

1. Aftermath

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
9:48 AM

He's gone. Off into the sky, unconscious and shackled, and around me, I hear the moans from the lucky ones. The unlucky aren't making any sounds at all.

I walk down to the beach, listening for the usual animal sounds, but the only thing I can hear is the white noise of the surf. The island's original inhabitants ran deeper into the jungle before the action started; they sense supers like they sense oncoming tornados and thunder storms, which makes sense, since the results are similar. Although, now that I think of it, supers are usually worse.

The lower ranks are following the plan, digging up the inflatable boats we buried before we ever built the first heat producing structure (so that their sats wouldn't pick up the caches), and carrying the wounded down to them so that we can evacuate. I watch them for a few moments to see if I need to straw boss, but they're by the numbers, so I make my way back toward the jungle to join the rescue workers.

I pass Private Kelley carrying a man in a fireman's carry whose face has been rendered unrecognizable by a blast of heat vision ; I move to help but he waves me off.

"I got him, sir," he says as he passes me.

"Who is he?" I ask.

"Jones, sir. He's out of it. He's gonna be in bad shape when he comes to; you got any morphine?"

"No, private," I say, "I don't carry the stuff around, and I wasn't ready for this. They got some down by the exit boats."

"If you weren't ready, sir, then none of us were. 'Scuse me, but he's kinda heavy."

"Carry on," I say to him, and move away, still watching Kelley, his feet splaying into the sand under Jones' weight as he hits the beach. A man by the closest boat, helping with the hand pump, looks over and sees us. He stands, and I see the red cross arm band as he reaches behind the boat, grabs a bag, and runs toward Kelley.

I never asked Kelley the name of the man on his shoulder. Was I in shock?

As I make my way through the jungle, I find two men dead; one with a broken neck, another hanging over a tree a dozen feet off the ground. I realize that to my right must be the place where the supers set down in whatever sexy aircraft brought them here, so I head left towards the base of the mountain. Towards the fortress, or what's left of it.

From this angle, you can see the path of devastation clearly; the fools blew down trees as they passed, rather than walking around them. Ridiculous. With great power comes great arrogance, as the Doc says. Or said.

The hidden entrance looks like a bomb crater, exposing the corridor behind it. I remember all of the work that went into it; the digging, replanting, and my back twinges in remembered pain. The work of dozens of men over several days, laid waste in seconds. The path led straight to it; they probably looked right down it to see our men at it's end, shaking behind their triggers.

Did we really think we had a chance against these gods who walk the Earth?

I find them in the corridors, the dead. Men I ate with, laughed with, hoped with, broken and strewn like a child's dolls. By the door to barracks 2, I finally find someone still breathing. It's Carson.

I kneel beside him, and he opens his eyes. "Patrick," he says to me, his voice bubbly from blood in his lungs, "you come to get me?"

"Yeah," I say. "Let's get you to the beach."

"Not gonna happen. Nightbreed punched me in the chest. Think I'm all busted up inside."

"What did you ever do to him?"

"Shot him a few times where it hurts while he was telling somebody he had pinned to the wall how futile it all was since he's invulnerable."

"Did you put him down?"

Carson coughs, and kneeling beside him, I can feel that his ribs are broken in a lot of places. I wonder how he's still breathing. He still manages, despite the pain, to look at me like I'm crazy. "Course not," he says, getting a bit of wind back, "didn't you hear me say he's invulnerable?"

"I thought he said that?"

"Well, turns out he's right."

We look at each other for a few minutes. Bad guys don't cry over fallen compatriots, do they? I try not to let him see what's going on behind my eyes, but he knows. It's in his eyes, too.

"How did it come apart so fast?" he asks.

"I don't know."

Silence for a few moments.

"Take me home," he says. "I don't wanna rot here on this island. I want to be laid to rest at home."

"I'll make sure of it," I promise him, and I mean it. He'd have done the same for me.

"We were right, you know. The Doc, what we were here for. I don't regret it. If I had it to do over again," he says, fading, "I'd shoot Nightbreed again. Someone's got to get through to them, even if it takes hurting them. Hurting us..."

And just like that, my best friend, like the evil Doctor Disaster whom we served, is gone.

I carry him back towards the beach, and as I do, his blood soaking through me, I think about what he said. And how I came to hear him say it.

2. Pressure

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
9:49 AM

When I was young, my father taught me to play chess, sort of. He taught me how the pieces move, what en passant and castling was, but he never taught me strategy, opening books, or planning my moves ahead. And he never let me win.

I never did beat him. I think I fought him to a draw a few times through dumb luck and sloppy attention on his part, but he could always trash me if he that's what he really wanted. He usually did.

Years after he died, I found myself wondering. Did he teach me so little so that he could have an opponent he knew he could beat?

I was starting to feel the same way about Sandman.

Sandman was a bruiser who'd saved his earnings from beating up college frat boys as a bouncer in New Orleans and parlayed it into a lucrative career in drug dealing out in Charlotte. He'd affect this weird Creole / gang banger way of talking when he was hustling, but that day in his office in the back of a strip mall pawn shop, he sounded as polished as James Earl Jones.

"Fifteen large, Patrick. You got it?"

"I can get it."

He started laughing. It was like watching a volcano erupt; it started in his midsection, and the rumbling worked its way up his massive frame and ejected a deep, braying guffaw. "You know how many times I heard that in here? How often it's not worth the air it took to say it?"

"I can get it."

He looked at me, his hands clasped in front of him on a huge calendar desk blotter that was a month behind and completely blank. Sandman kept it all in his head. He frowned, and said "How long's it gonna take?"

"I got some markers I can pull in, but it's going to take me a week."

"You're already a week late, Patrick. I want my money now." The muscles in his jaw started flexing as he growled that last word.

"A week."

"You got two days, Patrick."

"Three."

He stood, the chair behind him shrieking as it scooted across the floor.

"Two days, and not another word." As he stood, he'd opened the thin drawer that in most desks hold pencils. My guess was that Sandman didn't keep pencils in there. Not just.

I nodded, stood, careful to keep my head bowed, and backed out of the room, shutting the door.

Then I started shaking.

I had four thousand dollars to my name. I couldn't raise another thousand in a month, let alone eleven.

As I walked out of the pawn shop, two guys with crew cuts in a sedan across the street were careful to stop looking at me in a big hurry. Three blocks later, I saw that same sedan, those two shorn heads in the rear view mirror three cars behind me.

One way or another, I was dead.

I drove back to my efficiency third floor walk up. The building was a dump. Used to be one of those family freindly motels back in the sixties or seventies. Big U three stories tall surrounding a courtyard and pool. Wrought iron railing mounted into cement walkways. Now the railing was so rusty that your hand came back a dusty red if you tried to use it. The walkway cement was eroding, looking like ancient tombstones worn down by thousands of rainstorms. I never looked to closely at the pool; it was the splotchy dark green of a sinus infection, and so help me, the few times I did look, there was something moving in it.

I came within a few feet of my doorway and stopped.

My apartment was number 19, although the "1" had gone missing long ago, and the top nail on the 9 had vanished, leaving me a drunken 6. When I leave, I turn the number over; it stays that way until someone opens the door.

It was a 6, now.

Under the brown polyester curtain, I could make out some light coming from within the room. I hadn't left any lights on when I left, I was sure of it.

From under my coat, I drew out my pocket knife. It was a multi tool; cheap, mass produced thing, it tended to pinch the soft skin of the palm between the thumb and forefinger if you squeezed it closed without paying close attention, however if you unfolded one half of the unit, it would lock hard into position, and the knife blade folded up and out, leaving a nearly foot long pig sticker. I held it with my right hand, and with my left, turned the knob of the door. It turned loosely, unlocked and probably broken. I kicked the door open and rushed inside.

There was no one there. Nothing there.

The nothing was a problem. On my way home, I'd been thinking about a few items I'd stashed in the room; how much I could get for them, how close to the nut they would get me. A few would have to have been fenced, granted, and that would cost some, but they would have gotten me within striking distance.

Someone had robbed me blind.

Close to the door was a small round table and rickety chair, left behind with the motel's décor along with the paleolithic slab of a bed, and a bad print of a worse painting of an apple and two pears. I sat, staring at that stupid apple, the old song from Sesame Street running through my head.. *"One of these things is not like the others, one of these things just doesn't belong."*

I think I was trying not to think about how completely screwed I was.

I got up and walked over to the kitchenette, opened the fridge. They'd left the beer, at least. I took one, spun off the cap, and sat, taking a long pull.

I heard a *zip zop, zip zop* sound coming from the walkway. I hadn't bothered to close the door, and I saw first the screamingly pink crescent of one fuzzy slipper, then another (*zip zop*), and then the whole foot inside one slipper, varicose veins dragging the eye upward to the hem of a faded blue moomoo covered with lilies and dandelions, leading finally up to a small, pinched face framed with blue hair caught in giant blue curlers.

My neighbor stared at me, her eyes faded yellow like the pages of an old, old paperback book. "Is everything all right?" she said. "I thought I heard something in here, earlier today."

I believe this was the longest speech she'd ever given me. I had no idea what her name was. "I've been robbed." I said, calmly. If she'd looked at the hand clutching the beer bottle, she'd have noticed the knuckles were a bright white.

"I wondered if that's what happened." she said, turning (*ziiip zaaaaahhhp*) back toward her room.

"Did you call the police?" I asked, but she didn't hear me, and I heard her slippers drag back across the concrete.

I found myself wondering about her. She was old enough to have been here back when it was new. Did she choose to live here because, long ago, she'd had some happy memory from this place? Perhaps her current room was the one her husband had taken her to, that first wedding night long ago, on their way to Niagra, or Vegas, or where ever it was they couldn't wait to get to. Had she come back here, the way elephants go back to their birthplace just before they die?

Or was this place completely foreign to her? Perhaps she'd ended up here like driftwood; uncared for, alone, and like a hundred other warped and cracked chunks, left too long in the brine, fragile to the touch. Would she break if I touched her?

I shook my head, and drew another pull from the bottle. Why did I care? I had bigger problems, just then.

I walked over to the painting (*can you tell me which thing is not like the others*) and lifted it up off the walls, turned around and dropped it image first onto the bed. The back of the frame was covered with small stacks of hundred dollar bills, taped carefully so that they did not lift the painting from the wall. Nobody ever looks behind bad art.

Man, I wished there were more bills there.

Maybe I could run. Head somewhere, anywhere, get myself a 9 to 5, something.

Sandman would find me. It wasn't so much about the money anymore, not really. He was an up and comer, and needed to secure his rep. He'd been making me these little loans, no questions, no arguments, and I'd been doing a little bit of arm twisting for him. Nothing major; he just needed some guys encouraged a little in fulfilling their ends of bargains of which I neither needed nor wanted to know anything about. They were usually family men of the type that screams "Accountant"; careful hair, careful car, careful baby fences on the stairwells. I figured money laundering, but like I said, I didn't really want to know.

Then there'd been the races.

I got this thing for the ponies, and the hell of it is, it has very, very little to do with the races themselves. It's about the smells.

You ever been to a horse race? There's something about it.. You've got the guys who bring their honeys along for a bit of a low class thrill, the pros and their cigars burning like a house afire, stale beer, old hot dogs, and the animals themselves; a warm smell like an old barn in summer, laced with the electric current endorphins (or whatever horses use for it) charging their runs.

I love the smells of all those people; perfume, cologne, old leather, hair product, and hormones. You sit next to a guy who's got his next house payment out there in second, nosing for first, and you feel what he feels; the chemicals driving him transfer to you.

Of course, you can't just sit there and snort, so I'd put a few token bets down, here and there.

I always won. So I started putting down more.

I didn't have any sure thing, any inside track, any system. I'd just pick a straight bet, the decision made right there at the window. I'd hear the men around me calling to show, or for a trifecta, and hear them arguing odds like physicists arguing over electron trajectories, but I didn't bother with any of that. I just plunked a little money down, and ended up picking up some more. So I started betting more.

Sandman still asking me, "Anything you need? Anything you want? You just let me know." So one day, I did. I didn't plan it any more then I planned the winners, it just came spilling out of, "Fifteen thousand, Sandman." Found myself standing at the track, watching them run, knowing the moment they left the gate that I'd lost. The remaining twenty two seconds that they pounded the loam of the circuit, that was just the walk of the pall bearers, surely and inexorably making their way to the grave.

I think he knew it, Sandman. He had this way about him of just knowing things about what people were in to, what they were doing that could go from a waste of time to a waste of a life with just a little nudge. I think he saw the crash coming, and wanted to be there when I finally snapped. He wanted me to get under his thumb so that he could show his marks that he could squash me, easy as an ant on his counter.

Someone had stolen my car, I found when I finally made my way back out to the lot.

I started walking down the street, my coat pockets stuffed with too little and too much cash, my steps dragging (*zip zop, zip zop*), and like the horses, headed for the grave

3. By Way of Introduction

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
9:50 AM

I heard him three blocks away.

I expected an amplifier, or even a megaphone, but as I drew close enough to see him, I saw that it was just him, voice like thunder; his emphasis rolling over the parked cars and sidewalk to wash over me, his regular intonation just white noise, like the rain.

In the crashes, I heard him saying "Government" a lot, and "State." He didn't sound like he liked either one.

I thought about crossing the street.

I stayed, though. I don't think, looking back on it, that I cared enough to cross over. Maybe I hoped the guy would get in my face. Yeah, that was probably it. I had a whole lot of pain and suffering that I would have loved to visit on someone else.

He didn't, though. He kept on talking. He had, of all things, a white board, and he'd keep writing down numbers, raising his voice as he turned to it, lowering as he turned back, as if he had an audience of hundreds instead of me and an empty street.

His eyes took me in, just a quick sidelong glance, but I still felt as if this guy had taken one look and seen my soul, all in a split second. His eyebrow had lifted, as if asking if I had any interest in what he was pitching, and seeing none, had let me go.

"Don't you see, friends?" he asked as I passed him. "Don't you see the inevitable rushing towards us? The STATE is terrified of us, of our power, of our ascendancy! They are pushing the system towards the cliff, and they rely on the Super Empowered to keep us in check, so that THEY can permanently divide us from them, to turn the gap between rich and poor into a canyon! If you just look at...." and he turned back to the board, writing some number down. A long one.

The Super Empowered. Odd way of saying it, I thought.

In the midst of the Second World War, despite the involvement of the USA and the massive assets they brought to bear in the Axis, some brain trust of immigrant scientists had realized that the Nazi's position was unassailable, and that they could sit back and wear us down through attrition. They'd decided that the Allied powers needed some kind of ace in the hole, and that right fast.

Albert Einstein, the famous geneticist, had written a letter stating his belief that the only way we could win the war was to unlock the hidden potential of the human genome. He asked that a project be started with the top minds in the field and all the resources that could be brought to bear. He called the project "Talmud", after the young Jewish medical student who had given him textbooks on Biology, and had told him of genetics through the work of Mendel and the American William Allen. The Jewish name was chosen as a shot in the eye for Hitler; it was the Holocaust that had driven so many brilliant minds to the United States, and had given them the drive to work together to defeat him.

The Talmud team had created Neshimat, the source of the power that changed the face of the world. The treatment was arduous, and cost the lives of nine tenths of the test subjects who underwent it.

The project was a secret protected with all the strength of the Allied Forces until August 6, 1945, when

a strike team of project survivors code named Little Boy were parachuted into Nagasaki. Their objective was to destroy the depots of military supplies, and to disable the city's ports, crippling the Japanese offensive capabilities.

800 people were killed by the rampage of the world's first three supers, Trinity, Fat Man, and Mr Manhattan. Despite the death toll, the operation was referred to as a "perfect surgical strike." Japan surrendered four weeks later.

The war ended in Europe a scant few weeks later as the three supers made their way through Berlin and captured Hitler, ripping the heart from the Nazi campaign. Hitler was later executed following the Nuremberg trials.

Further research into Neshimat was halted for fear that it might lead to an inevitable series of escalations between the United States and the growing Communist regime in the Soviet Union and China, however the genie, once out of the bottle, could not be corked. Neshimat spread through genetics, and the children of Trinity and Mr. Manhattan were plentiful and prolific themselves. Later, it was discovered that a transmission of powers could be made through (very) physical contact with a carrier of the power, and soon a large extended family was rolling through the world.

Most of the Manhattan clan were staunchly conservative and vehemently patriotic, however some of them, disenchanted with the nation they gave them birth, began to speak openly in the 1960s, starting a movement responsible for the sexual revolution and recreational drug use. Those were the "gray sheep."

The black sheep of the Manhattan family were also anti-American, and began a civil war within America. The "white sheep" of the family fought back, although they tried very, very hard to keep the whole thing quiet. When Particle Man killed President Kennedy during a Texas motorcade in 1963, however, the secret could no longer be contained, as the incident was caught on film and released to the public. There could be no doubt who killed President Kennedy, and the nation was for the first time afraid of the family that had sheltered them for so long.

The War of the Supers lasted from 1963 to 1975. The fear of the Supers gave rise to a sort of cultural nihilism, a feeling that our destruction was assured. During and after the war, the rest of the world, seeing the internal conflict in the US, had begun arming themselves against the day that the supers spilled on to their shores, and the research into finding and exploiting a weakness in the supers kicked into high gear; the nations of the world infiltrated the US with leagues of spies and double agents, which the Manhattens, regardless of their side in the struggle, ruthlessly exterminated.

The black sheep were nearly gone, now. While open war had ended, some holdouts were still out there, spreading fear and sedition wherever they could. The US seemed to be trying to regain its old sense of power and patriotism, but the cultural fallout from the war, like an infection, kept the wound from closing fully.

Was this strange little man with the white board one of those lost black sheep?

Couldn't be. The guy looked to be about forty going on Methuselah, and no way anyone who could transmute matter to energy, or burn people to death by laughing at them, or whatever it is that they do would be standing here, raving alone with a whiteboard.

I kept walking.

Figured he wasn't my problem. It was the four Brunos I ran into as I turned the corner.

I've heard some guys talk about how the only way to be safe in the city is to make eye contact with whomever you meet; they'll think that you're crazier than they are. I don't generally have that problem; I'm not a small guy. However, I do tend to do it anyway; I have a look that I've practiced in the mirror that very clearly says, "Don't mess with me, I have nothing to lose."

Figures on the day I truly don't have anything to lose, I'm too shell shocked to act like it.

They sized me up while I gave them my best "my dog just died" expression, and in unison, decided I was fresh meat. The two flank men rounded around me like wolves, and the first guy says, "Hold up, Slick."

I stopped, suddenly aware of just how much money I had on me. It must have shown; maybe I unconsciously put a hand on my jacket pocket, I dunno, but I saw the other front man's eyes light up like a slot machine; he knew it was payday, and I felt suddenly very exposed.

"Let's have it." the second guy said.

"N" I said. Before I could get to "oh", one of the guys behind me hit me on the back of the neck with a jackhammer. Had to be; no way a man's fist feels like that.

I went down, and immediately felt a foot kicking my ribs like a football. The air went out of me, and then another kick, somewhat softer this time, designed to turn me onto my back, which it did. Another kick to the gut, and one to the head. I could see those guys from the back end of a long, dark tunnel, and wondered how they'd gone from four guys to sixteen so fast.

Something was touching me around my chest, not kicks or strikes, but odd little pokes, and by the time I cleared my thinking enough to realize that they were emptying my pockets, they were almost done. I kicked out with one leg, felt it connect with something, and heard one of them "Ooomph" in such a way that made me think I'd struck soft, dangly tissue, when I heard a voice like thunder yell "Stop!"

The three guys (number four was still trying to scrape himself off the pavement) turned to see my white board guy standing at the corner. His hand was in his jacket pocket, holding something that he was pointing at them without removing it from its hiding place. "Leave that man alone." he said.

The first guy, the one that had called me Slick, said, "Or what, pop? You gonna shoot me?"

"Yes." He said, as if he had just been asked if he knew the time, and his hand shifted slightly in his jacket pocket.

Suddenly, the first guy wasn't standing there any more. He was in the air, flying back from the spot he'd been standing as if he'd been struck in the middle with a baseball bat wielded by the Jolly Green Giant.

The second guy started to move, to run, but he looked back at white board man. "You're out of ammo, aren't you?" he grinned, pulling a switchblade from his pocket.

Whiteboard drew the something from his pocket which looked a bit like the fattest spray bottle trigger I'd ever seen, and he looked down at it, his expression amused. "For this?" he asked, looking back, "Yes." Then he whistled.

From around the corner came six guys like the offensive line of the most desperate football team you never wanted to play against. Those boys moved, and yet still managed to give you time to see this big grin on their face, like they already knew what balloon animal they wanted to twist you into once they caught you.

The brunos scattered.

Whiteboard guy walked over to me, put the spray mister (or whatever it was) back into his pocket, stood over me, and reached his hand down to me. I will never, no matter how long I live, forget the image of his face, still amused but also showing concern and caring, looking down from the other end of his outstretched arm. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Who are you?" I said, taking his hand.

He told me to call him Doctor Disaster as lifted me from the pavement.

4. Recruitment

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
9:51 AM

"Tell me something, " said Nathan, "what would you do with those guys if you could have caught them?"

I thought about it, filling the silence with a sip of my coffee. "I'd beat the crap out of them."

"Right!" said Nathan, and his tone of voice was like that of a school marm who hadn't expected the right answer from a slow student. "That's what anybody would do. But you know what they'd get if the State caught them?"

After the Doc had lifted me from the pavement, Nathan, one of those offensive linemen with the toothy grins I mentioned earlier, had come back to tell him that the "gentlemen" that had assaulted me had lept into a car and driven away before they could be caught. I'd gotten kind of fuzzy at that point, and next thing I knew, I was in an emergency room triage bay, a pretty little nurse bandaging my abdomen while Nathan asked her about what kind of meds I could get for the pain. After they got me fixed up, he'd taken me to a little hole in the wall diner next to the hospital, and this conversation had been the first thing he'd said.

"I don't know." I said. "I guess it depends on what kind of stuff they already got on their record."

"They'd get nothing." said Nathan, with real conviction. "They'd walk, because they can afford a lawyer who'd get them off, and they'd pay for it with your money."

I winced at the mention of my money. Nathan must've read that as having something to do with what he was saying, and he went on.

"Whereas if you had caught them, and you had given them the beating they richly deserved, what would you have gotten?"

"Probably six to ten months for assault." I said without even thinking.

He looked at me, reevaluating. "You've been in?"

"Long time ago, kid stuff a few days after I wasn't a kid anymore."

He nodded, as if he knew exactly what I was talking about. "Were you rehabilitated?"

I grit my teeth, not making eye contact. "I was certainly given reason to regret it, if that's what you mean."

"By the prison system?"

"No," I said, "by other inmates."

He was still nodding. "I was gang raped in prison." he said, not quite making eye contact with me. I noticed his right fist, flexing and unflexing. "Possession. For a nickel bag I was holding for a friend, I got treated to gang rape at the behest of our government, and that was called neither cruel nor unusual."

I looked at him, astonished. You don't talk about it. I mean, sure, a lot of guys have been in; I knew more guys that had then hadn't, and we all knew that unless you went in strong, and you went in

knowing some group with turf on the inside, you were going to be nanced, but you didn't talk about it. You thought about it. But not talk.

"And yet," he said, "real criminals rarely do hard time. And even if they do, it's not often a deterrent, is it?"

I thought about my work for Sandman, and shook my head.

"Why is that? Why is it that the system doesn't use the tools that make sense?"

"Like what?" I asked him.

"Public flogging, for one." he said. "If those boys had known they stood a chance of being whipped in front of anybody who cared to watch, even having it televised, you think they'd have mugged you?"

"No." I didn't think I'd have been twisting any arms for Sandman, either.

"The system is broken. We know it's broken. Why don't we fix it?"

"You can't fight them." I said. "They've got too much on their side. Most people, they just want to be left alone to do the 9 to 5, then watch the tube from 6 to 9, and do it all over again without any hassle. Meanwhile, the guys who run things, they got the money. They got the cops. And they got the supes, if it comes to that. How you gonna fight that?"

Nathan just smiled at me, and finally took his first bite of his breakfast.

Then later, he drove me across town.

The recruitment office was in an old fast food restaurant. The place was completely gutted; the only things left in there were the things that were bolted down to the floor.

I spoke to a man who introduced himself only as Mike. He had an eyepatch, a shaved head, and a scar down one cheek, a look which clashed with his semi formal trousers and polo shirt. He asked me if I was running from something, and I told him about Sandman. He nodded, took a few notes down on a legal pad. Then he asked me some questions about my past; had I ever been given a security clearance, had I ever been arrested for treason or espionage, had I ever been active in any public protests, sit ins, etc? No, no, no...

"Why are you here?" he asked, like a left hook out of nowhere.

I looked around at the plastic benches and tables, the padding long since removed, the tabletops faded from thousands of scrubblings from hundreds of apathetic teenagers and unskilled, dead end adults, all of them thinking of something else. I'd done my time in one of these.

"To be honest, I'm not sure. It's been kind of a rocket ride since I ran across Whiteboard guy.."

"Who?" Mike asked, lifting the eyebrow over his good eye.

"Doctor Disaster, he called himself."

Mike looked at me, no expression for three beats. Then "You've.. met... the Doctor?"

"Sure." I said, "Good thing, too. I'd probably be still be bleeding into the pavement if he hadn't shown

up."

"I need to make a call." Mike said, stood, and walked into the closet sized office of the restaurant, back behind the counter, shutting the door and drawing a slim phone from his pocket.

I waited, trying hard not to glance at the upside down legal pad Mike had left behind on the table. What was it he'd written about me, and why?

I turned in my plastic swivel chair, wincing at the pain in my chest. The painkillers were wearing off, and it felt like I'd been kicked with a wrecking ball. I saw the cars on the interstate, not fifteen yards from the tall glass windows that comprised the back wall of the building, whizzing by. Just folks, staring fixedly at where they're going, never sparing a glance for where they were. Children are different, though. They're always interested in the world around them, always looking out the sides, always managing to catch you in their vision, a thousand reactions. Some smile, some frown, some wave, and some look away, quickly, as if the adult reactions that they are to eventually learn are already ingrained. I smile, not at any one kid in particular, but for all of them.

Mike came back, a big grin on his face, as if whomever he was speaking to told him a good one, and he was relishing the thought like that last bite of a good meal that you don't want to swallow.

"You," he said, "got a character reference from as high as they come. So, we can dispense with the Q and A portion and get right down to it. We're willing to pay off your debt to Sandman; you'll be free and clear, and in return, you pull four years with us."

"In exchange for which, you put me through college?"

"Shoot no," says Mike, grinning, "we pay you. At least money is useful!"

"Who's us?"

Mike cocked his head, and then grinned. "You really don't know, do you?" he asked.

"No."

"I gotta say, this is the strangest interview I've done. I know you talked to Nathan. You remember that conversation?"

"Yeah," I said, "Nathan's good people."

"He is." Mike agreed. "How do you feel about the way the country is heading?"

"I think the people in charge are crazy." I said. "Either they're asleep at the switch, or they want to pull a Nero."

"Fiddle while Rome burns?" Mike asked, rhetorically. "You'd be surprised how close that is to the truth. You want to do something about it?"

And there it was. Treason. Right there in the open. If I'd been wearing a wire, there'd be a team through that glass wall in minutes, or worse, a super. But of course, they knew I wasn't wearing a wire; Nathan had been with me while I was unconscious. Still, I knew two things right away.

One, he was absolutely serious. Two, the wrong answer would probably mean that I was looking at the last sunlight I would ever see.

I felt a tickle at the back of my neck, and I knew that if I were to jig hard to my left or right, I'd see a red dot appear on Mike's waiting smile or his Adam's apple. I also knew that if I were to actually do that, Mike, perhaps still smiling, would draw a pistol from behind his back and blow me away.

"Yes." I said. I've never been a good liar. A good thief, maybe. A good strongarm, yeah. But I was a crappy liar; my tells had tells.

Mike saw me coming a mile away. "You don't know me," he said, "and if there was anything transmitting anywhere on the EM spectrum coming from your person, you wouldn't be here. You thinking we're gonna take you out if you refuse?"

I admitted the thought had crossed my mind.

"If you're not interested, you're free to walk out, right now." He nodded towards the door to my right. "Your car's out there, full tank of gas. We couldn't recover your money, I'm afraid, but the car was easy."

I couldn't see it from where I was sitting. I didn't move.

"We pulled your record, Patrick." Mike flipped over a few sheets of his legal pad, started reading.

"Patrick Connor, born December 8th, 1983, in Saint Joseph's Hospital, Tuscon Arizona. Mother Caroline Connor, no father on the birth certificate, no wedding announcements after.

I eased back in my site. I knew the typical reaction is the horrified, "They know all about me" shuffle followed by the paranoid heebie jeebies. I'd been through this before, though, and I knew how to use Google.

"First offense, assault, 2002, Maryland. Guy by the name of George Waynard." Mike looked up at me. I just smiled at him.

"Friend of yours?" he asked.

"Mom's." I said.

"You put him in the hospital, Patrick, can I call you Patrick?"

"Sure."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you just asked me, and it'd be rude to say no. Besides, I get to call you Mike."

Mike grinned a little. Sense of humor, good deal. "Why'd you beat him up so bad?"

"Does your notebook list who was two rooms down from him in the hospital?"

"Mom?" he asked.

I nodded. "She wouldn't press charges against him. She nearly lost her right eye, never lost the limp."

"She didn't defend you, did she?" he asked.

"Ha. She spoke for the prosecution. Can you believe that? Claimed he'd never laid a finger on her, that maybe it was me that beat her up. "

"You served three years, Eastern Correctional."

"Yeah. First and last bit I served. Should have been six, but it got crowded."

"Came close a few times, though."

"I got picked up a few times, yeah, nothing that stuck." I said.

"You got smarter."

"I'm not going back to prison." I said, tensing. "If you want to call that smarter, then sure, I guess so. I never took another risk that I didn't know the odds ongoing in."

"Except for the ponies." Smiling.

"Yeah, Mike, except the ponies. Everybody's got a weakness, right?"

"We fervently hope so."

He wasn't talking about just folks. He glanced upward while he said it. "You know what Lady Blessington said, right?"

"Who?"

"She said, 'the vices of the rich and great are mistaken for error; and those of the poor and lowly, for crimes.'"

"I got one for you," I said. "'A criminal is a person with predatory instincts who has not sufficient capital to form a corporation.'"

"Sounds like Twain." Mike said.

"Can't remember." I said. "Maybe Bertrand Russel. Not sure."

We sat for a moment.

"Is the water still on here?" I asked.

"I think so, why? Thirsty?"

"No," I said, getting up, "I gotta see a guy about a dog."

Mike nodded, closing the loose pages of his legal pad. I didn't see any red dots on him, or anywhere else. As I walked towards the bathrooms, which were on the same side of the building as the door Mike had mentioned, I saw that sure enough, there sat my car.

It was an old gray Sentra. The right rear quarter panel was mostly Bondo; I'd spun out heading home late one night (from a straight job, no less) and slammed into a split rail fence at about thirty. Not my fault, really; the oversized SUV in the other lane came around a curve with his high beams on, and in

that split second of being blinded, I put my passenger wheels into the gravel off the pavement. Did just like they tell you; didn't touch gas or brake, tried to bring it back on to the hard top, but it had been raining earlier, and there was just enough moisture to hydroplane. Bam, car kabob with a split rail stick. The State Trooper who'd driven by five minutes later cited me for "Exceeding safe speed in existing conditions", 75 dollar ticket. And I'd been doing five under the limit, ten miles slower than he "estimated".

I think it was that image, that cop's citation pad, winking back the red of my remaining tail light, as he wrote me up, that drove me into the bathroom rather than the door. I could remember, and even still feel, the pain in my back where the rail had pushed through the car and struck me, could remember wondering how I was going to get home as his two taillights shrank in the distance. Never asked me if I was all right. Never asked me if I needed assistance. I remember standing there, the ghosts of his vanished lights still in my retinas, asking myself "To protect and serve?"

When I came back from the john, I asked Mike where I signed. If Doctor Disaster needed an army, then I'd take a whack at it.

What else was I going to do?

5. Boot

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
9:52 AM

You know the typical DI, right? The jar head chiselled out of granite, strutting down a line of soon to be shaven hairbells? How they cringe as he rants about how his beloved Corps has finally done him the injustice of dumping their sorry carcasses on his blankety blank training grounds, and how impossible it is that he'll ever get them to shape up?

Yeah, I wish.

What I got was Von Neuman.

I was wiped out. To get to Von Neuman's soft spoken hatred, I first had to fill out some paperwork with Mike. Isn't that a rip? Paperwork? In a clandestine vigilante army, I had to fill out the same old tired blanks that I would have if I was going to work in that empty restaurant, about Social Security, home phone, tax filing status, if you can believe that. I mentioned to Mike the irony of having had them crawl so far into my past it's a wonder I didn't smell Mike's cologne when I burped, and here I was trying to make my full ten digit phone number fit in a blank meant for four digits.

"We have our reasons." he said. And then corrected me on my last place of employment's address.

He'd told me to head home, to think things over, and had handed me a business card with a single phone number printed on it, no name, nothing else, and said that if I hadn't changed my mind by the morning after next, to give him a call. And otherwise, not to worry about anything.

I drove home, mounting that same decrepit stair well as if I'd never seen it before. Everything looked smaller, somehow.

My door was still a nine, so I popped it open without any reservation.

My tv was back.

I don't know how they'd found it, but it was without a doubt my set. Same crappy pink line across the three quarter mark on the horizontal. Mike had mentioned that "the organization" had been trying to recover things for me. I have no idea how they knew the set was me.

I glanced over to the apple and pears. "Nah, " I said to myself, "no way." But there was a way. One slim stack of bills, three hundreds, greeted me when I flipped it over.

For a few minutes, I just stood there, bills in one hand, the remote in the other, muttering incoherent syllables as I looked from the nail that held the pears on the wall, to the tv, to the door.

Finally I just shrugged, and ordered some takeout Chinese.

I went out the next afternoon. There was a bar on Seventh Street that I used as a kind of drop for the more colorful jobs that I picked up. Everyone I knew knew that they could reach me there, so I figured I'd stop in.

I heard the door swing shut behind me as the name "SandMan" blew through my mind. I looked around.

A few faces aimed at me, none of them people I knew. It was early, yet. Vince had the bar today, and he was trying to rub a glass to death with a bar towel while he stared up at the television over the bar, back to me.

I bellied up. "What's up, Vince?"

He glanced over without really seeing me, turned back to the television, then snapped his head back at me, eyes widening.

"What?" I said.

He didn't speak, just motioned back toward the screen.

A pretty asian lady with big hair stood center shot muttering into an ice cream cone shaped microphone, while the legend "Gangland Hit in the City" sat below her.

The image did a jump cut to two paramedics lifting a stretcher up and over a familiar door frame, its occupant completely covered with a white sheet.

I knew that door frame, had nearly tripped over it myself yesterday in my haste to leave the room into which it opened. SandMan's office. I did a doubletake; the stretcher's occupant seemed like a pretty sizeable guy, but it's hard to tell. Somehow, death makes white slimming.

"Is that.." I managed.

"I don't theenk you gonna have any more jobs from heem." Vinnie said, not taking his eyes off the set. "Duh joo wanna beer?"

"Screwdriver." I said, still staring up at the box. "Until I say when."

I didn't say when for a long time.

The following morning, I got up, showered, shaved. Put on my best, put most of the little bit of cash I had left wrapped around my leg under my sock, put my few toiletries in a bag, and walked out of number 6.. Err, 19, for the last time. I glanced at the old lady's window as I passed, but didn't see anything.

She was staring at me from the bottom of the stairs as I turned my head back. Somehow, it made me jump a little. I could have sworn she hadn't been there, a moment before.

She was dressed just the same, curlers, slippers, flowers. Her face still looked no so much wrinkled as if it had been left soaking too long, and was all squeezed towards the center.

"You need a television, you're welcome to the one in my room. I won't be needing it ." I said. She just stared.

Two paces past her, I heard her say, "No good will come of it, son." I stopped, turned, but her back was to me, hands in a death grip on that rusty bannister as she hauled herself up the second step. I waited for a beat, then turned and walked away.

I'd treated myself to a good breakfast. Denny's. If you're sneering at me calling a cheap franchise chain a good breakfast, then to hell with you, champ. It was good, it was fast, and it was worth what I paid for it. The help was polite and the waitress, despite being a morning-shifter, was cute (ever noticed the

morning shift is always populated with grandmas and great aunts, while all the lookers work nights? No wonder I can't pick up girls; all the good ones are punched in), and I enjoyed every bite of it.

The music almost ruined it, I will say that. You don't normally hear steel guitars this far north of Dixie, and there's something about a steel guitar that just sets my teeth on edge, but I overlooked it.

After I ate my last bite, drank my last sip of the coffee, but before I put the tip under the plate, I pulled out my phone and the business card Mike had given me, and called the number. It was a recorded message, asking if I was certain I had the correct number, to press 1. I did. It told me that further directions would be forthcoming, and then it clicked, hung up.

I put the tip under the plate just at the same moment the waitress made her way back to my table. I hate it when that happens. No matter how much of a tip I leave, I always feel like, if they're watching, it's never enough.

"Thanks, honey." she said as she breezed past. As she walked by, I waited a beat, then inhaled.

You ever see that Al Pacino movie where he's blind, *Scent of a Woman*? No matter what else you might think of it, there's one thing they got right; women *smell* wonderful. I can't say I've ever heard one with a voice I couldn't just as soon not hear, and as a whole, I've never felt like I really trust a one of them, but I love the way they smell. Doesn't matter if she's wearing expensive perfume or not, if she's just out of the shower or back off a run, there's something appealing, and similar, about the scent of every one of them. It's not a sexual thing. It's just part of what they are.

The other part of what they are was the reason I'm still single.

I left the restaurant, walked back to my car, got in. As I sat down, my phone gave me a little buzz, and I hauled it out again, looked at it.

It said, "GLOVE COMPARTMENT." Text from some number I'd never heard of.

I opened the glove compartment of my car. Same rick rack that was always there; maps, old pine tree air freshener, cds, six sets of insurance cards (seemed like they sent me a new pair every other day), an unpaid parking ticket that I suppose I was actively trying to forget. I was just about to shut it when I heard a buzzing sound coming from it.

I turned my head back to my left hand; still had my phone. I rooted around in there again, and came up with another phone. Cheap disposable, prepaid. It said "DITCH YOUR PHONE. DRIVE TO AIRPORT."

So I did.

The cheap phone directed me to particular bed of mulch in the long term parking lot, where I found a key. The phone and the key gave me a locker that contained an old nylon wallet, inside of which was an equally old Driver License with my face and the name "Josh Grant" on it, a credit card with the same name, and a plane ticket to Rochester, Minnesota. It left in two hours.

I took it all, left my original wallet as the phone told me to, along with my pocket tool, and left the key in a men's bathroom stall. The phone said that someone would be by later to collect the wallet and make sure it got back to me.

I want to sound all jaded and tell you that I yawned in the face of this cheesy cloak and dagger stuff. I can't. I was enjoying it.

I stood in line for twenty minutes before the Federal Government gave me the joy of taking off my shoes, belt, keys, wallet, change and any other potentially lethal instruments of chaos, took my id, glanced at it, then subjected me to a pat down.

It's funny. If they'd given my ID as much scrutiny as that weirdo with the rubber glove gave my junk, they probably would have arrested me. My junk was clean (or as clean as I can get it); the ID was a poor job, and I'd been nervous about getting through security with it.

Ever since 911, we have absolutely lost our minds about airport security.

I was working that day, painting this guy's house, and he was paying me under the table. Decent guy; gave me lemonade and a radio while I worked, and I remember standing there, shocked, as they told us a plane had smashed into the World Trade Center. The guy whose house I was painting came home, walked up to me like he was going to give me the riot act over just standing there, and then heard the news. We stood there, just shaking our heads while the paint dried on the single wall I'd started on, unfinished.

The Manhattan family had responded, but not fast enough. Most of them were on the Left Coast for some fundraiser, and the really fast movers made it to New York just as the other planes crashed in Washington.

I've heard it a thousand times; they hate us because we are immoral, decadent, because we hold a weapon over the world which is an abomination in the eyes of whoever it is they pray to. Does it matter why they hate us? If I punch you in the eye for a real compelling reason, does it take the sting out of it?

Since then, they've decided that, since the supers can't protect us from crazies with rug cutters, we need to increase our security measures.

So now, like sheep down a chute, we all bah when we're supposed to bah, strip when we're supposed to strip, and we let strangers touch us in places which, when I was in school, we were told we were supposed to scream about and tell the police. And in some back handed way, they are the police. They were sort of police in prison, too, and they knew exactly what went on in the laundry.

It's not the cops that scare me. It's all the other "almost" cops. I we seem to think we need.

I bought a paperback in the little bookstore nearby the security checkpoint, and tried to read it while I waited for my flight.

From Denver, I was met by a car at the airport. The driver said, "Phone?" I handed it to him, and that was the last thing he ever said to me. I tried talking to him, asked where we were going, but he gave me the same vacant expression through the rear view mirror and shrugged, like he didn't speak English. I finally gave up and watched civilization disappear as the miles rolled by.

Airplanes make me sleepy, but I can't sleep in them. There's this constant image I get while in an airplane, of a can of Spam that had been sitting in the back of my cabinet since I'd moved in to the old motel. I couldn't find work for a while, and things were tight, and that can of Spam was looking better and better as its neighbors in the cabinets went missing.

So one day, after I'd been eating pretty much nothing but Saltines and tap water for a while, and I got to thinking about that can of Spam. How bad could it be, really? It was like Schroedinger's cat; either the spam was ok, or the spam had gone over, but only through observation could it ever reach one state or the other. Either I am a complete moron, or Schroedinger is.

I opened it, and apparently my atom had decayed. Or rather, my Spam had. It had gone over in such a way that the bacteria inside, while setting up a thriving metropolis inside my spam, had also created quite a bit of excess gas, which had hissed out of the can the moment I'd broken the seal.

Meat in a pressurized can. That's the image I get, ten thousand feet high and cramped into a chair smaller than the space given slaves on the Northwest Passage. Could you sleep with that?

So I had no idea where I was when the car stopped and the driver shook me awake. All I knew was that it was a Quonset hut in the middle of the woods. I walked inside, and found about three dozen other guys looking as groggy as me.

Ten minutes after that, a squad of guys looked like they really had it together rushed in, carrying sawed off pool cues, screaming at us to fall in, fall in, FALL IN.

We did. And standing there waiting for us at parade rest was Von Neuman.

The first thing that went through my mind when I saw him was, "How tall are you, five six? I didn't know they stack cliches that high."

He had what you might call a patrician nose. His mother might tell him it was distinguished. I tell you he got it wholesale from the remains of those presidents carved into Mount Rushmore after the black sheep blew it up in 72.

He was wearing a camouflage cap shaped like a squat version of a train engineer's cap, whatever they're called, and there was a reverse set of stairs in the line of the hat's brim, then his forehead, then the bridge of his nose, deep under dark, bushy eyebrows. Then the trend reversed up that nose again. With a vengeance.

He sported a thin, black, oily mustache that curled at the ends like Dick Dastardly. I kept waiting for him to pull at it so that I could watch it spring back, but he never did. Perhaps he didn't trust the product he used.

Saints preserve us, he sported a monocle.

He spoke with the fakest sounding German accent I'd ever heard, like Colonel Klink, only he spoke very softly, very mellow.

"Goot evening. I am Von Neuman." No rank, no call to quiet. There was no need. There was something about his voice that just cut through the chatter like someone screaming rape at a cocktail party.

"You vill all address me as Von Neuman. I haff no need of your names. "

He began to pace down the line. "Perhaps, when you joined us," (hard, sibilant essss,) "you thought zhat you vould have an eazy ride, yes? Zatt you vould be asked to perhaps stand at a few rallies, or perhaps engage in such activities as bar fights and gang wars?"

He reached on end, and was doubling back. "You are wrong. Here, you will be asked to kill. Without warning. Without hesitation. Without mercy." He stopped, stared down on of the men in second row. Then continued.

"My methods are quite simple. Perhaps you have heard, aut disce aut discede, yes? Learn or leave. Here, it is simpler still. Learn or die."

I don't know what it was that the guy beside him had done. Maybe he rolled his eyes. Maybe he glanced at the guy beside him; I think I caught a glimpse of his head turning. Either way, Von Neuman, not even looking at him, drew a luger and shot him in the head.

He never changed either his expression or his intonation.

"Just so. Learn or die. Novun knows where you are, none of you have any particular attachments from which you will be missed. You joined an organization which will strive to topple your government, jah? Here, in this place, your government is already gone. Here the law of the land has broken down. Here there is only vun law. Mine."

He stepped over to a recruit two places from me. "Perhaps you would like to dispute this with me, yes? You would like to prove to these men that I am veek, zat I can be taken?" The man didn't move.

Von Neuman stepped to me. "How about you, big boy, eh? Do you think you can take me?"

"NO SIR!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. He gave me a onceover, then took a pace past me, regarding the next man.

"Maybe you.." he said, and then I hit him, hands laced together, right between the shoulder blades, the top of the spine. As he went down, I crouched with him, pulling the Luger from his holster. "Not unless you turn your back on me, sir." I pulled the clip, shucked the shell in the chamber, and held them out.

Three of the guys with the pool cues were headed right for me. I don't know why I'd hit him. Well, I do; he was a cold blooded murder, and such monsters can't be tolerated, but I don't know why I'd chosen now to do something, rather than later, when I could maybe get away with it. I was waiting for my life to flash before my eyes; if it was gonna happen, it'd better happen soon, cause these guys were going to treat my head like a pinata in just a few more seconds, when Von Neuman lifted a hand.

The buzz cuts stopped in their tracks, still eyeing me, while Von Neumann got to his feet, turned to face me. There was a gleam in his eye, like it was Christmas, and as he took the unloaded weapon from me, he said, "Goot, my friend. Very goot. You have illustrated ze first rule; never turn your back on an opponent while he eess still able to maneuver. Vell done."

His hands moved like greased eels as he suddenly reloaded and cocked the weapon lifted it towards me for just a brief moment, then completed the motion by reholstering the gun.

"Let us hope," he said, "that the teacher can remember the lesson most carefully. I would hate to lose so gifted a pupil.. Too soon."

He nodded to the buzz cuts. "And now ve run, jah? Four miles, I think, a light start before we really begin."

As the hard boys screamed at us to about face, Von Neumann reached out, lightly gripped my arm, said even softer, "Not you, young man, not yet. Let us see vhat *else* you might teach, eh?"

And then he tortured me for a while.

Let's talk about that, while I'm thinking about it. Did you know the Romans only believed a slave's testimony if it was given under torture? They felt that slaves were by nature dishonest, so they would often torture a slave when putting a question to them, even if the poor slob was telling the truth. Perhaps that's where the phrase "ignorance is bliss" comes from.

The word torture comes to us from the Latin, meaning "to twist." Ironic, that. Sure, there's the obvious physical torture, that comes easily enough. Bamboo shoots under the finger nails, for example; Von Neumann loved that one. I can't clip my nails anymore without flashing back to those moments, fingers caught in this third hand cum vice grip thing he built, him tapping the thin reeds into them with a tiny little shoemaker's mallet. He'd mutter under his breath all the while, talking mostly to himself about technique. "Eez like lover," I remember him saying, "you change ze rhythm so each movement comes unexpected, give just enough pattern to offer hope, then take it away."

The thing about physical torture to remember is, you're going to break. Whatever it is they want to know, or whatever you are to say, you're going to say it, scream it, even mean it, if that's what's needed. The Doc compartmentalizes absolutely every piece of information except the ones he wants the other side to know, because he's not foolish enough to believe that the other side isn't engaging in torture. It may not be the expedient use of pain, granted.

No, theirs is worse. They twist your mind.

They deny you your sense of time, letting your mind rev up into hyper-acceleration once they rob you of as much stimulus as they can, and you manage to imprison yourself for much longer than the objective time they leave you in.

They encourage this by lying to you, telling you you've been in for days instead of hours, weeks instead of days. They starve you, then feed you twice in succession. They rob you of sleep, wearing your resistance down. They make you believe whatever they need you to believe; your side's already lost, the guy in the next room already named your name, the information you hold no longer holds the weight of men's lives, no.. But it might be worth a few moments of daylight. Or your family is all dead, and we need you to see these pictures to identify the bodies. Five minutes with photoshop and you can bring the hardest man down. Those guys don't always come back.

I'm not sure which is worse. I think of the guys we got back from the "good guys"; most of them were lucky if they could still feed themselves. Then I think of the man I saw undergo a "reverse hanging" at our camp, which is where the victim's hands are tied behind their back, then hoisted up off the ground by the wrists. Your arms are dislocated slowly, so slowly, and you get to hear the sound of the connective tissue in there strum and pop like high tension cables, get to pray that the thousand things in there break, and that they won't. He wasn't feeding himself afterwards, either.

Von Neumann never tried breaking your mind. I'm not sure why, but I have my opinions, aside from the obvious fact that he was a sadist. He did it, I think, because he had to meet a production quota. Perhaps the Doc allowed him a percentage of each incoming training crop; you can kill ten percent of them, but I need the remainder able to work. At least, that's how it worked out for us.

Torture, therefore, was something of a compliment. You were at least worth the effort.

On the other hand, maybe he just lacked the intelligence needed to do the job.

There were some punishments he made us inflict on each other. One guy, Carlisle, Carlton, can't remember now; the dope just wouldn't get it together. He'd fall in late, come in last, lose every sparring match; the guy was hopeless. Von Neumann gave us a rail, about the width of a flagpole and a quarter as long, and made us run him on it for a six mile run across hills and gullies.

He didn't come with us. As soon as we got out of visual range, we took the guy down. You would have, too; you ever ridden a rail? If not, you ever sliced a cheese with a guitar string? Same general principle. I think Von Neumann knew it. Perhaps he was trying to create an us versus him mentality, knit us together. I don't know, but I can tell you that it might have been more humane to have kept him up

there. Von Neumann shot him dead three days later. If he'd been trying for fraternity, he missed the mark. I was glad Carl.. or whomever bit it. I truly believe that his bullet would have been mine.

Much later, I heard a few cops laughing about how "the Doc's goon squad couldn't hit the broadside of barn." You want to know why? I'll give you two reasons.

One, most of us aren't killers. We're not nice people, mind you. I never lost any sleep hurting people for SandMan or lifting a stereo, but then I never hauled anyone up the pulley for a little strappado, either. Maybe that was the another reason Von Neumann "trained" us the way that he did, to make us harder, colder. I think that backfired, too. By the time we left we'd undergone so much pain and suffering that we were better able to empathize with the guy on the other end of the rifle, better able to rationalize the slight shift to the left or right as we squeezed the trigger.

The second reason was that we got one and only one afternoon of training with firearms, held by his minions. He didnt show up that day. I think he was too afraid that if one of us ever had a firearm about us in his presence, we'd kill him. I know I got quite a bit of razzing from my squadmates about unloading the Luger the "slow way" that first day.

Some of the guys in my unit were fair shots. This one guy, Brazzi, everybody called him Doublewide cause, well, he was. Big as a house. He took seven shots that day, every one of them in the hundred ring from as far back as the range let him. We told him he shot so well because it took so much to move him, all that extra weight steadied his arms. He said it was crap, came back and asked us if we'd ever poked a Jello mold before. "It's not getting me moving that's hard," he said, grin buried deep in his face, "it's getting me to stop."

He wasn't wrong. He took the top bunk in the quanset hut we called home for those many weeks, and it didn't take a prophet to know what was coming. Three days before graduation, the inevitable happened. The guy under him, Zuckerman, a real hayseed from Miss'ippi had drawn the short straw, and it killed him when Doublewide came crashing down. First thing anybody said was a guy from Jersey talking about how them poor boys always seem to get taken out by flying doublewides, and then Wilson, pretty straight arrow that never made much trouble, turned around and popped him in the jaw so hard that he passed out.

We don't get together and talk about old times, my squadmates and me.

I got a visit from Mike, around about then. "How's it going, cadet?" he asked, holding his hand out.

I'd been the recipient of Von Neumann's electrical experiments the night before. I didn't take his hand. "Sure doesn't match the brochure, hoss." I said.

"You still ready to fight for the cause?" he asked.

"What cause?" I said. "You stuck me in the middle of nowhere with a homicidal maniac calling himself a teacher, and the only thing I've learned is fear."

"That's good." Mike said, and for the first time, I saw that smile of his vanish. "That's very good. Some guys don't catch on quite so fast. Like SandMan, for example."

"We never did get around to talking about that, did we? I seem to recall you agreeing to pay my debt, not take him out."

"I ever tell you what I did before?" he said. "Insurance. Medical, life, the works. One of the ways we cut costs was getting the doctors to lower the bills for us. Amazing, what you can do once you can

blacklist a doctor out of your 'network', you know? They realize that they can lower this bill, or lose every customer we carry, and we carried a lot, brother. Just took a few promises and a commercial with a cartoon character and a good joke, and they signed up in droves.

"In the organization, we don't need cartoons. We don't need a network. What we need, what we have, is force. Sheer, unarguable force. Force of will, which gives us the ability to act, and force of might, which gives us action to take. I tried to make SandMan see that, I really did. He wouldn't understand."

"So you killed him."

"No." he said, almost primly. "I did not kill him."

"The guys who carried him out of that office might disagree."

"That's because they weren't there. No, Patrick, I didn't kill him. He killed himself."

"Metaphorically." I said.

"Literally. See, once reason was over, he had a choice. He could kill himself, or I could kill his brothers and sisters, his wife, his best friend, his aging mother."

"That was your leverage? You threatened his family over fifteen thousand?"

"No, Patrick, no. We simply told him how much he was going to accept. When he refused, we told him who we work for. He laughed."

I waited a beat. "And?"

"That was it. That was enough." Mike took a step closer to me. I'd been trained in a few moves to take a guy out, this close to me, but I reassessed Mike's stance, his body language. I think he knew a few more. "I don't think you understand the stakes we're playing for, here. See, the Doc will, very soon, be running this country. He, and he alone, will dictate life and death, and we cannot allow inferior men to stand in his way, or to doubt his power."

This was getting a little too messianic. "That's a far cry from the way I've heard him speak." I said. We got speeches from the Doc piped in every other day after lunch. "He talks about equality, about mankind in peace."

"He does." Mike said. "But knowing what you know about the nature of man, do you really think that will happen for a man with anything other than fanatic devotion from his followers?"

"I don't know", I said, and I didn't. I'd been thinking similar thoughts.

"I know for you, Patrick." he said. "Let me make a few things clear to you. There will always be a carrot, and there will always be a stick, and there will always be a man holding the stick."

"In your case, the carrot is a society that works. A society that finally functions, that is both free and just, as well as disciplined and orderly. The stick is the payoff that you, and every loyal soldier in our ranks will receive."

"The Doc is the man holding that stick, Patrick. He is merciless, yes, but he is benevolent, and for those loyal to him, he is kind and giving."

Mike took one more step towards me, and he eclipsed me, the way the moon eclipses the sun. I did something at that moment, under the sheer force of his will, that I had never, not even before Von Neumann, done before. I cowered.

"I am the stick, Patrick. I, and a few like me, are the either the goad that drives you forward, or the stake through your traitorous heart should you ever step out of line, and believe me when I tell you that no rock can give you shelter, nor any tree hide you from me should I ever be brought to bear against you. Do you understand me?"

I did.

And not long after that, I graduated.

6. Initiate

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
9:53 AM

We didn't have a uniform when I graduated. That came later. What we lacked in uniform, we made up for in other bits of ceremony.

We were all given a trip to Boston. We all took different routes; some of us caught a lift immediately off the camp, others the next day, others the next. I was in the third day group, and as the camp emptied, I had some time alone for the first time in longer than I could remember.

I needed it. I needed time to think about what I was doing with my life. I'm ashamed to admit that walking through those quiet woods, staring at the distant mountains, scaring rabbits with my giant feet and giant strides, that was probably the first time I'd ever really thought about my life as having a direction, a destination.

Those early years were spent constantly engaged in the now. Mom never talked about "what I wanted to be when I grew up", and the teachers in all the many places we lived never really seemed to want to talk to me about careers, either. They were too busy talking to me, if they talked to me at all, about coming from a single parent home, and how hard that must have been.

How would I know? You have to have a frame of reference before you can try to be objective about your life, and I had none. We moved too often for me to have any friendships. At first I couldn't make friends because I was the "new kid", and new kids have to be first scrutinized, then mocked, and finally beaten before they can be absorbed, and it seemed I always stayed around just long enough for the beating, then we moved. I hated fighting, but you can master anything if you spend enough time at it.

Eventually I started picking fights on day one. The first few times, I lost, but not badly enough to convince me. Then Nature stepped in, and I put on a foot and a few stone, and then I stopped losing. Eventually I stopped even having to fight. I think, when we are young, we operate on a level similar to animals; we perceive sounds and smells subconsciously, and like a dog we smell fear in the other animals around us, and fear's antipode. I used to think that was bravery, but that's not it. Bravery is the conscious act of ignoring fear, of overcoming it, and it is well to call it a virtue, but it isn't the opposite.

The opposite of fear is rage. We can smell that, too, like ozone from an electrical circuit. The other kids could smell that rage in me, and they started trying to stay out of my way. I didn't always let them.

Was that rage coming from my "tough" life as the child of a single parent? Was it simply that I had "father" issues?

Of course I did, and I knew it even then. Mom would **not** talk about him, whoever he was. I remember reading *The Scarlet Letter*, and wondering if Mom didn't talk about him because of some secret shame. Maybe he was a pastor, in some Bible Belt town where people were still able to feel shame.

Maybe he was a Manhattan.

Oh, I lugged that one around for years, I did. I'd see supers like Redshift and The Mystic in the news, doing things like teleporting to the moon with a video camera to prove NASA hadn't faked the moon landings, not out of any sense of patriotism, but just because they didn't like Geraldo, and I'd sit in my room, squeezing charcoal briquettes, hoping to make a diamond, or staring at the couch Mom was sprawled out on, getting over a bender, and I'd think, "Burn. Burn. Buuuurn.."

Or freeze. Or vanish. Or anything, really.

I remember the day it hit me that Mom wasn't telling me, not because she was trying to protect me, but because in all likelihood, *she didn't know who he was*.

That's when I started fighting back.

And here I was, having gotten myself into an organization bent on the overthrowing of my government, with death on my right at the end of a hangman's noose for treason, and death on my left from the men to whom I'd sold myself for betrayal. I'd come cheap. Three 45 caliber hollow points, discounted from a retail price of 15 grand.

Maybe I could run. Those mountains weren't so far away, and they were so beautiful. I could hike it over them, maybe break into a cabin along the way and steal some supplies. I could ...

Nah. I was never much of an outdoorsman. The only time I voluntarily left the house was when Mom wanted the television, and that was few and far between. I remember telling the shrink at Eastern Correctional that I had absolutely no father issues. I'd been raised by the great ones. Bill Cosby, Andy Griffith, Ward Cleaver.

He'd countered and said, "No you weren't. You were raised by Homer Simpson, Al Bundy, Raymond, and Peter Griffin."

That's true, I'd thought. Every Dad was a complete and utter moron, and weak besides. I wonder, looking back, if they weren't trying to make me feel better about not having a Dad. Or perhaps, trying to convince me not to become one. If that was the angle, it worked.

No, my TV dads hadn't taught me how to brave the elements.

And besides, I didn't want to run. I was still angry. Angry at the people who'd taken everything good there was to take and kept it in vaults and banks and gated communities. I was angry at the people who'd accepted that; let everything good go and kept the cheap, the gaudy, the trashy, the demeaning.

I was still angry at the government. Did you know they tax barter, in some states? If I trade you a baseball card, they have the nerve to think that they, the Government, have a right to some of the worth of that card. I was angry at them for the swagger in every cop's step, the perfect paintjobs on every cruiser, the gleam of every pistol and shotgun, while the men they supposedly serve cower, drive beaters, and undergo a ten day waiting period before they are allowed to purchase what the Constitution guarantees. Tired of being the only one who saw the irony when the television scoffed at countries that required border control, and then getting stopped at a traffic check the next day.

I was tired of being treated like a slave in the Land of the Free, tired of being suspected of being a terrorist with Sarin in my Coke bottle in the Home of the Brave.

Maybe, this one time in my whole stupid life, I could do something meaningful.

So I walked back into camp, just in time to catch the call for the last bus out.

I was given another phone, a set of earbuds, and a bus ticket. I was also given a 9 millimeter automatic pistol and a shoulder rig.

As the bus pulled into South Station, my phone buzzed again. I pulled it out of my pocket and looked at it.

GPS FIX CONFIRMED
DOWNLOADING APP
STAY IN SOUTH STATION

A little hourglass beneath it filled, turned over, and filled again. I got off the bus staring at it, just like pretty much every other person I barely noticed walking around me. It buzzed again

GO TO SOUTHWEST GRILL
ON LEFT AS YOU MOVE THROUGH TERMINAL

I started walking, and saw the little restaurant it mentioned. I walked in to it. Standard walk up counter. Buzz.

ASK CASHIER FOR A NUMBER 37

The kid standing behind the counter was totally zoned, staring over my left shoulder with a vacant expression.

"Uh, hi." I said. "Can I have.. a number 37?"

He reached under the counter and grabbed an envelope, slid it toward me. Never stopped staring at whatever it was. I looked over my shoulder, trying to follow his line of site, but there was nothing there.

"Thanks?" I said. Buzz.

LEAVE SOUTH STATION
TAKE MTA RED LINE

I started walking, looked back. The kid was still staring into space. I shuffled a little, trying to manage the phone in one hand while I opened the envelope with the other. It was a bus pass.

The phone buzzed again, and because of the awkward hold I had on it, I nearly dropped it.

MOVE FASTER

I left the station just in time to see the red line bus, pulling in. I ran to it, swiped my pass, and sat down.

I watched Boston roll past me for all of about ten minutes, then buzz.

GET OFF PARK ST STATION.

I did, a few other people getting off with me.

I looked out over the wide expanse of Boston Commons. It was a beautiful spring day, and it seemed as if there were thousands of people milling around in sun hats, sunglasses, sun screen, and sun dresses. I gotta say I preferred the latter. Buzz.

INSERT EAR BUDS

It had a little video beneath it of a quarter inch stereo jack inserting itself into a clone of my phone, and then a jumpcut to two ear buds leaping out like snakes into the ears of a cartoon figure. The cartoon seemed to wince as they did, and the effect was pretty creepy. I put mine in much more gently.

The moment the jack went into the phone, the screen changed to show a little barber pole over the word

BUFFERING

I waited, then heard someone speaking. The voice sounded so familiar, for some reason.

"Hello. In just a few moments, you will be linked into a live broadcast along with your fellow graduates. For now, I would like you to stroll.."

Then the voice jumped; it was the same voice, just out of cadence with the previous sentence, "Northwest.." jump "through the.." jump "park."

There was another buzz, and the phone displayed a compass image with a throbbing red line to the northwest. It moved as I moved the phone. I started walking.

The voice switched over to Bach's Air on a G-String. It was being played on a piano without accompaniment, and the player had this kind of jazz thing going on. Reminded me of Vince Garauldi playing the music for *Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown*. It was almost campy, but it wasn't, and I found my steps falling in time to it. I love the piece, but the name always hits me funny. "Air on a G-String." Sounds like the punch line for a joke about ladies under attire and the inevitable effect of carbonation.

I passed a couple playing keep away with a Frisbee and a golden retriever. The goldie had that big grin that his breed are so good at, and even though the sun was so bright that the pavement seemed to sizzle a little, it still seemed to brighten the world around him. He snagged the Frisbee out of the air, and I almost cried out, "Yeah, good dog!", but I stopped myself. Didn't want to draw attention to myself.

Air on a G-String (you're trying to come up with that joke, aren't you?) faded, and the voice came in again.

"Good day, ladies and gentlemen. I am Doctor Disaster, and this is your graduation ceremony. I would love nothing more than to have a personal conversation and a walk with each of you, individually, but I'm afraid the time line for my plans is too demanding, and there are a lot of you. I hope that this experience proves to be a close second. "

He paused. I found myself coming up around the Duck Pond, and again in that unrhythmic jumping manner, the Doc said, "Walk. Around the . Far side. Of the pond."

I kept walking.

"I would like to have this walk with you because, as of now, you are all my family. Your fate and mine are forever linked, and to be honest, that's quite an intimidating concept for me.

"Each of you has at this point proven to me, through terrible ordeals, that either your love of me, or perhaps, your hate of something for which you have no name or words, is stronger than your sense of self preservation. Or perhaps you have come to the same conclusion that I have; that your self preservation depends upon the removal, the irradiation, of that something. If so, then the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and either way, I'll take it.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance to you. I can give you a name for this thing, a reason for your fear. You may think me wrong to call it fear, but, my friend, what is hate but fear with teeth?"

As I walked, I noticed another man walking towards me, earbuds trailing into his pocket, with the vacant expression of someone paying close attention to something which he could hear but not see. He didn't notice me, and as I passed him, I recognized him as one of the guys from the first squad out at camp.

"The thing you fear, to rip off Eisenhower, is fear itself. But it is not necessarily a fear that *you feel*, so much as it is a fear which the world is attempting to *force upon you*." His voice had begun to take on something of a growl, a heat beneath the vowels.

"The world panicked, and in that moment of stupidity, gave birth to the ones you call supers, or the Manhattan clan, or the Ubermensch. I could go on, as there are nearly more words for them than names for God.

"They are, my friend, neither a force for good nor evil, for despite their powers, they are still us; they are foolish, childish, angry, and naïve. They are power without wisdom. They are misled. Misled by an organization of corrupted men who would use their power for the purpose of gaining still more power. Why?

"Every organization, be it 'elected' officials or single cell organisms, seeks to extend its existence. Perhaps, like epithelial cells, they behave as they do without reason, operating simply out of the programming built into them by their Creator.

"Or perhaps they do it because there is an *intelligence* behind them. Perhaps the tin foil hat set aren't quite so crazy as some would have you believe. Have we not seen giants walk the Earth who can peer into your mind, agitate your cells into spontaneous combustion, or lift you off of the ground in defiance of all that our empirical model of thinking can even begin to explain?

"The Talmud Project was the pinnacle moment of a movement of faith, my friend. It was the actions of men who had replaced the God they knew, the God that had delivered them into a nation vaster and richer than any other in the world, and they replaced Him with a nebulous god, a god of ritual and cant, a god of existence without reason, a god of science. And from that god sprang forth abominations.

"I tell you that, even if there is no intelligence driving the solidification of power, driving the removal of liberty, than it is simply a matter of time before one comes along, grabs the reins, and drives us all along the event horizon into slavery, destruction, and death."

Another pause, and another disjointed statement. "Head for the Soldiers and Sailors Monument to your. Left."

"What can you do against gods and demons, my family? What good is the might of mice against lions? What can you, with all of your weaknesses and fears, do in the face of such adversity?"

Then, disjointed, as I came near the monument, "Stop." I stood, and about me, I noticed hundreds of people milling about the park. The warm weather must really have pulled people outside today.

"You can do nothing. At least, not alone. With your single resources, you can do nothing against such overwhelming adversity. However.."

He paused, and as he did, the milling, loose streams of people suddenly began to knot and bunch, and I noticed that all of them, every last one had earbuds on. As one, they turned to the monument and walked towards it.

".. With just a little organization, with common purpose.."

Then, suddenly in my ear "Raise your arm, my friend, and shout your defiance!"

I threw my hand into the sky, opened my mouth, and shouted...

.. and somehow, my voice came out a hundred, a thousand times louder than was possible for it to have come from me. All around me, men, women, even children stood with their fists in the air, screaming in anger, in hatred. Our voices were somehow creating a harmonic that made my teeth rattle, and I realized that I was subconsciously crying out in tune to a tone that was coming to me through my ear buds.

The Soldiers and Sailors Monument, surrounded by this sudden mob of screaming people, looks like a thin pillar standing on top of a wide, squat, blocky base, and it reminded me somehow of one of the giant Saturn V rockets, standing on the pad waiting for launch. Somehow, I can't be sure how, somehow it was beginning to *move*, to vibrate; great cracks ran up and down its length.

"Stop!"

Silence. Even the traffic sounds that had only a moment ago penetrated even this far into Boston Common, the bird song, the sounds of people, all stopped, and for a moment, there was perfect, absolute silence.

The fringes of the group began to dissolve, the people going back to strolling, talking animatedly amongst each other, pedaling, or any of a thousand things, just as if nothing had happened.

"Walk. West. Towards the ball park." A buzz in my pocket, and I saw the compass had coming back, pulsing a red line across the western arm of the compass rose. I started walking.

"You see, my family? Do you begin to understand what possibilities are opened to us? What power even such as we hold, when wielded in concert?" He laughed, softly at first, and then louder, and then a cackle, for just a brief moment.

"This may be the last time so many of us are so close together to each other in a single place. However, wherever you go from here, in whatever cell you are placed, in whatever role you are cast, remember this day. Remember that no matter how tedious, or useless, or unimportant you are, that your actions, like your voice, are in concert with your family, and that together, we can rock the very foundations of the establishment.

"We can shake the super men, my family. We can shake them to pieces.

7. Posting

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
9:56 AM

1. Posting.

The first job they gave me was knocking over a liquor store.

Man, that didn't go at all well.

You think the camp, the phones, plane tickets, any of this stuff comes cheap? I mean, I'll grant you, the organization saves money where it can.

"Why buy what you can steal?" my cell leader tended to say. Usually while ignoring a request from me for some petty cash for underwear or shoes.

His name was Travis, or at least, that was the name he gave me. I was still "Josh Grant" then, so I doubt his momma scrawled "Travis" on that birth certificate form while she waited for the epidural to wear off.

He was wheel man, that first night out. Nicky had shotgun seat, Tom (or Tommy Gun; kinda like Little John in his case, since he carried this teenie weenie Walther like he was James Bond or something) took the middle, out of the car after Nicky, and I had the rear.

I don't remember the drive to the place at all. I think we were all too amped up to talk; I do remember Nicky smacking the button on the stereo in a sudden flash of temper and screaming, "Turn that crap off!"

The first thing I remember clearly is hearing Travis saying, "Go, go, go!" like the jump master on board a C-130, dropping grunts into a hot LZ, only his voice was low, almost a whisper. Nicky pulled the lever under his seat as he climbed out, the passenger seat snapping forward as Tommy climbed out. The blue half egg from a pair of pantyhose crunched under my feet as I climbed out. I felt like a complete idiot. I remembered that scene from *Raising Arizona* where the guy says, "Boy, you got a panty on your head," and nearly broke up. I crab walked towards the door, watching behind us with my hand on the 9 mill under my jacket.

By the time I got to the door, Nicky already had the clerks on the floor behind the counter, Tommy stood back to back with him, watching for someone to pop out from the stockroom or from behind one of the shelves, but the place was empty; we knew it would be, since we'd watched it for a week. It was ten minutes till closing time Friday night, nearly Saturday morning, and we knew business had been good.

My face started itching. At first it was just a little bit itchy, like those itches you get all over yourself all the time and ignore. I tried to stay out of the line of site of the door, and I'd occasionally lean over to look back the way we'd come. Travis had the lights off, and would flash them if anybody came.

Then the itching got worse, very quickly. First it was that beard stubble itch you get that convinces you to shave even when you're not working a straight job. I never grew a beard; my face always seemed to grow it just long enough to itch and then stop.

It kept getting more severe. I started scratching, but it wasn't helping.

Behind me, Nicky was screaming at one of the clerk to "open the safe, open the safe or you're dogmeat, open the safe, we know you got the combo, we've seen you open it, do it!" Tommy was still looking around.

I was using both hands now, scratching. The fingers of my left hand were a claw, reaching under the nylon, the right..

"Hey!" Tommy said, and I looked at him.

"Hey!" he said, again, staring at me. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm..." I said, and stopped, noticing that Nicky, standing over the clerk as he worked the dial on the safe, was also staring at me. I couldn't make out his features through his hose, but I could see his mouth was open in a wide O.

I took stock of myself, and realized that with my right hand, I was using the barrel of the gun, pushed under the nylon, to scratch my cheek.

We stood that way for a good four count, and then I said in a meek voice, "It itches, man. Bad."

That was it. Tommy stopped laughing about the time we made it back home, an hour later. Nicky managed to hold it together while we were in the store, but lost it coming out. We were supposed to run and pile into the car as fast as we could so Travis could get moving fast, and I made the trip in record time, pulling that Legg off my head the second I ducked under the door frame, but the other two moved like drunks, laughing.

That's how I earned the nickname "Death Wish," and it stuck.

Most of our jobs were like that. Travis called it "Procurement," and they were almost always nickel and dime kind of heists. I kept thinking back to the Doc, talking about coordinated effort, and imagined all those nickels and dimes piling in some giant piggie bank somewhere.

Occasionally we had other jobs that made no sense. Travis ended up riding a bus for a whole afternoon looking for a guy wearing a Red Sox ball cap and a pair of Converse high tops; when he saw him, he was supposed to sit next to the kid and say, "Don't let Gloria leave tonight," then get off the bus. The guy never showed, though.

I had one where I had to wait until 9 o'clock at night in the middle of a public park, then walk over to a little access road that lead in and use a pair of bolt cutters to cut the lock off a long chain between two poles sunk in concrete, then walk away. I did it, and never saw another soul in that park.

We moved around a lot. Travis and Tommy Gun were pretty decent guys to take a road trip with, although Nicky got car sick most of the time. Kind of a drag, sitting for hours at a time in the back with him all sallow, wrapped around a garbage bag, heaving his guts up.

We nearly got busted one night in this little gas station about thirty miles outside Topeka. We were running on fumes and hungry besides (except Nicky and Tommy, who'd drawn the short straw and had ended up in back with Nicky). I was driving that night, so I was gassing us up while Travis rummaged around in the station, picking up Slim Jims and other "food" products.

Travis kept looking out the window, in between doing some serious comparison shopping on all the crap in the store. The hayseed behind the counter had to have been pushing sixty going on a hundred, but

he wasn't slow; he was watching Travis like a hawk.

I filled the tank, put the handle back on the pump and got back in the car, starting it up. Travis had left the passenger door open, and he was now ambling up to the counter with an armload.

"Here it comes," I said to the guys in the back, and slipped the car into gear.

Travis plopped his load on the counter, and one of the bottles of soda rolled off the counter onto the floor in front of the geezer.

As soon as the old fellah bent down to get it, Travis grabbed the armload and ran for the car.

"C'mon!" I yelled foot tensed and ready for pushing us into liftoff.

Travis was laughing like a madman. The car was on the far side of the island, and as he stepped over it, his back foot caught on the concrete edge between the pumps, and he went down, smacking his head on the car's frame.

"Travis!" I yelled as one his soda bottles started spinning around beside him in a jet of fizz. He wasn't moving. I glanced up and the geezer was reaching under the counter, futzing with something.

Nicky popped the seat forward, stepped out over Travis and started lifting him into the car.

"Move! Move!" yelled Tommy, staring into the store. The geezer had gotten the thing he'd been tugging on loose, and it turned out to be a what looked like the longest barreled single barrel shotgun I'd ever seen. For his age, he was pretty spry; he lifted up the counter to expose his pass through into the store.

Travis was out cold, bleeding all over the place while Nicky tried to push him into the back seat; Tommy leaned over, grabbed him by the wrists, and started trying to haul him in.

Meanwhile, our old fellah had tried to run through the counter's passthrough with the single barrel held lengthwise in front of him; I heard him "Whoof" out a big lungful of air as the barrel and stock caught between the two edges of the counter. He righted it and started around the counter, a bit slower than before.

"Move it ladies!" I yelled. I wanted to just smash the pedal no matter what these dimwits were doing, but I couldn't, wouldn't.

Tommy heaved, and Travis's left shoulder finally cleared the doorframe. Nicky dropped the seat back, and as he put his left foot into the car, screamed, "Roll!"

He didn't have to tell me twice; I left three feet of rubber as I peeled out, Nicky hanging onto the handle beside the door as he pulled himself in. I glanced into the rear view just in time to see Papaw drawing a bead down four feet of shotgun and screamed, "Down!"

We ducked as our rear window blew into pieces through the car, spraying all of us with broken glass.

I nearly smacked into a car marked "Sherriff" as we pulled out. "Aw, c'mon, no!" I screamed, pounding the wheel in rage as the cop slid his cruiser around and took off after us.

Tommy lifted up out of the back, pulled out his Desert Eagle, and fired five shots, slow and easy into the passenger front tire of the Sherriffmobile; on the fifth shot, the tire blew, and the cruiser slewed into the

ditch.

I stared behind us through the shattered rear window watching the cruiser shrink, then turned to Nicky. "Can you believe that just happened?!" I screamed into his face.

He looked at me for a second, and then threw up into my lap.

Yeah, good times.

One time, we ran into a super.

After the gas station incident, the organization gave us another car and told us to stay low for a while. We did; we drove out to Myrtle Beach, down in South Carolina, to take a break, catch up with some friends of Travis, who we had now taken to calling "Twinkletoes."

Apparently he'd been a biker before joining our merry ranks, and said that this was "Biker Week, heaven on earth." I don't know if we went because we agreed with him, so much as we wanted to shut him up.

It had it's charm, I suppose, if you like Budweiser, rednecks, Harleys, and such. I'm no snob, but even I thought it was a bit.. Well, crass, really. But ok.

Travis (Twinkletoes), on the other hand, had himself a blast, except that he was without a bike. We'd hit a bar, or some cheap greasy spoon, and he'd inevitably run into someone he knew, and make up some completely outlandish story about how he'd lost his bike. My favorite was at this little pizza place in a random strip mall we stopped at because he "knew this girl that worked there, pull over, pull over." Said girl was Employee of the Month.. four years before. They'd left her picture up even though she'd moved on, and in fairness, I'd have stopped, too.

Anyway, he gets to telling them about nitrous. "I got the idea," he said, "of watching this couple of pencil necks on YouTube with Mentos and bottles of Diet Coke. You saw that, right?"

The guys hadn't, and it happened that the pizza place was attached to a supermarket, so next thing you know, we're standing in the parking lot, drinking while Twinkletoes illustrates rapid nucleation. We're all covered in foam while he goes on about the bike.

"So I figure," he says, "if a little foam can launch like that, what do you get if you get a bike, rig it with nitrous, and a jet engine, and kick em all off as you hit a ramp?"

"Jet engine? Whadda you know about jet engines?" says one of his buddies, slurring some.

"Me? Not a thing. But this guy I know, he's from Norway, see, and those guys, for fun, build jet engines and stick em on skis and ride em over ponds and stuff. I know cause he told me about it, so I go to see him, and I says, 'Sven', his name's Sven, great guy, you know him, dontcha, Paulie?"

"Redhead?" says the slurry buddy.

"Yep."

"Don't know 'em."

"Anyway, I says, 'Sven, how do you build a jet engine onto a bike that's already set for nitrous?' He says, 'Let's find out', and so we built it."

Twinkle toes paused to knock back some more Budweiser, which tasted suspiciously like Diet Coke.

"So here I am, seventy five feet away from this ramp we made, right, and Sven, he's telling me, 'You be sure an hit de switch as you hit de ramp, and she's gonna go, so you hang on.'

"I clamped on my skull bucket, said a Hail Mary, and off I go, hell for leather towards that ramp. I reach my finger over, ready to hit that button.. Closer.. Closer.. Then just as the front wheel hits the ramp, I hit the button!"

Silence. "Well?" I said. "What happened to the bike."

"You got me."

"What?"

"One second, I'm sittin on the bike, hittin the button, next thing I know, I'm rollin down the pavement. Sven runs up and tells me that that bike got movin so fast, it just took off without me.'"

Twinkletoes took one more pull on his beer. "We never saw it again."

We were running low on money, three days in, so we got into an argument about how we were going to top up. I wanted to leave town, head west as far as the gas would take us, hit something there and come back. Nicky and Tommy Gun were right on board with the idea, but Twinkletoes wasn't having any of that.

"We don't have to leave; the beach is filled with opportunities, boys. One stop shopping all along the way."

"We were supposed to keep a low profile, man." Tommy said. "This place is crawling with people."

"Rumbling with people." Nicky corrected, and he was right. Not once in two nights had the low throb of a thousand cycles stopped.

"I'm doing it." he said. "You can watch if you want to, or you can help me, but I am not going to go broke, sitting still, and end up sleeping in the car."

He was driving as he said this, and at this last, he pulled in to one of a thousand little strip malls with a package store, one of his favorites. "The last storehouse of all that's good," he'd call them, "cash and booze."

He walked in, drawing the inevitable panty hose over his head as I slid into the driver's seat.

"This won't take long," I said, and I had no idea how right I was. The moment I said this, I heard glass shatter. I turned just as Twinkle toes hit the pavement, and kept spinning for a few more yards.

I looked back at the store, and for just a split second, I thought I was having an Elvis sighting.

He was dressed in a black leather suit, with a leather fringe all along the sides of his pants, coat, and arms. He walked with a kind of rolling saunter, almost but not quite feminine.

"Oh no," Tommy said from the back seat, "oh, no, not him, no."

I was still seeing Elvis; the guy was wearing this huge set of mirrored shades, above which sat a forehead

that made me think of "the Old Man of the Mountain" you saw on New Hampshire license plates, over the motto, "Live Free or Die."

I realized who it was, and at the same time, I realized that Twinkletoes was not going to Live Free.

It was Graviton.

One of the gray sheep, not over any belief or ideal, but just because the guy was a complete slacker. He was always freeloading around the country, hanging out with the kind of seedy characters that the Manhattan clan tended to cover up for. Unlike the vast majority of the families rejects, no one in the family ever tried to punish the guy.

He controlled gravity. With thought or gesture, he could alter the effect of gravity on anyone or anything. There was a rumour that he had once killed a guy by putting a penny on the top of his head, and then giving it the relative weight of a jet airliner.

Being able to alter was useful for him for another reason besides complete autonomy. Without his power, he looked like he had to be pushing three hundred pounds, maybe three fifty.

Apparently he'd been in the package store picking up a load of firewater for a gang of hoodlums he'd taken a liking to, and was in the process of explaining the "marketing value" of giving him the load for free when Twinkletoes rushed in.

Twinkletoes hauled himself up off the pavement, shook his head as if trying to clear it, and finally saw who it was that was thumping towards him. His face went white, and the hand holding the pistol began to shake.

And then he smiled. I saw that smile spread itself across Twinkle.. Across Travis's face, and somehow I knew exactly what that smile meant. I knew that Travis had realized he was a dead man walking.

And that he'd decided he may as well have fun with it.

Graviton had started saying something about picking the wrong store when Travis said in his most mocking voice, "Well well! If it isn't Gravi Tun, here in lots and lots of flesh." Then he lifted the pistol and emptied it at Graviton, who stood no more than four paces away.

Graviton's arm had shot up as Travis had lifted his pistol, and he must of created a gravity field powerful enough to pull the bullets' trajectory hard to his right, because I saw a woman twenty degrees to Travis's left grab her arm and drop.

"What did you call me?" Graviton said, a snarl on his face.

"I called you Gravi Tun, buddy. I could call you Lard Butt, I could call you Tons of Fun, or I could just call you Fat, but I'd certainly better not call yo ulate for dinner, eh? How's that strike you, Jello Thighs?"

Graviton pulled of his shades threw them down to the sidewalk so hard they embedded themselves into the pavement. "How dare you, you cheap hood? I.."

"YOU," Travis yelled, taking a step closer, "are an even cheaper hood than I am! At least when I rob a guy, I have the common courtesy to be upfront about it and bring a gun! I tell him that this is a robbery! You and your whole stinking family call it publicity, or don't call it anything! You just take and expect us to like it! Well we don't like it, and we don't like you, Gravi Tun. What do you say to that?"

Graviton threw his right hand up over his head, fingers splayed, and Travis was jerked into the air as if a passing aircraft had angled a hook into his gut.

"MY!" Graviton screamed, and then brought his arm down, hard, fingers curling into a fist. Travis slammed into the pavement hard. The sound was.. I'd rather not think about what it sounded like.

"NAME!" Graviton screamed, voice getting shrill at the end, bringing his arm and Travis.. What was left of him, into the air again.

"IS GRAVI TAWN!" he screamed, twisting smoothly at the waist and throwing his arm straight out towards the package store. Travis flew through the plate glass window, and we could hear the sounds of shelves crashing, bottles breaking, and pained screams from the people inside.

"DO YOU PEOPLE HEAR ME?" he shouted spinning around. His arms were down at his sides, forearms held out, hands palms up, fingers clenching into a claw like fist. As he did this, a Ford Explorer on one side of him, and the front of the package store on the other began to crumple in on themselves. I was close enough, window open, to feel a slight pull from the Explorer as it twisted into itself.

Graviton took a few breaths, lowered his arms, stared down at the bloody pavement in front of him where he'd thrown Travis the first time. There were crazed cracks, and a slight indentation at the epicenter, and he seemed to take peace from the sight of it. Then he looked up again and said, "You people got somewhere to be?"

The gawkers standing around the strip mall, to a man, suddenly remembered pressing engagements that were awaiting them behind the door of the closest structure, and they evaporated into them like Travis's blood into the cracks in the pavement.

"Drive, Josh." Tommy said behind me. "Just drive, go on."

I took my foot off the brake and started rolling away. Graviton stared at us, and for one heart stopping moment, I knew that he somehow knew we were with Travis. I forced my eyes away from his dark round shape in the rear view and slowed at the outlet of the parking lot, looking for oncoming traffic.

This seemed to satisfy Graviton, who turned and started back towards the package store to look for any unbroken bottles that he could take back to his groupies.

As we drove away, I saw a police car and an ambulance, coming to do what they always did in situations like this. They were coming to pick up the pieces.

Travis had looked towards us for one brief second before he spat his last words. I hadn't caught it then, but I knew it now, heading north along the row after row of beach shops and bars, that Travis had thrown his life away to keep Graviton from forcing him to tell where his car, where his buddies were. He'd done it to keep any of us from saying anything about the Doc.

I drove, and I hated myself.

The local paper was the only news agency ever to say anything about Travis. It wasn't an obituary, nor was it even close to a realistic depiction of what had happened. It simply stated that Graviton, the "rogueish" member of the Manhattan Clan who'd been spending some R & R time at Myrtle Beach, had prevented an armed robbery.

I ended up cell leader, and we got some new fish to fill in that back seat for a while, but it just wasn't the

same after that. I was careful, after Travis died. I planned more, I took less risks with myself or my men, and I learned to be patient.

We were moved out of Procurement after about 6 more months. I got the notice in our drop, which was steganographically encoded into a LOLCat of the Day website. It's funny; that stupid site picked up an inordinate amount of traffic from grandmothers and old maids; who knows how many of our messages were being passed around on Facebook .

The reassignment came from a huge black cat, possibly caught as he was coming in for a landing, with the caption "HOVER CAT IZ COMING FOR YER SOUL". Inside the message was a series of numbers which corresponded to page and words numbers in a particular printing of "The Shining" by Stephen King (which we had each read a thousand times, and agreed was the king of all books about father issues).

It told us we needed to meet our controller ASAP for a new job. I really wasn't looking forward to it; the guy was a loser.

We drove for a couple days and made it to Detroit. I hate Detroit. The place has the feel of a third world disaster area, and everyone you meet seems to be simply waiting for that last tsunami, hurricane, or earthquake to finish them off. It's so empty that when I'm driving through it, I feel like Charlton Heston driving around in "The Omega Man", the last guy on Earth hunting vampires with white afros while they sleep during the day. I don't like being any where near the place at night, same reason.

We pulled in to Higgins Elementary about ten in the morning. I left the new guy with the car, a pump shotgun, and The Shining, and Nicky and Tommy Gun followed me in to the old school, flanking me, guns at the ready. We'd nearly gotten into it with a bunch of punks in here on one of our last visits, and we'd decided not to take any chances any more.

We walked through those echoing halls, plaster and glass crunching under our feet, until we came to a particular bank of lockers. They were orange, with blobs of yellow paint flecking the doors as if someone had lobbed a mustard filled water balloon into them. Without saying anything, Nicky walked down to the hall and craned his neck around the corner, and Tommy checked in the abandoned classrooms on either side of the lockers. They both gave me the nod, and I opened locker 417. The inside of the locker was empty, except a hole had been punched in the back of it. Sharp metal edged ringed the hole, looking like they'd give you a scar and an opportunity for a tetanus shot all at once.

I hated doing it, but I reached in, feeling the gossamer of spider webs wrap around my fingers, reached way back until I felt something like a pipe running vertically in the wall. I twisted it and pulled, and the entire bank of lockers swing inward, revealing a stair well leading down. I pulled my hand back out, just barely avoiding the spikes, and nodded to Nicky and Tommy. They came down with me.

We counted the steps as we went down, skipping the third, fifth, and seventh steps as we went. Stepping on them would have set off some rather nasty booby traps. The last time Spoodles had run us through, it had been a flame thrower mounted at the top of the stairs. He tended to change them out, though, so I had no idea what it was now. I do know that he hated cutesy stuff like curare darts or kitchen knives mounted to pivots; he went for more elaborate things like explosions and such. I do know that he still had hundreds of shotgun shells embedded into the walls beneath sheets of paper which he'd then painted over, and each one was wired to a primer. He'd stolen some of the old school fire alarm pulls from the school above him and wired them to the primers, giving "Pull in Case of EMERGENCY" a rather unique meaning.

We got down to the bottom of the stairwell and knocked on the heavy fire door at the bottom.

Spoodles was at the door a few seconds later, pulling bolts open on the other side for a few minutes (he

was a believer in locks), and finally he opened the door.

"You guys made crappy time." he said. "How'd you come, 69?"

"Nah," I said as we came in, "75. You mean you weren't tracking us on the way in?"

"Had other things to be watching." Spoodles said, stepping back into his chair.

Spoodles had a desk upon through which ran thick steel posts. Branches off of the posts each held a giant display screen, and the grouping of them arced around Spoodles like a half dome. His chair was a strange beast, mounted on a pivot to provide as much support as a bed if he reclined it back, and his monitors would shift position if he did so.

Spoodles had spent a good 48 straight hours in that chair, and smelled like it.

"You get that catheter fitted yet?" I asked. Nicky hee hawed like a donkey at that.

"You gonna put it in for me?" Spoodles replied, no longer looking at me. I looked and saw that a few small windows in one of his displays showed video feeds of us from several angles, and he was now speaking to those. Spoodles preferred people in two dimensions rather than three. He was typing like a mad man, but the sound of it was almost inaudible. His hands were sitting on two ergonomic palm rests, at the end of which sat a cup for each finger, ringed with switches on the sides, above, and below, as well as a push button. Moving a particular finger in a particular direction each gave a different symbol, with one finger working as a mouse pointer. I'd gotten him to let me try it one time and could make no sense of how to type anything at all. He'd said something about hexadecimal and unicode, and I'd given up.

"The Doc's pulling some cells in for something special," Spoodles said, "and you guys were one of the cells he tapped."

"What's the job?" I asked.

"I have no idea." Spoodles said.

"Really? I though everything went through you."

"No way." Spoodles said. "I'm a cutout just like you. I don't even know where most of the data I get comes from, and I'm not exactly encouraged to find out."

"I figured you'd have hacked your way back through the messages you get."

"On anybody but the Doc, that's SOP." he said. "But not him. I'm running some of the most paranoid machines on the planet; my operating systems make NetBSD look like Windows, but I know he's got people all through me."

"How?" I asked.

"How do I know?" He turned in his chair, faced the meat version of me and caught my eye. "You really want that explanation?"

I shook my head, knowing he'd lose me in a word cloud of jargon and acronyms, and I appreciated him giving me the opt out. A lot of techs don't.

"Call it a vibe." he said, turning back to his displays. He hadn't stopped typing as he'd turned to me. "At any rate, look behind the monitors."

Nicky, Tommy Gun and I stepped over the loose cables snaking from his chair and desk across the floor, and peaked back behind one of them. I didn't know what it was, but Tommy gave a high pitched bark and jumped back like he'd been bitten.

"What? I said.

"Plastic explosives, detonator." he said. "Enough on that one display to take out this room, easy."

"Some behind each one." Spoodles said, still typing away.

Nicky and I backed off, much more careful of the wires than we had been. "What is that, like a deadman's switch?" Nicky asked.

"No, man, more like the Sword of Damocles." said Spoodles.

"Say what?"

"Damocles was a yes man for his king, guy named Dionysus." Spoodles said. "He fawned all over his majesty, going on and on about just how lucky a guy Dionysus was to have the position he held, so Dionysus tells Damocles, 'Let's switch places for a while so you can see what it feels like.' So Damocles say, 'Oh yeah, that sounds great,' thinking that it's going to be a cake walk, but when he gets in the chair, Dionysus takes a sword and hangs it over the throne by a single strand of hair from a horse's tail. Damocles starts freaking out, as anyone would, and Dionysus goes, 'Do you feel lucky, punk? Well, do ya?'

"Damocles didn't, so he got out of the chair."

"And you're still in it." Nicky said, nodding.

"Something like that. I'm good, don't get me wrong, but I'm lazy. If I had any desire to really work at all, I'd probably be pulling in six figures, but I can't stand the kind of crap it takes to deal with the guys in charge. "

"What kind of guys? They'd have to be pretty bad to walk away from that kind of money." Tommy said, eyes agleam with contact avarice.

"In any technology gig, people rise to their level of incompetence, and it's cumulative." Spoodles said. "The kinds of morons you deal with in that line are unbearable. I mean, how do you respect a guy telling you how to code, how things *should* work when they don't have the math or the skills to have the first clue about how to do what you're doing? I don't, and I can't keep my mouth shut, and it got me fired, over and over."

"How did you end up with the Doc?" I asked. I was remembering Mike, his single eye glaring at me as he talked about killing SandMan for laughing.

"I don't know him." Spoodles said. "Never laid eyes on him, but the people who recruited me told me that they didn't care how I mouthed off as long as I did the job. They offered me any gear I wanted, anything I wanted, as long as I agreed to the Sword." He nodded at the monitor we'd looked at.

"The perks, man." Spoodles said. "Couldn't pass them up. I'd never have to worry about all the mundane crap in the meat world ever again. No more shopping, they send my stuff by dumb waiter from a drop a few blocks from the school and I have a guy who stewards; puts it all away, cleans up, cooks. I'd never have to worry about money again; anything I ask for on this particular encrypted IRC channel comes to me a while later. I wrote a Greasemonkey script that passes Amazon links through to the channel for me on a hot key, so all I have to do is hit a key and the thing's here a few days later.

"Not that I ask for much. The stuff I'm working on for the Doc doesn't take a lot of my time, and the guys he's got watching me provide me with the most incredible network of proxies you've ever seen, man, I mean absolutely untraceable, and at blazing speed. Makes Tor look like a Model T. I can hack away at pretty much anything I want."

"Eh, like what?" Tommy asked, glazing over the jargon. We didn't have much time; once Spoodles got into the mindset, he slid into incomprehensibility like a butter pat on a hot skillet.

"I defaced Justice Inc last month."

We stood there in stunned silence for a few moments. Even we knew about that one, everybody did. Justice Inc was this group of supers who'd created an agency kind of like the Pinkertons back in the 18 hundreds. It was an open secret that they were working with the government, although depending on how paranoid you were, the relationship of who worked for whom was debatable.

The hack had been the front page of the site, and had been a thing of beauty. The front page had the Justice Inc logo, this blocky font done up in metallic colors that had an animated shine passing over the brushed steel every few seconds, and a picture of The Mystic, Lady Justice, and Rage on the front. The only thing Spoodles, as it turns out, had changed was the photo.

In the original, the trio had stood in a mix of underwear ad and Captain Morgan poses that were so campy, you wanted to just spit on them, and they were absolutely flawless. Perfect skin like colored marble, not a hair out of place, and looks of benevolent wisdom on their perfectly symmetrical faces. That in itself was a miracle of photographic manipulation, but Spoodles had done exactly the opposite.

The Mystic, cowl over his face, single hand outstretched, now sported a cloak that looked moth eaten, wrinkled, and dingy. Instead of just a black field where the face would be (no one knew what he looked like), you could just make out a set of buck teeth with an overbite that would make any dentist think he had found his magnum opus, and a slight hint of a cleft palate. This would fit certain rumors about Mystic being the product of parents who were keeping it in the family.. His pendant had been replaced with a big and gaudy piece of bling which, if you looked carefully, were the words "Will conjure for attention" in cursive, covered in gold and diamonds.

Rage wasn't quite so obvious. Rage's strength grew logarithmically proportional to his emotional state; the more angrier he got, the stronger he got. You'd expect to see him red faced, veins in the forehead, steam coming out of his ears, that kind of thing, but Spoodles had been more subtle. Rage, in the replaced picture, had this weak, blubbery expression, his lower lip protruding, hiding his upper lip and part of his Freddy Mercury mustache, eyes huge, round and filled with tears. Spoodles had even moved his arms; instead of planted fists at his sides, they were bent, wrists in front, as if he were warding off a smack. His uniform had been changed from red to yellow.

And Lady Justice... Wow.

Lady Justice had been born blind, but could sense the world around her through sound. She went around with her eyes blindfolded with a sword, although she'd traded Justice's usual all covering robes for a leotard that left nearly nothing to the imagination.

Spoodles had robbed her of her curves (what little there were, if we're to be honest), the leotard nearly hanging off of her, if that could be said of spandex. Each rib was clearly outlined, and she was wearing a seventies style hearing aid in the ear turned to the camera. Her Mona Lisa style smile had been changed to a big goofy open mouthed grin, one of her front teeth blacked out. The sword beneath her palm had been exchanged for a cane.

I was lucky to have seen that image; it had been retracted almost immediately. Justice Inc had gone absolutely ballistic after the hack had happened. They'd found people still exchanging the file and gotten the Feds to arrest and jail them on the flimsiest pretexts imaginable, and the rumor was that they were offering millions for the name of whomever had done it.

I didn't know Spoodles real name, but I'd never in a million years turn him in. The hack had become folk legend over night.

"That was *you*?"

"Oh yeah. What, did you see it?"

"Dude, that was awesome!" said Nicky, ever the poet. "I'd ask you for a signed copy.."

".. But you might as well put a bullet in me, yeah." Spoodles said.

"So is it true?" Tommy asked.

"Is what true?"

"Did you get information on some of the super's, weaknesses and all?"

"Tommy," Spoodles said, shaking his head, "nobody but the rankest amateur serves a web site through any gateway that come within a thousand miles of their internal data." Spoodles said. "I mean, you'd have to be a complete moron to even allow a jump from an externally facing machine to an internal network."

"Oh." Tommy sounded dissatisfied.

"I have a feeling," Spoodles went on, "that they give me those proxies, the Doc's real techs, so that they can record what I'm doing. If I hack a site, they watch how, and probably store that against the day they need it. If you're careful, and you don't make a lot of noise, the door you open can last a long time."

"You weren't exactly quiet at Justice Inc." I said.

"Ah, I couldn't resist. I'd already gotten what I'd come for, and I hated that stupid page. Now if we can get back to business, I need to give you your next meet up info."

As we got back into the car, having memorized the location we were to meet up with those other cells, it occurred to me that Spoodles had told us that only an idiot would link up the web site to the network.

He'd never said that they hadn't.

8. Mission

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
10:01 AM

We met up with the other cells in arcade. I didn't even know there were still such things, but there were. The place was cram packed with people; teens, kids, and more adults than I'd anticipated, and the noise was absolutely incredible. There were a dozen of us, and we were pooled around an air hockey machine, two of us playing while the others watched, and the guys from one cell briefed us over the din.

"We're going to be hitting a hospital!" a big lanky blonde guy said. He had a few days bear stubble on his face, and his long haired was tied back with a strip of rawhide. The guy looked like he could peel porcupines with his teeth, he was so tough.

"Why?" I yelled back.

"There's something in there the Doc wants!" the blonde said. "Some kind of exotic element they're using on a research project! I dunno, but the Doc says he expects it to be easy!"

"When?!" I yelled. I watched Tommy Gun sink the puck for the sixth time with the same fakeout smash, and I really, really wanted to be next. It was kind of hard to pay attention to the briefing.

"About five tomorrow; the place is crawling with people during shift change and in visiting; less likely anyone would notice us!"

A teenager who was trying to look tough sauntered up to us, his thin arms held as if he were trying to pump them up, but there was nothing to pump. His head shifted from side to side with each step, and I thought of the big Boston pigeons I'd seen that day on the Common, cocky as a Mafia don.

"How's it going?" he said to the blonde, trying to push himself into the conversation.

"Beat it, chicken." the blonde said, staring him down.

"Who you calling chicken, girlie man?" the teenager said, eyes darting to the blonde's pony tail.

The blonde smiled, nastily, and glanced at me. "You got the basics?" he says to me. "Yeah," I said, "we'll be there."

"Excellent, he said, and then he laced his hands together, and popped his knuckles. Even through the sounds of Japanese pop stars singing gibberish to bad techno, and the beeps and boops of a thousand starships, the sound spread across the place like a pack of Black Cat firecrackers going off.

"Let's walk, friend." said the blonde, grabbing the teenager's scrawny arm in a grip that looked like it could crush a beer can without taking the beer out first.

"Let go of, ow, ow ahh eesh" the teen said, as his arm was bent back.

"Pipe down." he said, dragging the kid out.

Tommy Gun finished his man off, looked around at us to see who next. He'd taken three down already. I moved in fast, popped a token into the machine, and off we went.

The remaining guys were putting their heads together, and I noticed one of them had something in his hands; he seemed to be using an eye dropper to extract something from a shot glass.

Tommy tried that fake smash again, and I didn't go for it, he still tried going right up the middle. I leaned in to the retort, intending to pass under the paddle he'd just lifted up. I don't know if the puck was chipped, or if there was a clogged air port in the table, or what, but the puck lifted up off the table headed straight for the guy with the eyedropper.

"Yike!" he screamed, sounding like a kicked puppy, and instead of jiggling left or right, he ducked, taking the puck right in the mouth instead of his hands. "You wanna watch that!" he said, rising. One of the other guys next to him picked up the puck, passed it back to me.

"What's he doing?" I asked, nodding at the guy with the eye dropper and the swelling lip. "You'll see," he said, a big grin on his face, "it's great."

Tommy and I went 6 all, and he won with that same stupid faint when I glanced over at the eyedropper.

A little later, we made something of a bubble around the guy as we left; he said he really didn't want anybody bumping into him. Not that there was much risk of that; the place had emptied out quite a bit as we got closer to closing.

When we got out front, he took some leftover tokens out of his pocket, and one at a time, bent, laid a drop down with the dropper, then carefully placed a token on top of it. He did this with three or four tokens, then used the eye dropper alone in spots, leaving a large cluster of spots on the ground. The rest of us were leaning against our cars and talking.

"What is that stuff?" I asked Murphy, a red head so Irish it nearly hurt to look at him from one of the other cells.

"Ammonia and iodine crystals." he said with a Georgia twang that just didn't fit his looks. "That stuff is really unstable; you can set it off by blowin on it."

"And he carries it around with him in a shot glass?" I said?

"Naw, just the parts. He mixes it in the shot glass."

"What for?"

"For this, usually." he said. Eyedropper came over to us as a couple of kids came around the corner, hoping to get a little game time in before closing time. One of them, dopey looking kid with a Thundercats t-shirt, noticed one of the tokens. "Swee-eet!" he said, and bent down to pick it up.

The coin scraping the drop must have set off the drop beneath it; the drop exploded with a loud crack, sounded a bit like a 22 going off, and left a little purple cloud of smoke behind. The other drops around them started going off; the guy must've laid them out so that they go off like a chain reaction when their neighbors did.

The two kids screamed, taking off they way they'd come, and we busted a gut.

"I think the big one wet himself." said Murphy, doubled over.

"What was that?" I asked Eyedropper.

"N13," he said, "plus a little extra I use to speed things up, so you don't have to wait for the crystals to dry."

"You carry that stuff around with you?" I asked.

"You should see what keep in my bag." he said, lighting a cigarette.

We met up to hit the hospital the next day. We were nervous, like the horses waiting behind the gates for the starting bell, muscles tensed, almost shaking. I hadn't thought of the horses in a while, and I didn't like thinking of them now. They'd gotten me into enough as it was.

"We ready?" I asked Sam, which was the name of Eyedropper guy, I'd finally asked. I'm terrible with names; tell me who you are and I'll ask you again ten minutes later.

"One more coming." he said, looking at the traffic.

"Who?"

Sam sized me up for a second, then said, "You wouldn't believe me."

"Sure I would. Who?"

But Sam didn't have to answer, as a sedan pulled up beside us, and out stepped Whiteboard Guy.. Ah, the Doc.

I never told you much about the Doc, did I?

He reminds me a little bit of Jesus; not in, you know, anything even remotely like what he is, but in the idea that there's a bunch of common conceptions of his appearance that are all wrong. Jesus didn't look like the long haired blond with the killer chin you see in all the paintings; he was probably not a handsome man, judging by what we read about him.

On the other hand, the Doc was.

Urbane, maybe. Dapper. The guy stepped out of that car, and you felt like paparazzi ought to be popping up from the line of shrubs around the arcade, flashbulbs going off all around him. He had the look of a man who had never, not once in his life, been stopped anywhere on the mistaken assumption that he worked there. He didn't have that alpha male vibe going, but he wasn't much of a beta, either. It's hard to explain; I remember Nicky and I talking about him later, and Nicky said, "The Doc is the kind of guy who you feel walk into a room, even if you don't see him coming. Like he's got some kind of personal storm cloud over him, charging the room with the promise of a lightning bolt."

He was short; about five foot three, maybe, and had the arms of a man who'd spent his life turning pages. He had a dark complexion, and had dark hair and kind of European features.

He grinned when he saw me. "Ah, the man that was mugged. I hope you are well recovered?"

My mouth dropped open as if the spring that held it shut had snapped. I said something brilliant like, "Uh, yeah, good, thanks." I couldn't believe it; he remembered me?

"And Frederick," he said turning to another man leaning against a car, "was your .. ah, situation resolved satisfactorily?"

Frederick allowed that it had been, speaking with the same poise that I had.

"Good, good. The rest of you gentlemen are unfamiliar to me, but we shall remedy that, later I'm afraid, as our time table is rather precise.

"We all know of our destination, yes?" he asked. We did.

"Excellent. I have brought some more explicit directions," he said, drawing some neatly folded sheets of thick, creamy paper and handing them to a man from each cell. Despite not knowing all of us, he knew which cells we belonged to by sight. He'd studied us all.

".. and as the drive takes about forty five minutes at this time of day, I shall ask each man in the front passenger seat to read his directions aloud to the members of his cell. Once done, burn the paper. You'll find it goes up rather energetically; don't hold it close to your faces. Nick," he said, turning to Nicky, "would do well not to do the reading."

I had the feeling that not only did he know about Topeka, but had gotten a good laugh out of it. That made one of us.

"Stick to the plan, gentlemen. If things should go badly, I would ask that, if you are in one of the groups with me, you remain calm and simply help me to leave the building. I expect no real resistance, but if the situation should deteriorate, do whatever you have to extricate yourselves, however if the authorities make an appearance, remember that while I may leave you to the offices of our constabulary temporarily, I will come back for you either through legal channels.. or otherwise. "

He took all of us in, smiled. "Let's get going."

And with that, he duck back into the sedan, which started moving as soon as the door closed.

"You heard the man." I said, and we got going.

Tommy opened the sheet of paper as soon as he got in the car, scanned it.

"Well?" I said. He looked pale.

"We're going in with him." he said.

I thought for a minute. "What else does it say?"

"Not much. It tells where we meet him, and that's about it."

"We can't be all he's taking in with him, can we?" the new guy asked.

"It sounds that way," Tommy said, and then he read it to us.

We met the Doc in a small parking lot off to one side of the hospital campus, next to a dumpster and a loading dock. His sedan was already there.

The driver of the car got out. And got out, And got out. The guy was huge; I couldn't understand how they'd stuffed him in there to begin with, and caught myself bending to see if the car was parked over a hole like the clown car gag/

The giant opened the door for the Doc, who nodded to him as he got out.

"Gentlemen, glad to see that you are punctual. Our other elements are nearly in place; come and change."

He was reaching into the trunk as he said this, and he gave us each a set of folded clothing; whatever it was, it was dark blue and covered with little pockets. I unfolded mine and saw it was a paramedic's uniform.

"I shall give you some equipment for the pockets in a moment."

"Where's his?" I said, nodding towards the giant.

"Sloan tends to draw attention due to his height, so we shall be leaving him here."

That made sense; I had a hard time not staring at him myself. He'd have to hunch to walk indoors, and he'd stick out like a parade float.

I changed, then took the gizmos and doodads the Doc handed me into my pockets along with the other guys. Doctor Disaster would "tsk tsk" every now and then and correct the placement of some particular thingie into a different pocket. I figured there was no way we'd be passing through any metal detectors, which was a good thing; I was wearing my 9 millimeter under my coverall.

The Doc looked at his watch, then nodded to himself and said, "Time." We walked around a corner towards a door. The door had no knob on the outside, and I found myself wondering if this weren't the end of our little field trip already. The Doc must have anticipated this, though, and from a small bag he carried, he drew out a magnet about the size of a hockey puck that was attached to a rubber handle. He stepped over to the door, looked at Tommy Gun and said, "Keep alert", then put his left hand on the door frame near where the knob would have been, locked into position, then lifted the magnet. As soon as the magnet came within a foot of the door, it jerked towards it, and the Doc's neck bulged as he fought to gently, gently allow it to come closer to the door, until he finally allowed it to settle with a soft metallic thunk.

He looked behind him, then to Tommy, who looked back at him and nodded, then he pulled the door open with the rubber handle. We stepped inside with him.

A stall like a shower stall with a floor that lowered towards the center with a grill covering a hole greeted us on our left, and a trio of yellow industrial sized mop buckets sat to our right. The floor was a red tile, and I could make out a set of wire racks further down the hallway. We were in the hospital cafeteria.

The Doc motioned for me to move in front, so I took point, moved towards the intersection past the shelving. The Doc touched my arm, and I looked back at him. "Relax." he said, and I realized I'd been walking on my toes. I tried to walk more naturally, and that seemed to satisfy him.

We moved down to the intersection, and I looked back to the Doc. Tommy, Nicky, and the new guy were behind the Doc, trying to look casual. The Doc looked at his watch, held up his hand, waited. After about two minutes, he said, "Now. Walk casually through to your first left, take that, then fourth door on the right."

We moved through the kitchen. A few hairnetted folks were mixing, chopping, and moving things around, looking all as if they were going to be attending a funeral in a few moments, and I think I immediately understood why hospital foods tastes hopeless. I didn't stare, and while the closest morose looking lady glanced at us, she didn't seem to think we were out of place.

I kept walking, passed through the door into a white tiled utilitarian looking hallway. We moved down the corridor until we came to that fourth door, which was marked "SUPPLY ROOM 3". I opened it and we moved in, closing it behind us. Nicky flipped the light switch after he shut the door.

The room was walled with more of those wire racks, filled with industrial detergent, boxes of paper towels, and other sanitation rick rack. There was a ladder leaned up along the wall, and something tall and thin behind it wrapped in a blue tarp.

"Mister Carson, would you unwrap the package, please." said the Doc, gesturing towards the tarp. Tommy and I helped him maneuver everything, and as I handed Nicky the ladder, he fumbled it, and I watched it fall slowly, coming down like a felled tree, slow but picking up speed. I knew it was going to make on hell of a clatter when it hit.

It didn't, though. The Doc reached out cat quick and snagged it just before it could hit the cement floor of the supply room. He didn't even look mussed. "Please practice more care, Nicholas." he said. "Being discovered at this stage would be unfortunate."

Carson got the tarp off of what turned out to be a folding gurney. Nicky and Tommy got the ladder and the tarp squared away while Carson and I figured out how to extend the gurney's frame. The Doc walked over to one of the shelves, picked a cardboard box, and opened the unsealed flaps, pulling out a sheet.

"You gentlemen remember the directions I gave you?" said the Doc, climbing onto the gurney and throwing out one end of the sheet over himself. Nicky tucked the sheets ends around the slim mattress and frame. "Yeah," I said, "I got it."

"Excellent." He laid back onto the gurney and closed his eyes.

Tommy cracked the door, peered into the hallway, then pulled the door back, holding it open as I helped Nicky edge the gurney out into the hallway. I went out first, and once the door shut, walked forward, hearing the footsteps of the men behind me pushing the Doc, following me.

We went down a few hallways, came to a service elevator, and climbed inside. I pushed the button for the fourth floor, and we went up. So far, other than the few sad sacks in the kitchen, we'd not seen anyone.

When the elevator stopped, I found myself facing a nurse's station. A nurse, who looked Samoan, glanced up at me with a phone pressed to her ear. I smiled, nodded, and stepped off, turning to guide the gurney out of the elevator. She gave a quick grin back, then started speaking into the phone, her expression that of someone who is humoring someone, but not for much longer. She looked harassed, which suited me just fine.

We followed our oath through a maze of corridors. I smiled absently at people as we passed them as I counted hallways. Some of them had a bit of an uphill or downhill slant; I've only ever seen that in hospitals. Is there some reason they can't build the floors to the same height everywhere? We also passed through a long glass hallway that connected two of the hospital's wings like a bridge, and I could see what looked like a small park, enclosed on three sides by the rising walls of the buildings, and open to a parking lot on the fourth. I could see a few people standing in a huddle around an ash tray, furtively grabbing a smoke.

We had no problems until we came to a security door. A small oval, leaking a soft green light through it's smoky plastic front, sat mounted on the right side of the double doors. "Closer," the Doc said, and

we angle the gurney up close to the button.

The Doc glanced at his watch again. "Good timing gentlemen, we should be ready in three.. Two.. Time." The light on the green oval went out for a few seconds, blinked three times, then resumed its steady glow.

The Doc reached into his pocket and pulled out something that looked for all the world like a severed thumb with a metal cap on its base, like a rabbit's foot keychain, and he pressed it to the oval. I heard a click from the door behind me.

The Doc laid back down, and we pushed him through the doors and down another set of hallways. These had an all together different color scheme, as if we had landed in a different hospital somehow.

Again, the number of people around us seemed pathetically small given the size of the place, but I wasn't about to complain. I was feeling antsy. Something wasn't right, I just couldn't put my finger on it.

We made it to another room with a door marked "Nucleics." We eased the gurney in.

The place had more computers set up on lab tables than I've ever seen in one place. In the far left corner stood a glassed in chamber, red light inside, with a door marked "DANGER."

The Doc sprang up, threw off the sheet, and said, "Hold the door, gentlemen." His eyes gleamed as he made a beeline for that glassed in corner like a kid towards a Christmas tree.

I threw the thumb lock on the door we'd come in on, glanced to my right and saw another door. Tommy and Carson were already on it.

The Doc pulled a suit from a bin next to the DANGER door and started putting it on. Strangest thing I've ever seen; looked like the Stay Puff Marshmallow Man had had kids with a bee keeper. Once he got it on, he pulled a container from that bag of his that looked like a really oversized thermos, and walked over to the door. He pushed a button, and the door, which looked like a great big glass cylinder spun around, revealing a door sized opening. The Doc stepped in to the chamber, and the glass cylinder turned, first cutting access to the outside and then opening access to the inside.

I heard a "Psst", turned to Nicky, who looked at me and then pointed to the bottom of his door. Light was coming from under it, which I could've sworn wasn't there a moment before. He looked at me like, "Whadda we do?" I wanted to shrug at him, but I was afraid that might spook him, and the last thing I needed was him getting sick. I held a hand up in a gesture that I hoped he understood to me, "Calm down, wait." He seemed to; he put his ear to the door.

I looked back at the Doc in his red room; the glass of the chamber didn't stretch all the way down to floor level anywhere other than the door, and he was bent down, fiddling with something. I couldn't tell what.

I turned back to Nicky, who, ear still pressed to the door, held up a hand and made like Pac-Man, chomp chomp chomp. He could hear someone(s) talking in there. I glanced over to Tommy Gun and Carson, and they took a position behind Nick. Tommy Gun drew that stupid Walther of his and held it pointing up, shooters stance, waiting in case Nicky hauled the door open so he could tickle whomever it was with .22's or .32's or whatever pitiful caliber ammo that thing held. It was only a 6 shot, usually, because the grip is so small. Pathetic. He might as well light up a Virginia Slim Ultra Slim (which for the non smoker, is a tooth pick purported to be made of tobacco) to calm his nerves.

An eternity later, I heard the cylinder turn again, and the Doc stepped into the cylinder. This time, when the lock cycled closed, it stopped before opening to the outside, and something that looked like fire extinguishers mounted into the cylinder's top blasted over him. It was LOUD; I put my ear to the door, turned to Nicky, and we both shook our heads at each other. So far, so good.

The Doc put the thermos back in the bag, then peeled out of his silly suit, stuffing it in the bin. He came over to stand beside me, said, "Clear?"

I shook my head, pointed to Nicky. He noticed me, ear still pressed against the door and gave me a thumbs up. The lights were still on in there, so he must have heard them leave.

I was about to pull my ear from the door when I heard the sound of muted voices approaching my door from the other sound, followed by a metallic jingle. Keys.

"Incoming" I breathed. Tommy pivoted his stance to cover my door. The Doc pointed to Nicky's door, said, "Move" softly, and Nicky through the thumb lock; as he did this, I felt my door thump, then a key sliding into the barrel of the lock. I reached up and grabbed the thumb lock, felt the lock attempting to turn. I hadn't been applying my full pressure on the lock when it started turning, so I knew whomever was on the other side had felt it move, slow, then force exerting it back over; he wasn't going to mistake the lock for broken.

"Go!" I said in a stage whisper.

Nicky through the door open. It was an exam room, the kind you see in every doctor's office and hospital in the country; it's big tan exam table covered in crinkly wax paper; whenever I sit on those, I feel like a slab of meat on a butcher's table.

It wasn't meat on the paper, though. It was a super.

Rage.

9. Flight

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
9:57 AM

I didn't get much of a view of him; Nicky got the door shut in just a moment, but it seemed as if that moment stretched out much longer than it had any business taking. I saw Rage sitting on that paper, wearing one of those stupid backless gowns they give you. His face was set in an expression; it wasn't the blubbing simper from Spoodle's artwork, yet.. It was still fear. Not the kind of fear that, say, I felt in seeing him, or standing in front of an oncoming train, but the kind of fear you feel when you haven't eaten in a while and you don't know where your next meal is coming from. The kind of fear that has to grow and mature, and when it does, it overshadows any little simple thing like a train.

He saw us, and his expression went first to confusion, and just before the door closed, anger.

Nicky slammed the door shut, throwing the thumb bolt, and turned back to the Doc.

"What do we do?" he asked.

Before the Doc could answer him, there was a sound like a shotgun blast, and we saw that Rage had punched through the door and had Nicky by the neck, squeezing, Nicky's face going red, then *purple*, and I could see whatever it was that made Nicky himself fade from his swelling eyes. It wasn't Nicky in Rage's fist anymore, it was just a thing. Nicky was gone.

"Your door, Patrick." the Doc said, and I threw the thumb bolt on mine, pulled my door open to reveal a doctor, tie on under his lab coat, staring at me with an angry expression, saying "You're not supposed to.." as I popped him, hard in the face, really stepped into it, and moved into the hallway.

Back in the lab, Rage had released Nicky and was scrabbling his hand around the door like a crab, looking for the lock.

Tommy Gun took a few steady shots and hit Rage's arm. Rage screamed, pulling his wounded arm back through the door. He turned to me, grinning, yelled, "He bleeds!" Tommy emptied his clip through the door.

"Run, you fools!" the Doc yelled, and we got moving.

Carson somehow got up level with me as we ran through those halls, the Doc between us, muttering something into a phone, Tommy Gun in the rear, looking back occasionally.

The nice thing about running through a hospital is that if you holler, "Get outta the way" as you run through it, people actually do it, and they do it quick.

We came to the security doors, which must have had a sensor that started them opening automatically from our side, only they weren't moving fast enough. I put my shoulder into it as I hit the door and it flew open. Sounded like something up in the door's mechanics had broken.

"Is he still behind us?" I called back to Tommy. "Yeah." he huffed. He was already winded.

The Doc was muttering, I could only just hear him, "too soon, it's far too soon for them to be aware of me, too soon".

We came around a corner to the glass walkway, and the Doc called, "Wait."

We stopped, listening.

"I have a plan, but we must hold him for a few moments."

"You saw what he did to Nicky!" Tommy Gun nearly screamed.

"Yes, and I saw what you did to Rage as well, Tommy. As you said, he bleeds. I can't imagine, if he bleeds, what kept his hand from shattering as it passed through the door, but if it bleeds, we can kill it."

I heard shouting coming from the halls behind us.

"I can help you, I think, but you must face him." the Doc said.

Around the corner came Rage. He had taken a moment to put on his pants, and had something wrapped around his wounded arm, but despite the blood and the green exam gown, he looked like he was ready to seriously trash us.

"I got questions," Rage said, low and growly, "for one of you." His left hand flexed, and he stepped toward us.

"John," said the Doc, his voice cool and steady. "the tumor, it is inoperable, isn't it?"

Tommy Gun, Carson and I were standing between the Doc and Rage as he called this out. I was standing in the middle, and I saw Rage's expression change. Some of that anger boiled out of him, that look of fear I'd seen before coming back, and I figured that now was the best shot I'd have, so I took it. Again, I stepped into a hard right and caught him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Carson had come up on my right and kicked him hard in the left knee, not sweeping the leg out from under him, but taking him down to his knees. Tommy slid in on my left, lifted a foot, and kicked him hard in the jaw. Rage's head snapped to his left with the blow, and almost just as fast, snapped back to Tommy, eyes glittering.

Rage extended his left leg out as he pivoted, throwing me clear down the glass hall. I came to a rolling stop, tried hard to get air back into my lungs. "Now," the Doc said over his shoulder; he'd already been moving down the hallway as we'd traded knocks with Rage. I looked back down the hall, and Carson was moving towards us, but Tommy.. Rage must have reached out and grabbed him as he'd kicked me, and he had him by the front of his shirt, and was just hitting him, over and over.

I saw a flash from the parking lot adjoining the park below the bridge, and saw Doc's giant, standing with something like a pipe over his right shoulder. There was something moving, lightning fast, from that tube towards the bridge.

"Jump!" I screamed to Carson as the Doc passed me. Carson took a flying leap, just as something that felt like God's sledgehammer hit the bridge.

The sound was incredible; the jingle of glass shards intersecting, the shriek of metal bending, the boom of whatever the giant had shot at us going off. Carson landed on top of me, and we rolled together for a moment.

We looked back towards the bridge, which was now two bridges, the split close to Rage's end. The long side coming from our end of the structure was groaning under the weight that it could no longer support, and was bending downward. I could see Rage on the other side. Tommy was crumpled and lifeless beside him, forgotten, as Rage screamed at us, fist held in the air.

"Move!" screamed the Doc, and we got moving.

The Doc lead us through different halls this time, then down a long stair well. We took them so fast that I felt dizzy, although that could have been the knock I took from Rage. My shoes kept slipping just a little on the landings, and I knew I was going to take a header any second now, but I didn't. I kept thinking of Nicky and Tommy; the stupid jokes Nicky never seemed to run out of, all of us screaming at Tommy to get out of the bathroom; it took him three times as long as the rest of us to get a shower, and by the time you got in there, the hot water was gone. I was never going to see them again. They'd been my men, my responsibility, and they were dead.

At the bottom of the stairs we hit a fire door which opened out into bright daylight. Just in front of us was the Doc's sedan, the giant revving the engine, the rear door facing us standing open.

We climbed in, Carson pulling the door closed behind him, and the giant took off.

We were three blocks away and five under the limit when we passed the convoy of boys in blue, sirens blaring.

"That was unfortunate." said the Doc, settling himself. "This changes key elements of the plan drastically. We shall have to accelerate things."

"Did you get what you needed?" Carson asked. There was an undertone to his voice that the Doc didn't like; I could see it in the way his eyebrows came together.

"I did, Mister Carson. The price was much higher than I would have liked, but it was necessary."

"Doc, what were you talking about back there? How did you suck the wind out of Rage's sails like that?"

"The laboratory we were in just now," the Doc explained, "is involved in cancer research. The only reason that Rage could have been there was if he himself has cancer, and was involved in the project's clinical trials. It makes sense, really; the methods they are using would probably kill a normal human. They have perhaps found an idyllic test subject in John."

"What did you get?" I asked. I couldn't help myself, I had to ask.

The Doc looked at Carson and I for a moment, and seemed to be deciding something. "A rather rare element which they have discovered a way to synthesize in large quantities." he said, finally. "The details aren't important; this supply was necessary in order for the plan to move forward. I had hoped not to gain the attention of any of the Manhattan family for quite some time yet; it was unavoidable, but would have been more easily manageable in the future. We shall simply have to adjust."

That was the last thing we heard him say for several hours.

10. INTERLUDE - The Norns

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
9:57 AM

(Note - the idea here is to format this into three columns that intersect at certain points; this means that I may have to add or remove lines in order to sync them up. I'm bolding the syncing text in case we reformat and lose track, however bolding it in the print version might be a good idea. To try to get the columns even in rough, I used Jruler to eyeball it; authoring this in latex ought to be a blast.)

She pulled the stopper out of the sink and watched the water drain away, the odd bits of suppers past piling and piling onto the drain filter's holed surface, soap leaving piles of bubbles on top. The pile it made was nothing more than the food she'd eaten and soap, all clean things, right?

Yuck.

She winced.

She pulled the stopper out of the sink, using her fingers like pincers. She'd always heard that women were never squeemish or at least had that squeemish reflex resolved after they had children, but she never had, not through all the changings and the sicknesses and the dishes. Although at one point in her life, she'd not had to worry too much about dishes. Those days were gone.

Ah, but there was so much bliss to be had here and now, she thought as she emptied the drain filter into the trash can. Such a high class existence, and to think she'd once been "high maintenance", as the TV liked to call it. Ha. Every woman is high maintenance, she thought. It's just a question of how much they're willing to put up with in proportion to how serious they take themselves.

She opened the cabinet, a slight twinge from her back as she straightened, and looked at it critically. Her dinner options were rather limited, although she'd be home with the groceries in a moment. She thought about what was in the cabinets and what was in the bag she carried, and decided that Ramen would work just fine. She shuffled to the corner by the cabinet and took up her.. what was the word? The stick with a pistol grip on one end, pistol grip and long trigger on the other?

"It's called a claw, I think." she said to herself.

She reached up into the upper cabinet and pulled down a package of Ramen noodles.

She got the pot down from another cabinet. Why did she keep putting things up there, she asked herself? She knew it was hard to reach, knew her back was going to scream when she reached up there, claw or no claw. Yet she also knew she was going to reach up there to put the pot away, either after she ate, or later, say after breakfast. Just depended on how she felt. She had been getting weaker, after all, and the meds weren't helping. She knew she needed to start pacing herself better, and besides, if the sink were full of dirty dishes,

She made her way to the recliner from the bathroom. Boy, she was tired. It seemed that even these simple actions were getting harder and harder to do. Her slippers made a sushing sound as she dragged her feet across the floor.

She sat down, pain ratcheting down her back as she lowered herself gingerly into her chair.

She winced.

She dug into the cushions of the chair around her for the remote. She really couldn't for the life of her understand why they didn't just build the remote into the chair; you knew you were going to be there, you knew the chair faced the tv anyway, and you knew those stupid armrests took so much more space than they actually needed; why make these dinky little things so small you had to lose em?

Men are so smart, she thought, and snorted.

She flipped through the channels, coming first across a perfume ad, some young woman in practically nothing spraying herself liberally with a high dollar stinkum. She'd hated that, back in the glory days, the perfume. The primping was all right; the boys had never minded back when she'd first started dressing the way the old comics had female heros dress. It was a joke, a stupid joke, but she'd felt it, even then. The jealousy radiating from women who'd once looked down their noses at her. The treatment had changed her appearance as it had changed.. well, her, and she'd filled those comic book outfits out quite nicely, thank you.

The comics hadn't lasted much longer. Art imitates life, but it's never allowed to survive its own prophecy.

"It's called a claw, I think." she said to herself.

Speaking of claws, her hands certainly felt rather claw like today. Felt like a hundred fish hooks every time she clenched her thumb. She was going to have to either settle on something soon, or give up and read a book.

The television had a smear of pink across it, right about face level on most shots, and it was irritating. No amount of messing with the menus helped. Her neighbor had left it to her before he'd run off, the poor fool, so she guessed beggars couldn't be choosers, but it was irritating not knowing what color people were.

She turned the corner, and felt relieved to be so close to home.

She was only a block away from the building, now. Pitiful. This walk used to be easier, even just a week or so ago, and now it felt as if she had walked the length and breadth of Australia. Getting old sucks, it really does. It is by no means an exercise for the weak or the infirm.

She winced.

She glanced upward, and saw the clouds were ominous, pregnant, as it were. She had a quick flash of the pain from a moment ago in comparison to the constant pain that had nagged her with her firstborn. The second one hadn't given her near so much pain as she carried him. Of course, she wasn't up to the same foolishness that she had been during the second pregnancy, so perhaps it wasn't the child's fault. Didn't stop her, in the secret part of her heart, from carrying the smallest grudge.

Then she looked down at those stupid pink house slippers she was wearing, and thought about what a complete disaster it would be to get caught out in the wet with these things. she was slipping, she really was, and she chided herself as being the crazy old lady she'd feared she would someday become. She was still making her peace with it, but it wasn't coming easy.

Ah well, nothing for it now. She kept on shuffling, paying absolutely no attention to the carload of young men passing by that paid equal attention to her. She glanced down into the bag, reminding herself of it's contents. The men passing her by made her feel frightened, and she hated herself for it. Time was when she'd have noticed them only in the periphery as either a distraction, or a potential threat, and she had known how to deal with both.

"It's called a claw, I think." she said to herself.

She reached the building. A tunnel ran from the front into the dingy looking area where the.. Pool? Ha! Where the weird green pond hunkered. She was careful to look around to make sure there was no one to jump out at her, in part because she was afraid of being mugged, but more importantly she was afraid of a heart attack. She was going that way, she knew it, she'd felt the first flutters of her heart betraying her, despite the blood pressure meds. It was terrifying, that feeling of sudden weakness, then tunnel vision, as if her ties to her body was being stretched like taffy, thinning in the middle, ready at any moment to snap.

who cared? It's not like she was going to be keeping any company other than her own any time soon. She put the pot down and started walking towards the door.

She walked past the recliner and the television, walked to the front door, unlocked and opened it. She'd lost the key years ago, but it didn't matter. She was always home.

She shuffled back into the kitchen, lifting a stack of newspapers off of the rickety plastic table to make room for the grocery bag she'd be bringing in in a moment.

She busted out laughing, a deep belly laugh.

She shuffled back to the kitchen, took the pot, and began filling it with water. She wouldn't be this tired if she'd done her dishes after lunch. There's always a price, isn't there? She thought to herself. There'd been a price for the power she'd been given, and she'd paid, oh, how she'd paid. She'd done what she could once she'd realized the truth, once she'd seen what the family was becoming, but.. No, she hadn't done what she could, had she? She'd run away, from them, from the world, from all of it. She'd burned her bridges; made certain they would never find her, never bring her back.

She was a coward, and for the tenth time today, she hated herself for it.

She helped put the groceries away, then finished preparing dinner, then carried it out to the living room.

She walked out into the living room, carrying dinner, and sat down in the recliner.

She blurred...

She stopped at a news broadcast. They were talking about a hospital being bombed by terrorists. She turned up the volume, watching closely. Lord, but she'd gotten morbid in her old age.

Apparently there had a break in, some kind of research material had been stolen, something about cancer research.

The frame flipped to John, her grandson, running like an idiot through the hospital wearing a green hospital gown, the back flapping open as he hopped one legged into his pants.

She busted out laughing, a deep belly laugh.

Oh, that felt good! That boy never was very bright, but this was just the icing, candles, and bride and groom on top of the cake. He was never, ever going to live this down.

She was amazed they'd shown it.

She wouldn't have. The boy wasn't bright, granted, but he was strong, almost stronger than any of them, and he had a temper, would hurt anyone, even her. Even Grandma had never tried to control him, to teach him to be good. To be human.

She was a coward, and for the tenth time today, she hated herself for it.

She kept watching, transfixed. Several organizations were claiming responsibility, from the Arabs, which seemed unlikely, given the state of the war, to some of the more embarrassing extended family, which to her also smelled wrong. She'd always had a good sense for these things.

She blurred...

She started up the crumbling stairs. She hated this part. She didn't like stairs, and had been on the landlord's case for months to let her switch to one of the empty units on the bottom floor.

Hadn't she? It was so easy to forget, these days.

Not long, now. She could put these groceries down soon, put them away tomorrow, maybe.

No, it had to be tonight, groceries and dishes both. Hadn't she taught her children discipline was always most important when it came hardest?

She busted out laughing, a deep belly laugh.

She put the bag down, turned, closed and relocked the door, then picked up the bag again. She had a poor grip on it, and for one brief moment, she'd felt the brown paper begin to tear. Why do I always ask for paper, she asked herself as she caught the bottom of the bag before the tear in the top gave way. The pain in her hands flared, hotter than the sun, hotter than anything, and she closed her eyes, tried to shut it out.

Why did she keep asking for paper? Simple, she was afraid of change, any change at all.

She was a coward, and for the tenth time today, she hated herself for it.

She put the bag on the table, and put away the groceries.

She walked out to the living room, and sat down in the recliner.

She blurred...

.. and closed her eyes for a moment, waiting for the nausea to pass. She hated that part, the merging of three to one. Always had.

Grace Winston, who had once held the entire world in her hand, in fear, love, and curiosity under the name Trinity, opened her eyes, ate her Ramen, and watched the news of her grandchildren.

11. Mercenary

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
9:58 AM

The Doc was spooked, after that incident with Rage. He stopped "procurement" operations immediately, and from what I heard later, a very large number of cells went to the mattresses.

Interesting side note, in that particular vein. A lot of the people working for the Doc had, shall we say, a rather unsavory past. (A lot of them had an even more unsavory presence. Sorry, couldn't not say it.) The Doc had a problem in keeping all those folks fed without emptying the coffers to simple upkeep. So what do you do with those people?

Not all of us were inactive. A lot of us went into another line of work, which I'll get to. A lot of those of us who were working had perfectly acceptable names, social security numbers, and work histories. So the Doc shuffled us around, and told us to find jobs.

Some guy I'll never meet took a job in a shoe factory in Nebraska under my name. I'm glad that I won't meet him; in his former incarnation, he'd been a pretty awful guy. He'd killed a few people at a bus stop in Pennsylvania one rainy Monday morning. Just snapped while he was waiting for the bus, he'd said, and pled insanity. The jury had agreed, so they'd put him in a minimum level security program and given him a shrink.

He'd killed the shrink and walked out of the place wearing the shrink's suit.

You'd think I'd be worried, guy like that carrying my name around working in a shoe factory, right?

Nope. The Doc likes to relocate the violent ones into shared living spaces with other violent ones, and gives them the same statement; if you step a toe out of line, your roommates will eat you in your sleep.

My doppelganger was a good boy, the whole time. Even took the bus to work.

A very few stayed with the Doc himself. He was working on something, and absolutely nobody knew what or where.

The rest he rented out.

Carson and I were waiting to meet our principle. We were sitting at a table *al fresca* at a coffee shop. Not a Starbucks, mind you, which would have been bad enough. No, this was a boutique place with some fru fru name with a "haus" in it.

I do not understand the pretention around coffee.

Folks have to give it French names, mysterious sizes, and stress the country of origin. "Oh, sir, no, we don't do *that*. Perhaps sir meant a Zimbabwean Grande Mid Roast Espresso?"

For water passed through smashed beans.

Ever heard of Kopi Luwak? Every time I get near a place that has to ask me any more about my coffee than the number of ounces and whether I'm man enough to take it black, I think of that.

It's an extremely rare, incomprehensibly expensive coffee. But they don't harvest the beans. Oh no no. They let a civet, which is a critter kind of like a cat, eat the beans. Then they let the cat stroll around for a while, waiting patiently. Eventually, the cat poops.

That's Kopi Luwak. Don't believe me? Ask the coffee guy, next time you're ordering. (You can call him a barrista if you want to, I can't. Makes me think of a female South American lawyer, and one more time: It's. Just. Coffee.)

We were told a little about our principle, and that little was enough. We knew she was going to be wearing a head scarf. We knew she'd know us when she saw us. And we knew she was psychic.

What do you do, when you're waiting for a psychic person you've never met before to come and interview you for a job?

I thought about prime numbers. I have no idea what Carson was thinking.

I saw her walking up to us. The head scarf, like the rest of the clothes, were black, but not the nun slash penguin kind of black I'd been expecting. She was stylish, in a business informal kind of way. She was a little on the thin side, but still.. Wait, was I checking her out?

1. 2. 3. 5. 7.

She walked into the shop. She had glanced at us on the way by, so I figured she was going in for a coffee before she came back out. As she walked to the door, I did what all men do when a woman they've never seen before turns her back; I looked at her..

11, 13, 15. No, 17.

I looked over at Carson. He was staring fixedly at a sign mounted on the outside of the shop listing blends. His eyes went back and forth like a typewriter carriage; I could almost hear the bell go "ding" every time they snapped quickly back to his left.

"That doesn't work, you know." I glanced up and saw that she had pulled a chair out for herself, and was sitting down.

"Beg pardon?" Carson asked.

"Repetition. It doesn't hide what you're really thinking. It just pisses me off."

I stopped thinking of primes.

"Well," she said, "let's get this over with."

She took off her scarf.

I'd noticed even before she pulled off the veil that the skin around her eyes and at the bridge of her nose was very pale. As she unwound the veil, I saw that I'd been wrong.

She wasn't pale, she was bone white.

The effect wasn't quite that of a geisha's makeup, but it was close. Her face was.. Striking, but not in a good way. There was something off about it, I just couldn't quite put my finger on what it was..

"Can you really read minds?" Carson asked.

"Not so much read," she said, "as that implies active effort in order to understand. Call it eavesdropping, although that's wrong as well. It takes less effort to avoid hearing a thing as what I do does. And," she said, turning to me, "the number you were thinking of just now is 39, although it's not a prime. Threes. Hard to stop thinking about something once you start, isn't it? Like forgetting to make yourself breathe once you take control.

"And you," she said, looking at Carson, "were thinking about how my face is darker than my ears, a bit. No, I'm not going to talk about it. Can we think about the job, now?"

Job? I thought.

She rolled her eyes. "I hate men. I need a couple of guys that I can trust to get my back without missing something because they're staring at my can, you follow?" she said. She sipped her coffee.

Yeah. I thought. She sipped again, then rolled her eyes. "Idiots." she said. She looked at me. "You are capable of speech, I take it. Good, in that case, how about we hold this conversation out loud, huh? Otherwise," she said, leaning in conspiratorially, "we might scare the straights."

I stripped a few gears, mentally, before finally moving on into second. "Yeah, ok." I said. "It's just odd, you know?"

"Odd enough to pass on the job?"

I thought for a second, glanced at Carson, then said, "No. It could be worse. It would be nice if this thing were a two way street, but I think I can handle it."

Carson, so help me, blushed. The lady smiled, ruefully, reached across the table, and patted his hand.

"It's ok." she said. "The first thing anyone with anything to hide thinks of when they know about me is, 'Oops, I better not think of that..', and then they do. So you know, it's not abnormal. Most people have done the same thing, they just don't talk about it."

I looked back and forth between them. "What.."

"Never mind," Carson said, "I guess I don't have a problem, then."

"You don't." she agreed, nodding and smiling ruefully. Even I got the double meaning there, or at least part of it. What the heck was he thinking about.

"Like I said, I need some guys to watch my back."

"What's the plan?" I asked.

Carson spoke, still looking at her. "If you were psychic, what else could it be? Vegas, right?"

She arched an eyebrow, then held out a hand to Carson. "My name is Patricia. You're hired."

So it was more driving.

When we joined the organization, a lot of us thought that the Doc would be arming us to the teeth with ray guns, neural neutralizers, jet pack, and invisibility suits. We thought he'd throw us immediately into the fray against the shadowy organizations hell bent on running the planet into ruin, with our end goal of our shadowy organization running the planet in at least a steady state. We had no illusions about building Utopia; even the Doc's most frothy rhetoric didn't take things that far.

We just wanted to stop the bleeding.

Turns out, most of us did a lot of watching the miles roll by. I remember during one bleary eyed run of night time road, watching birds, bugs, and bats flicker across my high beams playing chicken (and usually losing), I thought how fortunate it was that Nicky wasn't in the car, since he would have lost it ages ago and the car would still have that low level ammonia stink lingering. Then I remembered why Nicky wasn't with us, and I felt small.

"You couldn't have done anything." Patricia said from beside me. She always took shotgun, and I thought she'd been dozing for a while.

"No, just thinking. Sorry, I should have let you say that, shouldn't I?"

I passed on that question, asked one of my own. "How do you know I couldn't have done anything?"

"During that incident with Rage? I didn't have to be there, you've been brooding about it for the last hundred miles."

"Sorry, if I'd known I'd be your entertainment for the evening, I would have tried to think about the last couple of movies I saw. Do you like biographies?"

She snorted. "You're learning." she said. "You might as well say whatever it is you're thinking, I'll hear it anyway. And I told you, it's not because I want to. Especially not about Nicky and Tommy. You're loud, thinking about them."

I gripped the wheel a little tighter. I felt irritable, felt cheap, somehow. As if my life were nothing more than some crappy tv show that she was watching, not because it was interesting, but because nothing else was on, and she couldn't turn off the set.

I glanced back through the rear view at Carson. He was dead to the world, head back and mouth open as if he were trying to catch raindrops. Wasn't going to happen, we were driving through the desert, now. I wanted to toss something back there, see if I could land it in that gaping maw, but I didn't have anything small enough.

"It happened too fast." she said. "You're lucky you're still here, let alone Carson and the Doc."

"No thanks to me." I said.

"Maybe." she said. "On the other hand, if you hadn't taken a swing when you had, maybe he'd have gotten past you, kept you from getting across. If he had, you'd all be dead, except maybe the Doc. He might be.. Where they keep guys like him."

"There's more?" I asked.

Her phone beeped twice in her pocket. She didn't pull it out; instead, she reached into the giant purse she carried and pulled out a box of pills. The box was kind of like an ice tray with a dozen little plastic containers, each with a lid. The lids were numbered. She opened one, took a few pills out, and dry

swallowed them.

I grimaced. I'd never been able to do that, but I'd tried and very nearly choked myself to death.

"You get used to it." she said. "You can get used to anything, if you have to."

We drove on for a second. I watched the broken white line in front of us, and found myself trying to find a song that went along with the rhythm of the breaks as they strobed by. I had an old Anthrax song, but I couldn't remember the words, just the main guitar riff, over and over.

Patricia groaned. "Weren't we talking about you?" she said.

"I thought I had craftily evaded the psychic girls attempts to, despite the complete lack of a reason to have to, understand me better through speech."

"I can take things out of your head, but I can't put them in. Thank God." she said. "You asked if there are more guys like the Doc. The answer is yes.. And no."

"How yes?"

"Well, there's the crazies, for one. They think the Manhattans are immortal, or omniscient, or able to reach the 'Other Side', or whatever it is they think is being held out from them, and they figure they're willing to do anything to set things right. They build pipe bomb, plant bugs, maybe kidnap servants, all kinds of stuff. Those guys get locked up. You know how even saying you'll kill the President is grounds for arrest?"

"Yeah, I guess." I said. "Never thought much about it."

"You can say that about anyone else, and it's looked at, if anything, as a joke in poor taste. Comedians talk about wanting to kill celebrities, politics are overflowing with people mentioning the benefit of removing their opponents from among the breathing, but the Prez, on the other hands, is verboten. So are the Manhattans."

"What? That can't be right." I said.

"Why not?" she said. "Why is that one political office, the president of the U S of A, not be joked about? "

"I don't know," I said, "maybe because there's more people interested in taking him out."

"If that's the case, I can think of quite a few celebrities that should be causing some arrests; some of those people really manage to put their foot in it. Did you know the office of the president was never originally part of the original plan for running the country?"

"Yeah," I said, "they threw a bone to Washington, right? "

She nodded. "We need kings. We have to put a face to power. We can't function without it. If we don't have a single face which we can blame for everything, or put ourselves to sleep on scary nights when we wake up, just for a second, and see how the world is sliding down the drain; we have to have a face to reassure us back into complacency. Don't blame Washington," she went on, "we'd have found someone else if he'd said no. Might even have given up on the whole democracy experiment earlier."

"Earlier?" I said.

She just stared at me, as if I were a child that had thrown peas on the floor. "We have a face for power, and once it's established, once it comforts us, we stop thinking about how much power is being redistributed. The Manhattans ended World War II, sure, and got us through the Seventies by forcing oil countries to open their controls to 'international' representatives. We never blinked at how much power was being taken from sovereign nations; we just smiled when gas prices went back down."

We drove in silence for a bit. She knew at one point a conversation was getting tedious, and this was heading that way for me. We'd had more bull sessions along these lines than I could count back in training. There was this one question floating around in my mind, though. I knew that she knew that I wanted to ask it, so I would let her answer it if she wanted to, or decide to ignore it, if that's what she wanted.

I glanced over at her. Her face loomed in the darkened car like a full moon, it was so pale. She had a little smile on her face. Maybe she appreciated her letting it slide.

"Yeah." she said. "I do."

Didn't stop me from wondering, though.

Was she a Manhattan?

Carson snored on.

Las Vegas is like Disney Land with a really serious drinking problem. And it's a mean drunk.

We got up to our room about ten the next morning. She had her head scarf on, and we flanked her in the elevator. She had a bit of a limp, I noticed. Small thing, hardly noticeable at all, really, but there.

When we got everything squared away in the two bedroom suite, she said, "Shoo, go play outside, Mommy's going to have a little lie down with a headache." This would be the last afternoon we'd have to ourselves, Patricia told us. We'd argued that we didn't like leaving her alone, and she'd retorted that A) we were full of crap and had been hoping she'd cut us loose, and B) she needed a rest from us.

We left her as she opened some other little pharmacopia tupperware ice tray thing, and took in the sites for a while.

I'd never been, but Carson had, and we had a few laughs. I suppose I could tell you how, but it's Vegas, right?

Ah, don't get all worked up; we shot skeet with an M16. A guy Carson knew had a range and all kinds of hardware; kind of like mini golf with a mini-gun. Actually, it was exactly like that.

I think a lot of people go to Vegas, watch TV in their rooms, gamble away a couple of paychecks, and then act ominous when they go home. They get to let the image rub off onto them without all the hedonism.

Then again, it's not like there's a shortage of customers, either.

Carson wanted to gamble, so I sat with him drinking virgin cocktails while he whittled away at his worldly fortune playing one of those weird games; baccarat, maybe? The one with the "shoe", anyway. He claimed it had better odds; I watched him, and I'm telling you it's poker with more ways to get taken.

It made me think of Tommy Gun. He'd probably have rented a tux for the occasion, the fop.

We got back up to the room, where Patricia fussed at us for letting her sleep so long. From this point on, Carson and I would be working shifts, and one of us would always be awake and near Patricia. I drew first watch, so down we went.

We left our hotel and walked along the strip. I'd taken her arm, not out of any need to make it look like we were together, but because she was a little unsteady. There's no shortage of unsteady people on the strip come evening, but none of the others were paying me to watch out for them.

She'd lost the head scarf, and was wearing makeup. With it, she looked normal, but there was still something about her face, a kind of subtle immobility that you only caught if you stared. I realized I was staring when she lifted an eyebrow at me, so I knocked it off.

She took us through our first casino, where she immediately went to the roulette table and started losing. I stood beside her, back to the dealer, watching the crowds. I couldn't figure it; why would you come to Las Vegas with psychic powers and lose money.

"Idiot." she muttered. I had no illusions about to whom she was referring.

She got up after a little while and made her way over to a game of blackjack, and her fortunes began to change.

It was like watching a drunk climb a flight of stairs; he takes a step up, you're rooting for him, then he weaves, totters, loses ground, tries again.

She worked her way up to about 12 grand ahead, eventually. She blew two grand, then cashed out, and we left.

"How does it work?" I asked. "I'd imagine you could clean them out."

"Sure," she said, "I could. And then I'd draw serious attention to myself. They'd start watching me closely, digging into who I am, and I don't want that.

"While I'm at a table, I'm working the dealer and the other players. I can see their hands, and I can see the dealer's impression of what's going on, which is pretty accurate. It ought to be; she does this all day every day. More importantly, I can gauge how much I'm getting her attention. If I'm winning and it's not tripping off her weird alarm, I keep going. If she starts to get a little tickle that something's up, I start losing before she signals the floor boss."

She cleared about 50 thousand dollars that night. She'd rented us for a week. I started to get it.

"This is like lobster boating for you, isn't it?" I asked her. She regarded me for a second, then nodded. She probably saw the image in my mind of the guys I'd known who would go work a summer crewing lobster boats up New England way, earn enough to put them through the school year without having to do anything else.

Sounds like easy money until you see how stupid any mortal would have to be to get on one of those boats voluntarily twice. And I worked for an evil genius bent on world domination; if I think something's too dangerous, pay attention.

"What's the danger for you?" I asked. We were having breakfast at this little diner a bit off the strip.

She looked at me, her eyes bloodshot. "The people." she said.

"I don't understand."

She took a few bites. She seemed to be deliberating something. Finally, she started to speak.

"You remember when you were in grade school, how they told you about how it Neshimat saved us from the Nazis, right? Don't bother, you do. The evolutionists had a field day. Obviously, everything Darwin had ever said was true, we were indeed headed down a glorious path that started in the primordial soup and would eventually end with man becoming gods, right? To hell with the second law of thermodynamics. Oh, you don't get that.

"Entropy increases. Systems tend to break down over time. It's a pretty easy concept to wrap your head around; get yourself a good healthy one year old and stack some blocks on top of each other; you bring order to chaos. That one year old is going to knock those blocks down, just the same way that the Universe is eroding away at pretty much everything.

"Well along comes Evolution straight out of the mysterious holy primordial soup, and suddenly that's out the window. Fine. We'll roll with that, critters change over time.

"Whenever anyone thinks about the Manhattans, they think of this ideal that comes from the propaganda films they shot trying to get the Communists to calm down, you ever seen them? Mother Trinity's Nursery, that was my favorite. Sweet little cherub flying, literally flying around the room from neat stacks of teddy bears and whatever to smiling Mommy's arms.

"You got the impression that every baby was this smiling, happy bundle of joy, and that kind of backfired on the propaganda machine, remember? They backed off of that real quick, made a lot of veiled references to Father Einstein's inability to resolve the tendency to sterility, and the destruction of the original program, with the world convening a court to verify that the research truly was gone. Poor Al, the disgruntled savior, talking about how if he'd known how all his work would have turned out, he'd have been a watchmaker. Shame he wasn't, you ask me."

She paused for a bit to eat. I glanced around; we had the place pretty much to ourselves, and I didn't notice anyone eavesdropping. Then I realized I didn't need to look. Patricia would have known.

"They were right about Neshimat. It was evolution accelerated. But you know what evolution is, don't you?

"Natural mutation is undirected change. Little tiny bits of the genetic sequence altered by passing subatomic particles; 'God plays billiards with the Universe', as Father Albert said. Neshimat was like trading out the pool cue for a machine gun. They didn't have time to try to break down the genome, so they built a disease that invaded the cells, whipped out that big ol machine gun and fired like crazy, hoping the changes were a net positive.

"What Mother Trinity's Nursery didn't show you were all the rejects."

Tears welled up in her bloodshot eyes as she went on. "Ever read about Roman fatherhood? They'd walk in to the birthing room and look at the newborn. If they liked what they saw, they picked the kid up and held it over their head, claiming it as their own. If they didn't, then someone chucked the infant off of a hill and let either passers by or Nature run their course.

"You don't see the screaming horrors born of Neshimat. The kids with their hearts inside out, or mouths where their... No, I don't want to go there. Not today.

"Everybody envies these powers. They'd kill for them, they'd sell their children to slavery, do anything. But they don't understand that there's no free rides, not even for the gods.

"Case in point." she said, squaring herself up. "Do you really think I *want* to hear what people are thinking all the time? Really? It's no picnic. People are heartless, manipulative, deceitful, and vain, and the only thing that keeps everyone from breaking down, from going postal like that guy at the bus stop is their blind assumption that everybody else is a decent person. But they're not.

"I've never been in a serious relationship with another human being, Patrick. Never. It's not for want of one, it's because I see inside their head. There's no illusions for me about the goodness of that other person, no illusions about how their proclaimed feelings are truly self serving and without depth.

"I can turn it off. I can make the voices stop, blind myself to it. But it hurts. It hurts like having an icepick lodged through your eye socket, then having the steel heated and electrified. "

"So when I come to places like this," she said, "crawling with people, infested with them like roaches in a rotten melon, I get to either lose my sanity gradually as the noise inside my head gets so loud that I lose myself, lose my own voice.

"Or I get to take a whole lot of drugs and still suffer through this pain."

"So whaddya say, Pat? Want to join the family?"

12. Paranoid

Wednesday, May 30, 2012
9:52 PM

"So yes, you are.." I started.

"Yes, of course I am, you idiot. You know a lot of psychic people?"

"How did.." I stopped.

"Don't stop now, Patrick." she said, dabbing her eyes with a napkin. "Not when we're just having fun.

"Hey, look at me." she said.

"Huh?" I said, intelligently. I was beginning to think her constant belittling of my intelligence was starting to convince me that she had a point.

"Look at my face."

I did. She turned to show me her left side, her right, then moved her face forward, her eyes looming towards me.

"Wow, I look bad. Makeup's not running, though."

"Did you just use me as a mirror?" I asked.

"Yeah, I did. I.."

She stopped, cocked her head. "You're right." she said. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I asked.

"Oh, don't start the stupid act again. I treated you like a thing, rather than as a person, and you called me out on it. You're right. I of all people should no better then that. I'm sorry."

She reached into her purse, pulling out that big box of pills.

"You're going to kill yourself with those painkillers." I said. "Bad for you."

"These aren't painkillers, Pat." she said.

Only my mother had ever really called me Pat. To hear it coming from her was.. nice.

"What are they for?"

"Can't let it go, can you?" she said, smiling, then dry swallowing a handful of pills. "You're like an otter, you know that? Got to keep smacking that oyster on the rock till you see what's inside. You going to eat me all up, Pat?"

"Woman, would you at least take pills with water when the glass is sitting four inches from your hand? You're going to choke yourself to death."

I saw something on her face, at that moment, that I only saw one other time in all the time I knew her.

She looked surprised.

"You really..."

"What?" I asked.

She stared at me, then shook her head. "Nothing." she said.

The waitress walked up, asked if we were interested in dessert.

"I'll have a coffee, black." Patricia said.

"Same for me."

"Okay, honey." the waitress said, walked away.

"Which one of us is 'honey'?" I asked.

Patricia gave me an evil grin. "You are, Pat. She likes you. She's been stealing glances at you the whole time, and she's thinking she'd let you take her home if you asked."

"Waah? No she isn't!"

"Heavens preserve us, Pat, you are blushing!"

Remind me to never, ever make friends with a psychic person, ever again. They know what buttons to push.

"You are a walking contradiction, Pat. You act like this tough guy, and you are, but there's still something decent in you, something unspoiled. " Pause. "You still suck as a human being, don't get me wrong, but still.."

The waitress came back, gave us our coffees. "Thanks, Tammy." Patricia said. "We'll be a while, but I think we're set."

"Okay. You folks have a great night." As Tammy turned to walk away, she met my eyes for a brief second.

And she winked.

Patricia was fighting back a laugh. Then her face got serious.

"The pills are anti rejection meds. From the Doc."

"Anti rejection meds?" I asked. "Are you sick?"

"Oh, in so many ways. Let's come back round to that, shall we? Let's start with what it's like to grow up as a Manhattan. "

"OK." I said.

"The men in my family make Zeus look like a paragon of monogamy. It's no secret. That's just how they are. I've heard college professors extol on how Neshimat made them more prone to philandering as a defense mechanism, to try and move their superior genetics into the gene pool. Of course, college professors are like the infinite monkeys in the room that will eventually type up Shakespeare's works. Only you don't need an infinite supply. You put a finite number of college professors in a room, and one of them will hold whatever opinion you care to make up.

"Imagine, going around the country, and not only are your conquests sanctioned by the powers that be, but lionized. No shocker, then, that they behave that way, and it adds to the mythos, right?"

"Right." I said. "Who wouldn't?"

"That's backwards, though." Patricia said. "It's not the lionization that causes them to behave that way. It's planned. It's very, very planned."

"Why?"

"I told you about that machine gun, right? And think back to your Shakespeare monkeys. They believe that if they keep making babies, sooner or later, they'll get the results they want. They're breeding, Pat. Most of the time, whatever two Einstein forgot to carry keeps the event from being anything than another belt notch, but if she catches pregnant.." She looked at me expectantly, waiting for me to finish the thought.

"Then the family brings her in, sets her up now that she's momma to a new Manhattan." I said.

"Right." said Patricia. "They usually pick girls with no family, girls that aren't very bright. The lonely, dumb ones don't notice as much when the door to that gilded cage swings shut.

"They wait till the kid pops, and if it's.. If it's not worth holding over Dad's head, they quickly, quietly console the poor mother, who never gets to see the kid, and they pay her off. If the kid is ok.. "

"Then they console her, never let her see the kid, and pay her off." I said.

"Gold star for you. Then they raise the kid."

"So what's that like?"

"Picture a boarding school. It's a nice place, out in some sleepy, pastoral town. It's oozing money out of the ivy crawling the walls, defended like Fort Knox without the warning shots, and monitored under constant surveillance.

"Now imagine growing up in there, knowing that sometimes instead of jack in the box, you get sulfurous gas that makes you puke, just to see if you can generate a force field or fly. Or when you get scared about there being a boogie man in your closet, it's because there is, and when he comes out, he's going to beat the crap out of you, beat you senseless, unless you can make your skin like armor, or break him in half with your arms or your mind.

"I didn't manifest for a long time, because I never thought to ask if hearing voices in your head was normal. For me, it just was. Then they started noticing I evaded some of their.. 'tests', and gradually they figured it out.

"It was like hitting the lottery, Pat. I went from zero to hero in sixty seconds flat. They had this party for me with the family, like a debutante ball. It was the first time I'd ever met anyone related to me by any

other relationship than just another fellow bastard, although they didn't tell me who my father was. I never knew my parents.

"At the end of the party, there's a tradition where they give you your name. They called me Pandora, although I have no idea why.

"Then it was on to training. They put me in with real hard cases, teaching me about surveillance, stealth. They wanted to make a spy out of me. Get me within range of whatever individual, let me siphon off whatever information was needed, get out. At least at first.

"As my trainers praised me for my ability to move past defenses, just because I knew when to duck, really, they changed their minds. Having a spy wasn't enough. They wanted an assassin.

"They put me through a 'live fire' exercise against this guy. He was twenty four, escaped convict, although I found out later that they'd helped him escape so that we'd have someone no one would miss. He was a bad guy, Pat. Really, just sheer evil, all the way down to his core. I knew it, and so when the time came, I killed him. Took him out silently, not a drop of blood on me.

"But he didn't go fast enough. I was there, in his head, feeling the fear he felt, feeling the pain. I was in his head when he dies, Pat, and it nearly destroyed me. I begged, pleaded, to never have to do that again, never. I'd be the best mole in the world, only please don't ask me to take another life.

"They nodded, said it would be taken under consideration, but I could see what was going on in their minds, and there was no way I was going to be a conscientious objector. They were trying to figure out how to make me *like* it, Pat.

"I wanted out. I had to get out, there was no way I could do that again, but I knew how good surveillance is in this country. It appalls me, how fast people ooh and ah about how wonderful it is that their smart phone is able to automatically recognize and tag the pictures they take so they can find that picture of Aunt Nell and post it, never thinking about the ATM cameras, traffic cameras, government and private surveillance pictures. They love the little helicopters their kids can fly around for thirty bucks at the mega mart, not thinking about how they can be made smaller, quieter, and have a camera on board.

"I was trapped. They knew my face, they knew how I walked, they could pick me out of the ambient traffic in Times Square in real time, if they wanted.

"Then I read about Ryonen. She was the granddaughter of a famous warrior, and she was exquisitely beautiful. She wanted to become a Zen nun, but she wasn't allowed. She was too pretty. She was married off, and she asked her husband to be allowed to become a nun. He said no, but finally agreed to let her go after she'd given him three children, so she did, and he finally held his end of the bargain.

"She gets to the temple, after having overcome these obstacles, and the priest refuses to let her in. She is too beautiful, he says, and will be a distraction to the monks.

"So Ryonen took a hot iron and burned her face, destroyed her beauty, and so they finally let her in."

She sat quietly, sipped her coffee.

"What did you do, Patricia?" I asked.

"I did what Ryonen did. I knew enough about the surveillance system to know how much it would take, and it took a lot. I ran, and I destroyed myself."

She paused again for a few moments.

"I was beautiful once, Patrick. When I was Pandora, I could make men howl at the moon, never doubt it."

"I don't."

"No, you don't, do you?" She shook her head.

"They found me. I wasn't careful enough, wasn't paranoid enough. Funny, huh? The psychic, not paranoid enough. I managed to get away from them, but they'd photographed me. I wouldn't have long. So I got in touch with some people, and they got me to the Doc.

"Doctor Disaster knew some people who were experimenting with transplanting faces. Taking the face from a cadaver and transplanting it onto a living person. Somehow he got me into the program, and they gave me this face.

"The surgery seemed to work, but I got sick. My body was rejecting the foreign tissue. Doctor Disaster kept me hidden, and synthesized the drugs I'm taking. I'm still sick, but my face.. is still mine."

"So now you know." she said. She was crying, and she wasn't meeting my eyes. "What do you think?"

I reached out and took her hand. "I think that this conversation is the first time you've let me finish my sentences since you met me. I think that's the first time you've asked me what I'm thinking."

I squeezed her hand, and she looked into my eyes. "You tell me, Patricia. What am I thinking?"

We sat that way for a long time.

Carson took the morning shifts, so while I slept in the odd bedroom, and while Patricia stayed in the master bedroom, he was up, reading a book and sitting facing the door. I'd wake up first, walk to find him sitting there, book held casually in one hand, a silenced pillow on the couch beside him.

He knew something was up. He'd look at me as if he was finally going to ask why the boss had come back that first night with her makeup runny, and why I'd been so silent, and then he'd ask some completely other question, like how the take had gone that night, and if she'd gotten a vibe that we were under closer scrutiny.

Patricia and I didn't talk much, after that first night. I wasn't sure what it was, between us, and knowing that she was psychic, I knew I didn't have to ask, that she answer if she wanted to, only apparently she didn't want to, and she'd know I wanted to know why, and...

I could go bonkers, second guessing like that. I decided to keep my mind on the job, and I did.

It happened on the fifth night. I've thought about it a lot since it happened, tried to figure out why things went wrong so fast, how they must have been tipped off, and how it took so long for her to catch on.

I think the pain meds she was taking were a big part of it. She made this trip once every couple of year, I

found out later, and lived modestly in sleepy little burgs where broadband internet still isn't prevalent. She said that once broadband comes, surveillance comes along with it, and America was the last first world country that still had folks using the venerable modem to get their cat pictures and illicit mp3's at 40 odd kilobytes per second. It also gave her a chance to live outside the range at which she could hear another human's thoughts. That made these trips worth it.

We aren't any of us getting any younger. I think she had misjudged just how much of a toll they were taking on her system, how slow they were making her.

She was winning at a medium stake poker game. She was sitting next to this New England lady with big blonde hair, a bigger voice, and a green pantsuit that looked about five years past it's prime. "I'll take a cahd." she'd say, and something about it felt like biting tinfoil. Next to her was a Korean guy, tourist, who played as if he were killing time between his parents' funerals. He tapped the table and glowered. I made four with the dealer, but I was playing with Patricia's money.