could restrain himself no longer, whooping and pounding on the steering wheel. Arnie and Novak grinned at each other.

They were in. Now it was a matter of waiting for Phase Two to get underway.

It wouldn’t be long...

22

Fifteen minutes. That's all they allowed.

Time was short. Hope the guards would finish sniffing around the crates and not be tempted to crack one open to confirm it contained (as labeled) *Maintenance and Janitorial Supplies*. Fifteen minutes and then a series of loud *pops* and *bangs* somewhere on the main floor would send them scurrying off to investigate...

One side of a crate fell open like the gate of an amphibious landing craft *whap!* and right after that two other crates went *whap! whap!*. Elaine Froese, Sally Nesbit and Tanya Frye emerged. Gave each other 'thumbs up' and then retrieved their backpacks and duffel bags, double-checking to make sure they hadn't forgotten anything. Hurrying now, conscious of the timeline...so preoccupied they didn't notice the elderly guard until Tanya literally ran into him.

"*Motherfuck!*" she screamed and nailed him with a thunderous roundhouse kick, the heel of her boot connecting with his forehead, right on the NIN logo, knocking him back about five feet. Disconnected. Unmoving. Meanwhile, Tanya had reagravated her bum knee and was grimacing in pain. She motioned impatiently for the others to hurry up and let the guys in and, shit, when they looked a minute later the guard was *gone*. Just a sticky spot where he had been lying.

"So much for the element of surprise," Novak stated gloomily.

Petra Mueller's expression was grim. "We must hurry now. They will have time to prepare for us and that is not good..."

They took the elevator most of the way. It was risky but there were nearly seventy stories and none of them fancied legging it up the stairs. They got off on sixty, as planned. Started the climb from there.

Arnie Peabody took point with his scattergun. They were passing the landing for 62 when one of the guards, the young one with the build of a wrestler, barged through the door and grabbed Petra Meuller. He wrapped his meaty arms around her and swung her up off her feet—and was left blinking in bafflement when he found he was holding nothing but air. She reappeared a few feet away, looking shaken but furious. Arnie took the opportunity to step forward and wallop her assailant with the thick stock of his shotgun. His hardhat went flying and the guard lurched, his momentum carrying him over the handrail, a six hundred foot plummet to the ground floor with numerous stops along the way. Some of them covered their ears and no one looked as he gradually unraveled en route to the bottom. It made for a messy landing.

“Neat trick,” Sally complimented Petra.

“Yeah, bet it comes in handy on dates,” Tanya added.

They advanced with renewed resolve, aware that there were two more guards and those *things* still ahead, waiting.

“We’re definitely getting close,” Petra paused, closing her eyes. “I’m sensing waves of...I can’t describe it. Ugh, it’s actually making me *nauseous*.”

“I’m getting it too,” Sally confirmed. “A cold feeling, but on the inside. I felt it the night I was attacked. They’re here...and they’re close.”

“It’s possible you’re an adept,” Petra told her, “you should—”

The lights went out.

Emergency lighting should have cut in automatically. It didn't.

There were things moving in the dark.

“Lights!” Someone cried, it sounded like Tanya, still gamely limping along nearly a floor below them. Bright, white beams leapt on, illuminating the stairwell. Novak scratched a flare and the space around him lit up with its sputtering glow. Two creatures were revealed, dropping toward them. When the light caught them, they veered, colliding with one another and tumbling out of sight. Someone cheered and the others joined in excitedly. Novak barked to get their attention.

“Quiet, everyone! That was an ambush and if we hadn't been ready, they might have—”

The straggler eluded their lights and swept down, launching itself at Sally. She shrieked as it clawed and snapped at her. Petra Mueller rushed to her assistance, but flashlight beams jumped ahead of her and found the creature. It emitted an agonized squawk and flailed about, one wing striking Sally, sending her sprawling.

The creature flopped and writhed on the steps a few feet from Petra, literally melting in the concentrated circles of light. Its death cries roused her pity. She started to draw her gun but Arnie stopped her.

“Could be a ricochet,” he warned. Within moments, the raptor had dissolved beyond recognition.

Sally was dazed, sporting a world class bump. She'd landed hard, striking her forehead on the unyielding cement. Elaine had taken some first aid courses and diagnosed a concussion. She worried about internal bleeding. Tanya hauled herself

up in time to be given the job of helping Elaine take Sally down. The kid wasn't too happy about it but did as she was told. Her leg was giving her all kinds of hell and, to be honest, she was having trouble keeping pace with the rest of them. They escorted the trio to the elevators, making sure nothing waylaid them on the way. Waited for the doors to close before continuing their ascent.

“That was one sweet trap they set for us,” Vic Anson observed.

“Keep it down.”

“Smart. Good tactical thinking.” Vic sounded worried and Novak didn't blame him.

When they reached the 66th floor, Petra was practically swooning from the ugly vibes buzzing about. They pushed open the door. The hallway was empty. The windows were painted over and the lights still hadn't been restored so the darting beams of their maglights were the only sources of illumination.

“It's like the fuckin' *X Files*,” Vic complained.

They had chosen Andre Brossard to speak for them.

The raiding party came around a corner and there he was, waiting for them. Their lights didn't bother him. He regarded them with strange, misaligned eyes, the effect unsettling.

“We wish to know your purpose.”

“To stop your infestation,” Petra answered. Novak nodded. He didn't have any problem with that.

Brossard paused, taking that in. *“You have come to destroy us?”*

“Our two species are inimical. You don't belong here.”

Vic stepped forward, jabbing a finger at him. “Yeah, so go back where you came from, you weird fucks!” The guard had been waiting for one of them to get close enough. He swung the heavy wrench he had been concealing behind him, connecting solidly with Anson’s upper body. There was a *crunch* of bone--and then a blast lifted Brossard off his feet. Arnie Peabody’s shotgun exploded a second time, removing most of the guard’s head. Just to make sure.

“That’s another one,” Arnie said, “but we ain’t finished yet. Not by a long shot.” Arnie looked scary. Like a superannuated Terminator.

They managed to get Anson back on his feet but it was clear he was out of commission. A broken collarbone, an incapacitating injury any way you looked at it.

“Sorry, guys,” he groaned.

“Arnie, you take him down.” Arnie wasn’t so inclined and Arnie had a big gun. But Novak was a cop and knew a thing or two about imposing his authority. Told him to hurry back as soon as he got Vic safely squared away. Arnie finally relented and down the elevator they went.

Back to the stairwell. Just Petra and Novak now. Petra took point, using her special senses to guide them. He had flares, a flashlight, some of Arnie’s grenades. One guard left. The old guy. They would have to kill him too. No question. Time was growing short, they had to move quickly if they hoped to catch the nightfliers while they were still at home and vulnerable.

She paused as something occurred to her. “These creatures...their thinking may be radically different from ours, but they’re *not* superior to us. They’re hunting, stalking animals that have perfected their technique over uncounted millenia.

Creatures of instinct with some degree of socialization but I'm getting nothing that indicates they're more intelligent than humans. Just more *specialized*." She was jumpy, thought she spotted movement overhead but her seeking light revealed nothing.

"Can you tell how many there are?"

"Hard to say. But there can't be that many or the attacks would be more widespread."

"That's reassuring." They were standing very close. Her hair was tickling his nose. Novak became conscious of how much he was sweating. "So we have a bug hunt, exact a little revenge and get everybody out of here in one piece."

"Sounds like a plan." She showed him the Beretta.

"Very nice." He reached into his backpack for another flare. "I'm actually not much of a shot. Certainly no marksman. Think I'll stick with these."

"The cop who can't shoot straight. Or is it that you're too straight a shooter? I read your file—"

"Some other time," he snapped. "Let's keep going." They stuck close to one another, both straining to detect the smallest sound or movement.

Then she whispered: "I believe our chances are better than I originally thought. They've revealed weaknesses and shown themselves to be vulnerable."

"And don't forget, we have home universe advantage."

"I don't think that's—" He heard her draw in a sharp breath, flicked his light to her face. She was flushed, excited. "This is it." Placing her palm on the wall adjacent the door to the 68^h floor. "They're awake and they know we're here. They

have certain crude abilities—telepathy, as we have seen--but they seem to lack what you would call ‘magical’ powers. Fortunately.”

“Does that mean they can read our minds?”

“No more than we can read theirs’. It’s how they communicate between themselves. It shows how different we are as species. But we’re both predators, both used to occupying the top of the food chain. Inevitably only one of us can survive.”

“Well, you know who gets my vote.” Glancing down the stairwell. “I wonder how long the others will be. I know Arnie wouldn’t want to miss the fireworks—”

From the other side of the door the sound of a shotgun discharging, once... twice.

“He took the elevator, the dope!” They started through the door but were chased back by a bright flash and sharp concussion. He pinned Petra against the wall, squeezing against her to shield her from shrapnel or flying debris—

“Um, I think that was one of Arnie’s grenades.” She sounded winded. He released her with a muttered apology. They could hear Tanya Frye whooping, hurried out to see what had transpired. There was a bank of elevators down the hall. Bits of slippery, shredded flesh stuck to the walls and Arnie’s buckshot had pulverized several ceiling tiles and blown out a light fixture.

“They were waiting for us,” Arnie exulted. “But, boy, were *we* ready for *them*.”

“Goddamnit, Arnie.” Novak was furious. He felt Petra Mueller’s hand on his arm and watched Arnie’s gleeful expression drift southward. “You weren’t supposed to...” Giving up. “Aw, what the hell. All’s well that ends well. Good job.”

The light was back in the old guy's eyes. "Thanks, skipper. We met Elaine down in the lobby and left Vic with her. Got back quick as we could. Thought we'd catch up with you at the top."

"I had a grenade ready as soon as the door opened." Her limp was worse than ever but she wasn't letting that stop her. "We hit 'em with the lights and Arnie nailed one and then my grenade went off and, *fuck*, it's a good thing you warned me. *Pow!* First the light and then it nearly blew my ear drums out. It was great!"

Petra had turned away from them and was facing down the hallway. "There are more," she cautioned.

"Bring 'em on!" Arnie bellowed and he and Tanya high-fived.

But Petra looked worried, moving further down the corridor. "How many, Petra, can you tell?" She shook her head but remained silent, directing all of her energies into deciphering what she was sensing.

The *smell* was the first thing to hit them, an exotic reek wafting down the hallway; a fetid, revolting fragrance. She focussed on one particular door. They bunched together behind her, distracted for a few crucial moments—

Novak heard someone go "hup" and when he turned around, Arnie was stumbling away from the group. Novak saw the elderly security guard, one eye dangling from its socket, loom up behind Tanya Frye and stab her high in the shoulder with a sharpened screwdriver or pick. Tanya wrenched away from him and butted him in the face with her forehead. A beautiful shot, it rocked him back on his heels, dislodging the other eye, both of them swinging on slim tethers of optic nerve--

“Move,” Petra commanded. Novak grabbed Tanya and muscled her out of the way as Petra’s Beretta pumped eight or nine bullets into the guard’s body. He went over in a heap, twitched a few times and that was it. Tanya’s wound was deep and painful but not lethal. Arnie Peabody, however, had received a thrust to his lower back and one to his abdomen, both of which had inflicted worrying damage. He was gripped in pain, inwardly gazing, barely responding when they knelt to assist him.

In truth, it was his heart. The repeated jolts and shocks it had absorbed in the past few days, especially losing the boys like that. He was looking right at Tanya when he died. His last living sensation a twinge of regret at not getting to see how it ended, then...

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Tanya was slumped beside Arnie’s body, white-faced, likely in the early stages of shock. She said she would wait for them. She was holding Arnie’s hand and looked forlorn.

They tended to her shoulder as best they could. Novak went through Arnie’s kit for the rest of the grenades and flares and found the bubblewrapped reconnaissance flare. Before transferring it to his pack, he tore aside part of the wrapping. It had military markings and appeared to be the real deal. *Cripes, who keeps something like this around, socked away in their basement?* He showed it to Petra. “I’m still not sold on the idea of using this thing indoors. You can light up a whole *hillside* with these babies. Ten gazillion candlepower.” He found a vintage Very pistol and tossed it to her. “Let’s see how good you are with that pea shooter.”

They stood in front of the door. It had been ripped from its hinges, propped in place. He looked at her and she nodded. He stepped back and booted the door down.

It fell inward with an impressive thump and she immediately tossed in two grenades, one after the other. The flashes came first, followed by two sharp concussions. They could feel the shockwaves. Tanya suddenly woke from her stupor, shouting “*Kill them! Kill all the motherfuckers!*” Novak darted in ahead of Petra, a freshly struck flare in one hand, flashlight in the other.

A short hallway led to a common room. They each threw in another grenade and there were more explosions of light and noise. He peered around the corner, his flashlight illuminating various portions of the chamber.

The stench was incredible, so intense it made him light-headed. He gagged, his eyes watering. There were body parts everywhere, he had to be careful where he stepped. The carpet was slick with blood, squishing underfoot. Creatures were flopping and reeling about the room, blinded, their sensory apparatus over-loaded by the effects of the grenades. Weak, dying. Whenever they came into contact, they lashed out at each other, inflicting grievous wounds, killing each other in their pain and confusion.

A nearby door was flung open and something came through. He heard Petra shout a warning but it was too late. The creature grabbed him and Novak registered a startlingly human face except for an elongated bill, claws instead of fingers—

--and then he was flying through the air, landing awkwardly, skidding and rolling, the stuff in his backpack rattling and banging about. *Shit, Arnie's recon flare! If that thing goes off--*

Petra stepped forward with the Very pistol but the creature, which bore a marked resemblance to the one at Ferrell's trailer, anticipated her. It spun, slashing with those impressive claws, knocking the weapon from her grasp. Then it lunged at her but she managed to apport herself out of reach just in time.

Novak could tell the creature was confused. Its instincts told it prey wasn't supposed to be able to *do* that. He spotted the Very pistol, started crawling toward it. The creature gathered itself for another spring at Petra. Novak fumbled with the pistol, got away a wild shot. The flare *whooshed* past the intended target, missing by four feet. It caromed off the ceiling, bounced a few times on the spongy carpet and went out with a wet, futile *fffsst*.

"Fuck!"

Now bad boy was coming for *him*. But Petra materialized between them, the Beretta rock steady in her hands. Two, three pops, then it was clicking on empty chambers.

What a pair of heroes.

The bullets found their mark, ripping leaking divots in its thick chest. But the creature kept coming. Only this time if she flitted away, she would leave Novak exposed. She stood her ground, fending it off with a flourish of kicks and nifty counter-moves.

But her opponent was cagy, its reflexes preternaturally swift and it nearly snagged her hand when she misjudged a punch. The three bullets should have put it down, especially with the potent banes they packed. That meant this was a whole other order of being. She noticed it seemed to be trying to keep between her and a door leading to an adjacent chamber.

“Novak,” she panted, “it’s guarding that door. See if you can get in there.” She blocked another attack, drove it off again. Her defiance was infuriating it. “Do you have another grenade?” She edged closer so he could flip it to her.

“What are you going to do?”

She never took her eyes off her adversary. “Get to that room, no matter what happens to me.”

“Petra--”

“I’m going to use a little telepathy of my own . Telegraph my next move, dare it to try and stop me.” The creature, which had been advancing on her, paused, clearly struggling to understand whatever it was she was sending. “Go!” Novak scuttled forward and at the same time she gripped the canister in her left hand, feinted a kick and chopped at its face. It captured her arm easily, savagely wrenching it, doing considerable damage judging from her agonized cries.

But, wait, what’s this? With her free hand she was plunging something heavy and metallic into its exaggerated mouth, causing it to bite down reflexively, its head igniting, bursting with violent light--

Novak threw open the door and, *oh, God*, when he used up another flare he saw there were more bodies: animals, dogs, cats, humans. A hothouse atmosphere; warm, sultry air, sickening miasma of decomposition—

No, not a hothouse, an *incubator*. He saw egg sacs heaped together in crude nests, a few spindly hatchlings swiveling their heads, viewing him with bead-like eyes.

Novak recoiled from the scene, overcome with revulsion. Not just inimical. These things were *foul*, no conscience, no pity, just killing machines.

He nearly dropped the reconnaissance flare when he retrieved it from his pack. His hands were sweaty, shaking. He tore the wrap off the cylinder, yanked the release pin Arnie and his ex-army buddy jury-rigged, had to use both hands to sling it inside.

There was supposed to be at least a ten second delay. Ten seconds, Arnie *guaranteed* it.

Maybe it was all the banging around. A short circuit of some kind.

He was turning away when it blew. It registered as a *flash*, as if someone had thrown a switch in a pitch black room. A detonation of pure, white light followed immediately by a blastwave of heat. Novak tried to shield his face against the scalding glare but he could hear his hair crackling, knew he was too close. It felt like the walls had caught fire, the room ablaze around him.

Petra saved him, pulling him out of harm's way, leading him with her good arm because he wasn't seeing too well at that point.

The fire was spreading quickly. “It’s the magnesium,” Novak said, “it’s super-hot.”

“Also, the sprinkler system seems to be inoperative,” Petra added.

“Yeah, by now it should be be, like, *pissing* down,” Tanya elaborated.

“*Let it burn...*”

They took stock of the situation and decided they would have to leave Arnie. Novak felt bad about it but none of them was in any condition to carry him down. They had to practically drag Tanya away from his body. On the elevator, she kept her face turned away from them, self-conscious, hiding her bitter tears.

Elaine drove the van with the others in the back. She followed Darla and the professor in his old VW bug as they sped through Ilium. Darla knew a doctor, retired from private practice but always willing to accommodate an old friend.

His name was Caruthers and he set Vic Anson’s collarbone, dressed Tanya’s puncture wound and popped Petra Mueller’s shoulder back into place. Sally was still experiencing dizziness and double vision--she and Vic would go to separate hospitals for further testing and treatment, ferried in Stanley Polk’s bug. Tanya blew off such precautions. She’d had her tetanus shot and was raring to go. Her friend Elaine didn’t seem much any worse for wear either. The resilience of youth.

Novak’s vision was a source of concern but Caruthers remained optimistic. The right eye was definitely the worst. Give it ten days, two weeks at the outside. He might have to wear sunglasses on bright days and suffer the occasional crippling headache for the rest of his life but otherwise he’d be fine. It was also recommended he find employment during evening hours. That galled him.

Petra stopped by to see them on the way to the airport. Darla insisted on serving her something before she left. Went to the kitchen to fix tea.

“How’s the arm?” he asked.

“Stiff.” She still hadn’t taken a seat. “I see you have the bandages off your eyes. Is there much improvement?”

“Getting there. Darla says I look pretty funky without my eyebrows.”

Petra came over, stood directly in front of him. “Can you see me?”

“You’re sort of a blur.”

She bent down. “How about now?”

“Well...”

The outline of her face, still maddeningly indistinct, filled his vision and he jumped when she pressed her lips to his. “That was personal,” she told him. Then she stepped back, shook his hand listlessly. “And that’s from...sometimes we call ourselves ‘the daughters of Thera’. Or ‘the Order’. Anyway, thanks for your assistance and sacrifice and all that stuff. I’ll see to it they get your Chief off your back. Have you assigned to the night shift for the sake of your eyes. You want a raise too?”

“Nah,” he answered. “‘To protect and serve’, that’s good enough for me.”

She promised to keep in touch. He didn’t believe her. She left after a few polite sips of tea. Ten minutes later Darla told him to stop smiling and wipe the lipstick off his mouth, he looked foolish.

He remembered he was half blind, at her mercy for at least the next week. Did as he was told. Doing his best to appear suitably meek and contrite.

Then he held out his cup and asked for more tea. The minty stuff she said promoted healing.

“Don’t get too comfortable,” she warned, pouring.

“I’m just enjoying the company,” he replied blandly.

She turned on the radio, found the classical station he liked. He thought he recognized Schubert’s “Death and the Maiden”. The music was melancholy, not to her taste, but she sat through the rest of the program with him. Afterward, she put more drops in his eyes, made sure he was comfortable and left him. He could hear her moving about in the bedroom. His eyes burned from the medication, his body ached in a dozen different places, but at that moment Gus Novak experienced something akin to contentment.

He had no idea what time it was, if it was day or night.

It was *all* dark now.

A place of lurking shadows, faceless strangers and dead end streets.

Everything lit by a cool, conspiratorial moon and surmounted by the enigmatic stars.

A world a man could get used to, if he was clever and resourceful, with a knack for solving puzzles and a tendency to see things in black and white.

End

The author acknowledges consulting the following sources during the course of writing this book:

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Avon Books)

Jerry Langton, *Iced: The Crystal Meth Epidemic* (Key Porter Books)