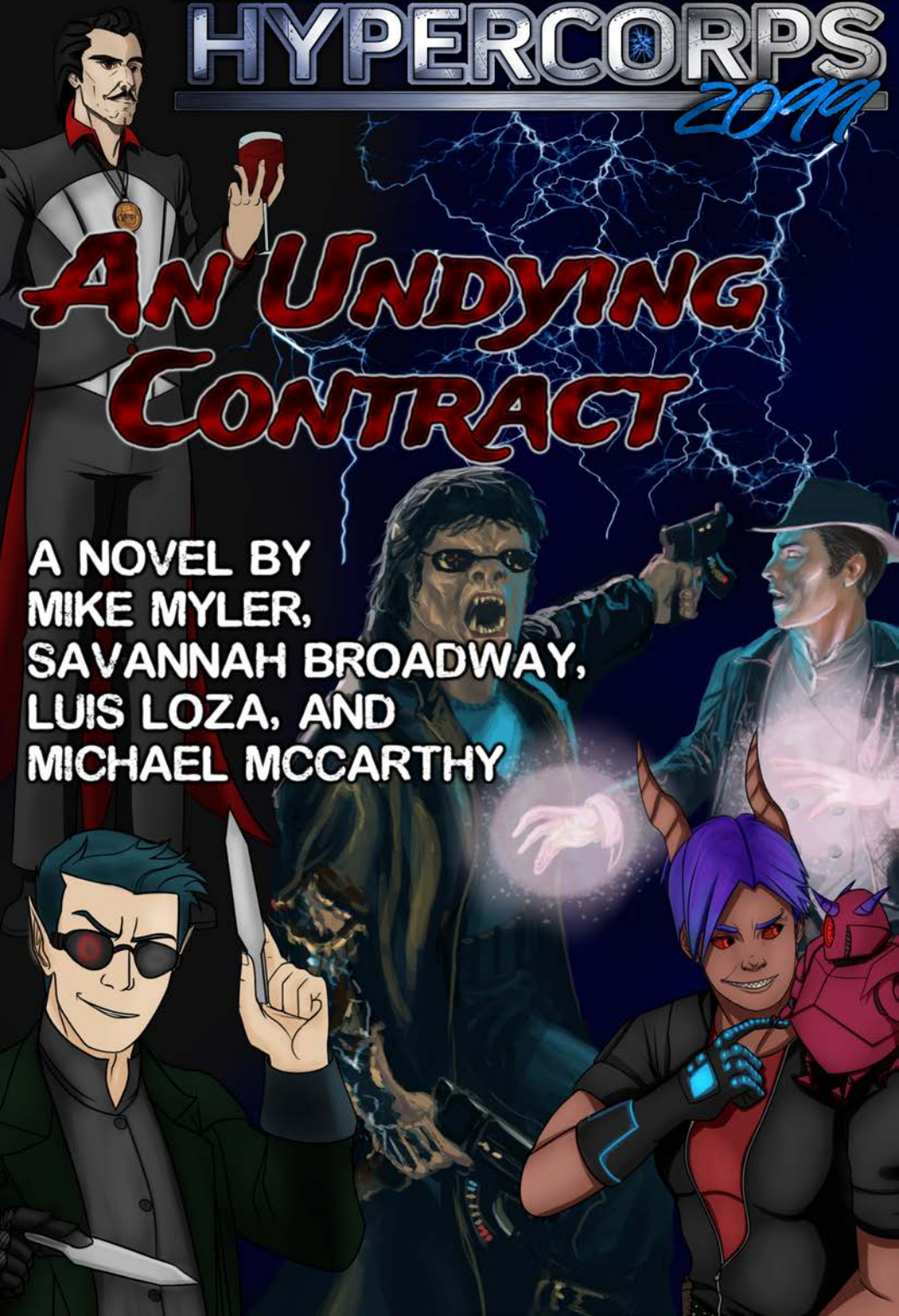


HYPERCORPS

2019

AN UNDYING CONTRACT

A NOVEL BY
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AN UNDYING CONTRACT

A *Hypercorps 2099* Novel

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Hypercorps 2099 is a superheroic cyberpunk fantasy campaign setting by Mike Myler published by Legendary Games, available for both the [Pathfinder Roleplaying Game](#) and [Fifth Edition](#).

One of the world's most well known operators, Lucky Mack, is getting into a job that's too big even for his britches. For things to go off without a hitch a great deal of careful planning and preparation is necessary, and lesser freelancers all over the world are pulling off their own missions in order to make it happen. By the time it's do or die, he and his compatriots will be equipped in sanctified power armor and across the world, battling against an evil even greater and more entrenched than the most unethical hypercorporation. Will they survive *An Undying Contract* and collect on their payment?



PROLOGUE: BIRTH OF UNDEATH

**TIMESTAMP: TRANSYLVANIA, WALLACHIA;
THURSDAY NOVEMBER 2ND, 11:34 PM, 1448**

As the night dragged on towards dawn the clouds crashed together across the moon to make for a truly impressive downpour. Through it all trudged a lone man, his clothes finely tailored but thoroughly worn and utterly inadequate for the coming storm. Forced to flee across the length of Moldova and into the most remote regions of Transylvania, Vlad III Dracula, once and future prince of Wallachia, was now truly alone—his retinue had either abandoned him or fled when wolves made a twilight assault on their encampment.

Anger was the only thing keeping the young noble warm and he was so embroiled in it—against his useless father, his traitorous brother, his damnable former captors, and his disloyal boyars—that his boot caught in the gnarled roots of an ancient tree and sent him sprawling into the mud. It stunk of rot and clung to his face, and as he wiped it out of his eyes he screamed, slamming his fist into the ground and spattering himself with still more of the slop. Self-pity, rage, the thirst for vengeance; they surged in his chest, tingling his clammy skin as the rain poured down, the sky itself pissing on him.

As he slowly pulled himself to his feet, the dagger at Vlad's belt dug into his hip, bringing with it the familiar, unwelcome thought that had so often plagued him of late: of ending it here and bothering the world no more with his futile dreams of ruling a liberated Wallachia from his father's throne. Truly, who would miss one more aspirant to the crown? But instead of sending him into the despondence it usually did, it just made his anger darker. Tearing the dagger from its sheath, the noble threw

it into the darkness, his curses unheard over the growing thunder.

“God in heaven!” he yelled, his voice breaking as Vlad roared to the pouring sky. “Gods of the storm and the earth! Devils in hell!” Lightning split the night to strike nearby, causing his ears to ring and his vision to white out—but he continued on. “I am Vlad Dracula, third of my name, son of the Dragon!” His father had been perhaps less a dragon and more an ineffectual lizard, but there was no need to involve such a failing in his oath. “I vow here that I will take the throne of Wallachia! I will take my revenge, at any cost! At *any price!*”

“Any price?” A voice somehow reached his ears over the growing roar of the wind, the lashing of the rain, and the howl of his own desperate cries. “I might arrange some assistance to your cause, good nobleman.”

Vlad whirled around, almost tripping over himself again in the mud. Behind him stood a dark-haired and deeply-tanned woman holding a lantern that cast a pale green light. Her simple white dress seemed to glow in the dark of the night, reflecting back brilliantly in a flash of lightning. As she came towards him, the rain finally began to let up and it occurred to Vlad suddenly that he must look disheveled. She didn’t deign to notice and only came nearer.

“Revenge cannot be given, young princeling,” she said while looking deep into his eyes, and Vlad felt as though this mysterious woman must be gazing upon his very soul. “It must be taken—and I can help you do that.” He stared at her, his mind unable to form words for a long moment.

“You can?” he finally managed.

“Oh, I can do many things for you, Vlad, but know that if you accept this gift I offer, you will change the world.” He gave her a confused look and she continued, “There is a dire imbalance and you can restore it; the question is, are you brave enough to grasp your vengeance?”

Some of the old anger returned then and for a moment he was more affronted than in awe of her. “I said what I meant—any cost, any price! If you help me free

whatever you please.”

The edge of the woman’s mouth quirked upwards slightly. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. As I said revenge is yours to take, but the help you seek can be found here,” she said, an ebony scroll case embellished with gold suddenly in her hand. He reached for it reflexively and she snatched it away. “Not yet,” she chided, “first, we make a deal.”

And so they did. That night as the clouds parted she presented him a contract. Vlad should have read it closely, he knew, but his flight through the forest left him on the brink of exhaustion, and compelled by her offer of revenge, he only gave it the barest thought. Besides, when he had taken the throne and repelled the cursed Ottomans, who would there be to enforce any kind of deal against him?

At the end, she had pulled out a blade—his dagger, in fact, the one that he had thrown in his rage—and slit her palm with it. He stared, taken aback at this sudden act of violence, until she handed it to him. “No progress without pain, princeling.”

Setting his jaw, Vlad nodded and took the knife, only hesitating a moment before cutting his own palm and grasping her hand as she offered it to him. As he did so there was a strange sucking sensation at the wound on his palm—he tried to jerk away in surprise but the woman just smiled and held him fast for a long moment that stretched on uncomfortably.

Then as he felt her let go there was a crash of lighting dangerously close, knocking him backwards, and leaving Vlad temporarily blinded with his head spinning. He tried to sit up but a flash of pain went through his wounded palm, leaving him dizzy and drained. No longer able to fight he let the darkness at the edge of his vision take over, but before he lost consciousness he found that though the scroll case was clutched tightly in his right hand, the woman who’d given it to him was gone.

Finding the location on the map had been more easily said than done, but Vlad had already taken the first step towards his revenge; he could feel it pulsing in his

veins. The following morning he awoke stiff, cold, and tired, but possessed by a fevered sense of purpose—indeed perhaps he was fevered, for he shivered badly as he forced himself doggedly forward. The wound on his palm throbbed with a sickly heat.

Vlad felt a nagging sense of unease as he neared the end of his route. The calls of the birds had stopped some time ago and he now noticed that the grass was growing only in small, sullen patches. The trees, too, were looking sickly—small and tough and gnarled where they grew at all, except for a kind of broad, towering beech tree with black leaves that seemed to block out almost all light, leaving only slivers of illumination to read his map. But he had come too far to back down now and he continued on.

In a wooded clearing he finally saw it. Afterwards he could never quite say how he knew he had arrived; certainly there had been no description of the place, but somehow a round stepwell with a set of stairs spiraling down into darkness spoke to him. Vlad knew that it was early afternoon and that the sun should still have been bright in the sky (even as late in the year it was), but here it was as though everything was dimmer than normal. The few courageous clumps of grass that dared grow were monochrome, the cloudless sky somehow gray. Even as he felt the first pangs of fear lance through his stomach—followed closely by those of hunger—he forced his feet onward.

As Vlad neared the stone edge of the stepwell he saw that strange markings lined the parameter, but rather than carved they looked like they had been eaten out of the stone itself by acid. Before the young noble's eyes they shimmered slightly, as if ushering him toward the steps. Vlad approached, his ears pricking for a noise just outside of hearing, but as he drew closer it became louder, more distinct. Whispers.

Hungry. Need. Feed us.

The dark mutterings continued as he took his first faltering steps down the well. Just as he was beginning to wonder how he would ever reach the bottom without



falling to his death in the dark, he saw the lantern:

simple but set with green glass—the woman’s lantern. He picked it up and was only somewhat surprised to see that it lit up at his touch, casting a faint glow a few feet ahead. Vlad journeyed deeper still, an acrid scent of bile and rot wafting up from below. He coughed, pressing his nose to his mud-spattered sleeve as he went on. The voices did not abate.

Life. Warmth. We hunger.

By now it was hard to tell if the voices were coming from his fevered imagination or from the darkness of the well itself, but they seemed to writhe in his mind like leeches in a pond. “Show yourself!” he barked hoarsely, bringing the lantern around and nearly throwing himself off balance.

Nothing answered back and there was only the slightest sound of whispering voices far away, like rustling leaves. He nearly turned back then but an oily gleam further down drew him nearer; at the bottom of the stepwell was a pool, dark and roiling. Black as night, it looked almost like the waxy skin of a corpse—stretched tight with the press of maggots just underneath—and smelled much the same. Hot bile rose up in his throat then and if he hadn’t been as paralyzed as he was sickened, he knew he would have vomited. Then, before his horrified eyes, the pool began to rise up.

It seemed to be taking the form of a man dripping with slime and hunched over with age. As it reached out one arm, a portion of the sludge dropped off—revealing a bony, ebony hand for just a moment—and then the ooze surged over it again. Vlad stifled a scream as it looked up at him, its face formless, its eyes strangely dry, empty sockets.

“Ah, you have come,” it said, its voice as cracked and dry as a parched riverbed.

Vlad tried to speak but the words simply wouldn’t come. He tried to take a breath but inhaled the disgusting vapors of the pool, coughing instead. “What are you?” he managed.

The form seemed to chuckle, leaning in uncomfortably close. “I? I am that which comes in the night. I am the thrill of fear up your spine when you hear



footsteps in the dark. I am the embodiment of all that walks the line between the living and the dead; that which drives rot and decay and the madness therein. The real question is, who are you?"

"I am Vlad the third, son of the Dragon," he replied with as much pride as he could manage.

"No, no, that is what they *call* you. Who are you really?" The creature wrapped around behind him then and Vlad stumbled forward, almost pitched into the pool. It whispered in his ear, "you are angry, vengeful—are you not? You seek recompense for a wrong done against you?"

Vlad flushed, remembering the harsh beatings of his youth; his father, who had left his sons at the mercy of the Turks, and the despicable defection of his brother Radu in exchange for favor. For years he had been abused, his beloved Wallachia crushed under the boot heel of the towering Ottoman Empire—but he would change all of that

"Yes," he said simply, and the figure seemed to smile.

"Good," the otherworldly thing replied, its voice louder than before and echoing in the stairwell. "Then consider this: become my vessel, lead my kind, give us dominion over your enemies, and you will have power beyond measure."

It was a tempting offer to be sure, but Vlad still hesitated—it would not do to shake the yoke of the Turks if he was only subjecting himself to another. Sensing his misgivings, the form continued, moving from his ear to look at him face to face. "Not as a servant, princeling; as a partner. With my power and your will, there is nothing we cannot bring about."

Any price or any cost, he reminded himself. "It's a deal, then." Vlad extended his hand, felt the deathly cold of the sludge envelop it, felt the tear of his skin as it crept in through his pores. He arched his back, screamed, and then the thing was inside of him; in his mouth, his ears, his nose—everything was darkness and pain. He dropped the lantern, feeling one of the shards of glass graze his leg as it burst apart, and then the creature was

in that, too. His body shivered, deathly cold, but at



the same time a fire had started in his stomach, flaring outwards and burning away everything else in his mind.

Vlad's bones felt like they were shattering bits at a time, breaking and changing into something stronger; the tips of his fingers exploded in a spray of red as the bone reformed into inch-long claws; his incisors itched and ached as they grew longer and his jaw broke with a snap to reset just as quickly into a new form, able to stretch wider than any human's was meant to.

The creature that emerged from the stepwell that night wore the skin of Vlad III Dracula, but the mind driving it was unlike anything that the world had seen before: gaunt, lean, hungry, and completely infused with the energy of undeath. The First Vampire was born.

It was during Vlad's second reign that a knight of Moldovia also sought to calibrate the balance. For years the warrior hounded the growing ranks of the undead, weakening Vlad's position even as he lost political ground against his other enemies. Finally after being deposed of his throne again (and again reinstalling himself), the perseverant king predicted his own fall. The First Vampire was no stranger to setbacks though and instead of trying to prevent it he instead made plans for his eventual return. Still more fledglings were made, given prescient instructions on how to proceed in his absence and told to look for his glorious homecoming. A month later on the road from Bucharest to Giugiu, Vlad's predictions came to pass.

The battle with the shining warrior was perhaps the blurriest of all of the First Vampire's memories, but he knew that it was a brutal conflict, one fought with arrow and blade and fang and claw; two equal and opposite forces destroying themselves and each other. What bothers him most about the memory however is not how it ended—impaled through the heart with a broken shaft, even as his claws tore out the knight's windpipe—but that he was never able to make out his killer's features. His bodyguards, he knew, could see a mortal standing there, the same as any other, but to him his assailant's face shone only a brilliant light, so searing and full of life that it was painful to gaze upon.

Five hundred and fifteen years after his destruction—one hundred and fifteen years after the tachyon flux forever changed the world and enabled his regeneration—the First Vampire emerged from the waters of the South China Sea and onto the shores of southwestern Thailand just after sunset, naked as the day he had been born and emaciated as a skeleton. More animal than man he had decimated a small fishing village (killing them down to the last soi dog) but as he stood up from the dried out and devoured remains of the settlement's piled up corpses, a strange collection of mortals appeared in the distance. They were clearly natives of the area, but as alike to the villagers he had killed as a pup was to a wolf. One was pale blue of skin, with prominent gills, another hugely tall with a large maul over one shoulder. The third was covered in glowing tattoos, electricity crackling idly around her body, and the fourth looked to be half man and half beast. Vlad smiled, eyeing the coat that the fishy one wore; after he had amused himself with this lot it would fit him well.

They seemed shocked at the sheer level of devastation Vlad had unleashed, but with no hesitation the one with the tattoos cried out in a language he didn't understand and pointed, sending a bolt of lightning arcing through the air and straight towards him. In response the First Vampire calmly reached out a hand, absorbing the bolt and savoring its tingle as it flowed through him—a novel sensation to be sure, but nothing to fret over. Vlad rolled his shoulders as she yelled commands to her comrades. He had been strong before, yes; fast, of course; able to take punishment that would have killed a normal man. But all of that was nothing compared to what he was now. He could feel the wellspring of fell energies at his beck and call, throbbing underneath the surface of his skin—the darkness of the pool flowed through him, drawing from the power of every creature that walked the line between life and death. The greater their numbers, the greater his strength. And now it was time to use it.

The towering woman with the maul rushed at him, the beast man coming from the opposite side. They were fast—amusingly so even—but he was faster.



As the maul crashed down he was gone, behind the beast man and punching a clawed hand through flesh, through bone, and out the other side. As if that were not enough, everywhere he touched the tissue withered and died. The man howled in pain and died almost instantly as his companion whirled around but before she could charge, Vlad had lifted the beast man's corpse one handed and flung it at her.

It was truly glorious, this new power. What he had thought was the whole of it was only the beginning—every moment he existed more power flowed into him, unknowingly donated from his children across the world and so intense that it threatened to overwhelm his newly formed frame. Instead of mere speed he now stepped through the shadows, appearing behind the piscine mortal. Keeping in mind that he wanted the coat in the best condition possible, he merely reached out and snapped the unfortunate soul's neck, deftly relieving them of the garment as his victim's body went limp.

Before he could put it on however, the maul came crashing into his backside. It was an impressive blow to be sure—his arm, shoulder, and collarbone were undoubtedly smashed into grinding shards—but he felt almost nothing from it. Vlad turned and as he felt the muscles knitting together, the bones crunching into shape, he applauded politely. The woman stared dumbfounded, the same expression still on her face as he relieved her of the great weapon and crushed her ribcage with it.

There was a great whoosh behind him and on instinct Vlad flitted through the shadows again, just in time to see the blinding light of an enormous fireball engulf where he had been standing a moment ago. That must have meant that the coat would be burnt—a pity. Taking a moment to admire the beauty of the unleashed magic, he darted forward and took the mage by the throat, calmly waiting for the life to drain out of her before sinking his teeth into her neck; it wasn't that he was hungry, but he *did* have an idle curiosity about whether or not her blood would taste of lightning.

He wasn't disappointed.

CHAPTER 1: JUST ANOTHER JOB


TIMESTAMP: NUEVOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
USA, JANUARY 1ST, 4:32 AM, 2099

Mack woke in a daze. The aching was back—after almost fifty years of jobs left and right, the dull pain had grown familiar. The half-orc learned to put up with it like a relative who never really leaves. He was fine with the aching, but the massive mound of rubble that he was buried under? Not so much. Mack struggled to get up, but found that his left arm and his legs were all properly trapped under a terrible mix of concrete, rebar, and steel.

“Well, damn,” he muttered.

At least it wasn't like the last time he was trapped under debris during the job in Colombia. Mack had to wait almost two days straight for a cleanup crew to come by and find him and he was completely without any hypernet access the whole time. It was damned boring. No, this time he'd be just fine. It wouldn't be pretty, but he would be fine.

The half-orc used his free arm to tear away the rubble burying his other arm—this was the easy part and with just a few minutes of effort he had enough space to wrestle his limb free. One of the perks of a bodytech arm is just how strong it is. If need be, a neural override will kick the cybernetics into high gear and give a boost of torque in a pinch. All Mack had to do was will his arm to go full force and it would do the rest. Even after two decades with the prosthetic, though, he hadn't really picked up on the nuances of these finer controls.

“Come on you bastard!” he screamed at the hunk of expensive metal coming out of his shoulder. The arm  erupted forth, blasting debris every which way. His

arm was covered in a thick layer of silt, a mix of powdered concrete and nanite fluid that leaked from the lacerations across the device. In an instant the nanites within the arm began the hard work of repairing it from within, drawing upon elements in the air and who knows what else to synthesize new nanites in a concoction colloquially known as “syrup.” After a minute of letting his arm repair, Mack looked down at his legs and got to work again. The half-orc threw rubble all around his pinned body for several minutes until he reached his legs; they looked worse than his arm did. There was pigeon-toed and then there were his legs—bones and muscles had healed and his skin was intact, but he would never be able to walk with them in this state.

Setting bones was never an enjoyable process but one with which he'd become intimately familiar. Given the alarming frequency that Mack had to reset his bones, he had an extra module added to the arm to allow him to view through his flesh. It was a great ice breaker at parties. Mack scanned his legs and found the problem: he had essentially grown an extra ankle on his right leg. This wouldn't do. After a mental countdown, a flick of the bodytech wrist was all it took, sending a scream of pain that echoed around the ruins of the warehouse's remains. With the scanner still going, he set the bone and watched his body go to work. A massive amount of calcium formed around the fracture almost instantly and proceeded to be worn down to its normal shape in the span of seconds.

“Cool,” he chuckled. It hurt like a bitch but the half-orc never grew tired of watching it happen.

Finally back in his preferred, functional shape, Mack stood up and looked around. If his legs were a mess, the rest of this place was a catastrophe; if there was someone with a rubble fetish out there (and Mack was sure there was) they would have a field day here. Debris, detritus, and general dreck was spotted with a good number of bodies. Mack and his crew had done some good work here. Shame they didn't make it—he was starting to like them.

“Looks like it's just you and me again, Gertie.” He reached for his gun but found his holster empty.

Mack began to panic. He couldn't leave Gertrude here. He went to check his coat jacket for the gun, but was quick to realize his jacket was missing as well. Not only that, but his sunglasses were gone too. "Where the @\$%&! is all my stuff?!"

This was not a good way to start the new year. Mack took a moment to collect himself; this wasn't the first time he had misplaced any of these things, but it was the first time they were all missing simultaneously. He knew exactly what to do—retrace his steps, just like his mom taught him when he was a kid. The half-orc clambered over a nearby wall that sported an immense, recent hole (an addition from about a half hour ago). Once outside, he rushed over to the side entrance where the operation kicked off.

There were five of them, he recalled: a halfling, an elf, two humans, and his implacable self. The halfling, X-Press, was clever and she was fast. That's all that really mattered. The elf, Insite, was a whiz of a netjacker. His drones were essentially two small, deadly, propeller-driven extensions of his own body. The human women were quite different, Mack recalled—one was a savant with all things electric and explosive, the other was a master of the sword. Aleksa the Mage and Izela the Samurai were their names (well, their code names). All the best operators had them, except for Mack. He tried the whole code name thing once, but kept forgetting what he picked; it was easier to go by Mack instead of responding to Kill Streak or whatever the hell code names operators had these days.

The crew sat in wait just one hundred feet from the facility, scoping the joint.

"Alright," X-Press said with all the excitement of a child, "so the plan is to run in, beat up all those fools, grab the whatever-it-is-we're-getting-paid-for, get out, and grab a drink. Gizmo, you've done the research, what are we looking at?"

Insite gave his umpteenth sigh of the night. "Insite. It's Insite. Now remember it or the last thing you're seeing is the business end of one of these drones."

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X-Press gave a nervous chuckle. "Okay, okay,

buddy. No need to get violent with me. Save it for the who-knows-what's inside."

"Fine," Insite spat with a shake of his head. "The info I nabbed says there are upwards of thirty guards each armed with Peretta SMGs and Kevlar suits. Also, all of the work crew has thorough jiu-jitsu and hapkido training as a minimum. This place is nothing to sneeze at, that's for sure."

"Are there any wards in place?" asked Aleksa.

"Thankfully, no," Insite replied. "The cheap bastards at DRAPA pinched their bytecoins. They probably figured that if you throw enough guns at something, it will be safe enough. You should be clear to shock and awe all you like, Miss."

Mack chimed in. "Any bots?"

The rest of the crew almost blew their cover at the sound of the half-orc's voice. Mack wasn't one for talking and, so far, Insite and Aleksa believed him to be mute. Insite looked over to Mack, quietly polishing his gun. The elf took a moment to bring his bulging eyes back into his head and compose himself. "Um... not really. There are some lift suits to move around all the heavy stuff, but those are all technically manned."

Mack gave an acknowledging grunt before putting Gertrude away. "Good. I don't like bots."

"Enough talk," Izela declared, standing up and drawing her blade, "we know the plan. Let's get the work done."

X-press nodded, "Yeah, I'm with her. Let's get moving." The halfling was a blur, already waiting by the entrance before anyone registered that she was gone. The rest of the crew rushed along to catch up. Insite pounded away at the digiboard on his wrist with manic speed.

"Please don't do that again," the elf berated between labored breaths. "You might have been spotted on the security cams."

"It's fine," she replied, opening the side door into the warehouse. "I'm too fast for anything to—"

A spray of bullets flew out from within, bringing the halfling to a bloody halt.

"@#\$\$%&! Oh, @#\$\$%&!" Aleksa screamed,

her face overcome with terror. She began to slip into a panic until she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Move.” Mack pushed her through the door, revealing a group of guards reloading their weapons. They had only seen X-Press and were unprepared for the rest of the crew. For a brief, tense moment the world slowed to a still, then bullets began flying in either direction, like so much rain in a hurricane.

Aleksa kept enough of her head to cast a spell—with a few motions, her hands began to glow a dim, pale cobalt. She used two fingers to point at the ground, drawing an imaginary line between her crew and the guards. In an instant, it flared into a veritable wall of brutal wind that kicked inward, throwing bullets everywhere.

A guard hurried across a walkway some distance from the fighting and readied his rifle. A small reticle appeared in the vision of his cybernetic eye as he lined up his shot, giving him distances and impact ratios: the half-orc was his closest target. The crosshairs gave a pleasing red pulse when they lined up over Mack’s nose.

The guard took a deep breath and pulled the trigger. The bullet was right on track until it hit the wind, where it was knocked off course by a few stray inches, striking the brute’s eyewear before glancing off harmlessly. “Augh! You @#\$%&!” screamed Mack, retaliating with a perfect shot against the guard, bringing him down. “Those are my favorite specs!”

Aleksa began to cast her next spell as Insite’s drones made quick work of the guard that ran up to bash her with his gun. She splayed her fingers, small sparks arcing between them, rapidly coruscating into a maelstrom in her palm. The Mage held onto her spell for a moment, charging it—jolting power coursed through her arms and across her chest, arcing into her heart and shorting her breath. The hair on her neck stood like an electrified forest until Aleksa thrust her hands forward, releasing the energy at the remaining guards. Lightning shot forth, jumping between each of her victims and cries of agony before they fell to the ground.

The sunglasses sat on the concrete a few feet away, the left arm completely shattered by the bullet.

Mack felt Insite tugging at his arm as the rest moved ahead—there was no time to waste.

The crew moved past the pile of dead sec-ops at the entrance and onto the work floor. Merchandise found its way around the warehouse via hover dolly or lift suit. Workers were placed in their suits like action figures inside the latest new accessory twice their size. The construction apparatuses were more arm than anything else, each ending in a three-pronged claw capable of lifting the pallets, shipping containers, and chemical tanks lining the warehouse; they weren't really meant for combat.

Izela leapt ahead, slicing through a lift suit's arm, spraying oil and syrup everywhere. The Samurai continued her rampage, cutting the rest of the suit down into fine pieces. Earlier she had proudly explained that her sword was sharpened down to the molecular level and capable of cutting anything that wasn't reinforced by magic. Mack didn't believe her until that moment, watching in awe as the woman bathed in the robotic viscera spewing everywhere.

"Glorious!" she screamed as she dashed ahead to find the next lift suit.

The workers took to defending their livelihood after the initial shock of the situation passed. Men and women assumed fighting stances and surrounded Izela only to be cut down in seconds. Again the Samurai drowned herself in the sea of combat—she was covered in bright crimson, harsh grays, and deep, void-like black. A grin was her only recognizable feature, giving her the appearance of a demon. The crew and the workers all paused for a moment, watching the menace that unfolded before them. "More... bring me more!" Izela demanded. "You can do better than that, you pitiful fools!"

A bullet rang out and the fighting continued; Mack ducked behind a stray crate to reload. He considered never working with Izela again, but was too shaken by her display to really think about it in the moment. Gertrude reloaded with the audible click of the next magazine sliding into place and the half-orc peeked around to survey the scene. More sec-ops were on the floor, laying suppressing fire in his direction, and the Samurai



was nowhere to be seen—she may have been blood-thirsty, but she wasn't an idiot.

The guards allowed the smallest of lapses between bullets and Insite's drones took off. One flew high towards the warehouse ceiling, drawing away gunfire. As the sec-ops focus shifted toward the roof, the other robot flew past the guards, spraying its own line of bullets and bringing down a handful of them. The first drone took care of the rest; revealing a small slot on its chassis and then a multitude of blades within, razor sharp discs rained down on the remaining guards, eviscerating them left and right. Izela was vicious, but generally slayed her targets—Insite left them severely incapacitated instead.

Aleksa moved past the writhing guards towards the next wave of approaching workers, her hands already at work on her next spell. The workers hesitated at the sight of her, practiced in defense against magic. The spell completed and the Mage brought her hands up, cupping them around her mouth. Her soon-to-be-victims prepared themselves for the attack, covering their ears in preparation for some kind of sonic blast, but a smirk came across Aleksa's face as a single drop of poison dripped from her mouth. She stepped forward and let loose a noxious miasma, a mix of pitch-black coagulate roiling forth and sticking to the workers. It burned through their clothes in an instant, burning and searing the flesh beneath as they fell to the ground twisting in anguish as the acid finished them off.

A lift suit broke through the toxic cloud, piloted by one of the few remaining sec-ops.

"We must defend the target at all costs," she shouted into the comm system, her voice booming over the chaos of the warehouse. The construction apparatus' arm swung on Aleksa, unprepared for the attack; the Mage was knocked aside like a rag doll, rolling in pain on the ground. Spinning around to focus on Mack, the lift suit's legs following the swiveling torso as its pilot stomped towards the half-orc.

Mack lost himself to panic for a brief moment. Izela was further down the floor, dealing with more guards.

Insite was still too far away to help and his drones



were crafting themselves new ammunition for the next attack. The half-orc got desperate—he pointed Gertrude at the guard point-blank while the lift suit’s arms were closing in on him. In response she wrenched her arm into the cockpit, pulling out a pistol from her hip and firing back. Her bullet nicked Mack’s hand, knocking Gertie across the floor. He didn’t have time to reach for her, diving under the guard’s other robotic arm as it came down towards him. The half-orc rolled between the lift suit’s legs, coming up just behind it. He let out a desperate punch, striking the main circuitry panel on the suit’s back; much to his surprise, its left arm dropped to the ground, unresponsive.

“No!” shouted the guard in disbelief. A grin planted itself on Mack’s face as he punched the panel again and again. Striking it over and over, he watched gleefully as the lift suit slipped progressively out of control and kept pouring it on, watching the skin shear away on his real fist. The sec-ops pilot was unable to eject and could only scream as the construction apparatus stumbled toward a set of chemical tanks a few feet away. It tripped over itself and onto the vats, setting off a tremendous explosion that toppled a container and set a few nearby tanks ablaze. The blast continued setting off others like it all around Mack and unable to see Aleksa or his gun, he rushed over to his remaining crew.

He found Insite and Izela standing in front of a small container amidst large piles of crates and chemical tanks.

“I think we should hurry,” Mack pressed. “I think I bjorked the joint.”

“No @#%&, man!” Insite replied, one eye on his digiboard. “This is going to take a hot second.”

“No matter. We can fill the time,” Izela assured, watching as the last remaining sec-ops closed in on them. Mack sighed. “Thirty! You said thirty! I’m sure this makes about fifty at this point,” he growled, annoyed. Izela was already running ahead towards the guards, cutting down one as she caught up with them.

“Just a note,” commented Insite, “this is the worst job I’ve ever been on.”

"I've had worse," replied Mack, turning towards Izela. The Samurai bloodily dealt with the last guard and let out a hearty chuckle that progressed into a manic laugh. "Eh, looks like she's got this." Mack squatted down beside Insite. "Almost done?"

The elf turned to him with a wicked grin. "Ding!" The doors of the unlocked container slid into the box's oblong walls to reveal a lone pedestal at the far end with something resembling a katana resting on it. The pair of operators went to stand up, but Mack's jacket caught on the edge of the container, knocking him forward onto his face. Insite ignored the half-orc's bumbling and, flanked by his aerial automatons, stepped inside and unknowingly triggered the container's final counter measure. An override signal pulsed out from the circuitry inside the control panel the elf had just manipulated, counter-hacking Insite's drones in 50 microseconds completely beneath the netjacker's notice.

The drones had completed their ammo recreation procedure seconds before the override kicked in, leaving them loaded for bear—they unleashed their full store within the container, bringing Insite down and destroying themselves in the process. Mack stayed flat to the floor for a moment after the last shot fired, checking himself for any new bullet holes or lacerations. Satisfied that he was unscathed and sighing at the wasteful impetuosity of the dead elf beside him, the half-orc attempted to free his jacket. The angle he lay at made it almost impossible and when another set of explosions echoed through the warehouse he thought better of it, slipping out of his beloved coat. The nearby canisters joined in on the blasts, tossing Mack aside as he became covered in rubble.

The fire blazing around the canister didn't impede Izela from making her way inside. Syrup, blood, and oil roiled from the intense heat, complementing her blood-thirsty visage as the flames danced around her, licking at the Samurai's flesh harmlessly while the synthetic fluids dripped from her body to sizzle and evaporate instantly upon hitting the hot concrete. The sword lay in wait ahead; it appeared to be made of glass embedded

a chorus of whispers filled her head that taunted her combat prowess, deeming her unworthy of the weapon. She ignored them, reaching forth and grabbing the blade—in response a spirit stirred within, manifesting as a deep, hissing voice in her head. “Ahhh, warrior, you are truly skilled to achieve even a single touch on me.”

“Quiet, blade,” spat Izela. “I know you are merely another AI meant to deter me from completing my work. Keep quiet and it will make things simple.”

A bellowing laugh filled Izela’s mind, causing her to wince for a moment. “You know not what you trifle with, warrior. I am more than a simple program—I will be the end of you.”

The laughter continued, growing louder every second. Izela fell to her knees, shaking her head. “Leave me be, fiend!”

Cackling, the voice ominously echoed in her mind as it exerted its will, “this is the end of you, warrior...” Izela stopped shaking and held the blade before her, her eyes were wide with horror and utterly unable to keep her body from moving. The Samurai struggled helplessly, yelling at the being in her mind as she spun the sword around, pointing the blade at her stomach. With a single slice she cut through her armor and into her belly, gutting herself. Izela screamed but found she was voiceless, unable to even open her mouth. She fell forward onto the sword—her blood lapped on the blade, coating it thoroughly as Izela blacked out to the sound of dark laughter ringing in her ears.

“Oh, here they are.” Mack’s retracing led him to find his sunglasses, interrupting his reverie. He picked them up and looked at the damage. “Well, crap. I guess it’s time for a new pair.” The half-orc continued clambering over the rubble until he made his way to the work floor, taking some time to clear the debris before eventually locating Gertrude. “There you are, babe. We’ll be home soon and I’ll clean you up.”

He proceeded towards the container, a leather sleeve peeking up at him from beneath the rubble. Upon digging it out Mack did his best to clear the dust from the coat, eventually satisfied when he could once more

read the faded “N.A. Bandits” etched on the back. He took care with putting on his jacket again, avoiding the hole in the right sleeve that tends to catch his hand when he puts it on. “Okay, let’s get that damn sword.”

He made his way into the container and nearly retched at the sight of Izela. “Oh, @\$%&!” He put his sleeve up to his face to ease the smell of the impromptu abattoir, pushing the Samurai’s body aside to access the sword (thinking to himself that she could probably also have chosen a better code name). The spirit within the blade began to stir once more, eager for another victim, but the blood on the katana was dried and caked over by the time Mack reached for it, preventing his skin from actually making contact with the weapon itself. The entity trapped within the katana could only struggle helplessly as it watched the half-orc pick it up without a care.

An augmented reality overlay came up on Mack’s left arm. He scrolled through his speed dial until reaching Arturo on his list. The call was answered after only two rings. It was a personal best. “Artie!” Mack shouted.

“Damn it, Mack.” The voice on the other end of the line was impatient from the get go, as usual. “What is it?”

“I need a ride, Artie.” Mack looked at Gertrude carefully, wiping away some syrup near her ammunition catch. “It’s payday and I’ll buy you a drink if you pick me up.”

“Two drinks and you’re sitting in the back,” his friend replied tacitly, “you tend to dirty up the car.”

“Deal.”

Mack and Artie pulled up to the best bar in all of Nuevos Angeles, Santa Tequila’s.

Parking his Fujiko model armored van around the back, the dwarf driver looked at his half-orc passenger disdainfully. “Mack,” Artie scolded, “I didn’t know you were so damn dusty—you owe me three drinks if I have to clean up after you.”

“Fine,” said Mack, “but I pick what you’re drinking. Grinning, he killed the ignition and stepped out of the vehicle. “Fair enough.”



The two went inside to find the place somewhat full,

especially for a Thursday morning. They sat in their usual spots and the barkeep brought over a fresh bottle of Rosa Antigua and two glasses.

“Oh, Chuck,” swooned Artie, his stubby fingers splaying out into a royal gesture, “I never knew you cared so much.”

The ogre barkeep wasn’t having it, looking down at the two with contempt that was almost palpable as he set their order on the table. “Shove it, Artie,” called Chuck as he made his way back to the bar.

Mack and Artie shared a laugh but out of the corner of his eye, the half-orc spotted a figure too well dressed for the operator dive. She was sitting in the booth she always did, sipping on a glass of warm water.

“I’ll be back,” said Mack.

“You might as well bring another bottle on your way back, man,” shouted Artie behind him.

Mack strolled over to Ms. Grey’s table, blade in hand, and took a seat.

“Ah, Mack, it looks like another job well done,” began Ms. Grey. “It’s a shame about the rest of your crew.”

Mack knew better than to try to ask about how she always knew—he gave up two decades ago. “Here’s your stinking sword,” he said, tossing it onto the table.

“Mack, I’d ask you to be more careful with my things,” she said coyly, “but I’m sure this little guy can take some rough handling.”

“So, that’s it? I’m paid and good to go, right?” he asked, beginning to stand from his seat.

“Yes, you are. Well, there is one thing...” she trailed off.

“When are you going to learn to be upfront with me?” Mack gave a sigh, sitting back down. “What is it this time?”

Ms. Grey handed Mack a digiboard. He took a moment to read it over. “You know I don’t like working alone.”

She gave him a small smile. “Yes, yes, I know dear, but look at the bottom.”

“Is that so?” Mack said, slightly surprised. “Half upfront? Is that right?”

Ms. Grey gave a nod.

“Fine,” the half-orc said, a hint of reluctance in his voice. “I’m in.”

“I figured you would be,” she replied, her smile turning from an expression of amusement to one of satisfaction. “Expect a contract in the morning.”

Mack stood up and made his way back to Artie. As he sat down, he looked back to Ms. Grey’s booth—it was completely empty, not even a glass of water.

“Everything cool, Mack?” Artie asked from behind the remaining half of the bottle.

“Yeah, it’s cool.” He poured himself a drink. “I think this is good way to start the new year.”

CHAPTER 2: MEAN MEGALOPOLIS STREETS

TIMESTAMP: NEO YORK, NEW YORK USA;
WEDNESDAY APRIL 1ST, 1:17 PM, 2099

Yet another rainy day in Neo York. The water seems to never really have stopped falling on the megalopolis after the oceans rose and the sea walls went up, and Vince has witnessed maybe a dozen sunny days in the city since his arrival last year. It's almost as if the Atlantic Ocean refused to let Neo York go, or like the world can't stop crying in frustration at the constant injustices that plague the Big Apple. Maybe it was simpler than that—maybe the Earth just wanted to wash away its biggest concrete tumor.

Tossing out a few flashing orange warning drones and crouching down onto the street, Vince reflected that he probably wouldn't be able to make it in Neo York if it weren't for the rain. Forcing his willpower down onto the asphalt, "Pothole" stretched the material to cover and fill yet another depression in the road, swiping away at the digital tally on the augmented reality display layed over his vision by the cyber-eye in the right side of his skull. One of the warning drones squealed out as a hazardous red light blipped toward his right and Vince just barely leapt out of the way as a skycar careened off of a hyperway above and bounced off the ground and around a corner, destroying a large section of the street (two hours worth, he thought tiredly) directly where the dwarf was standing only a moment before. A blast of heat followed after the vehicle as a Neo-Deputy rocketed past him, a blazing speedster just ahead and firing off a paint gun at the thing's sensors. Whatever had already painted

the automobile wasn't the enterprising sprinter though—he was shooting blue and a bright crimson was splattered across the vehicle's hood.

Vince thought back to his first day in Neo York; it was, if it can be believed, even more depressing than the weeks and months that followed. Filled with youthful energy, the twenty year old dwarf had stepped off the train from Pittsburgh with the unbridled enthusiasm of naiveté, making his way to the Neo-Metro Deputy Processing Center in Times Square on foot. As “Mr. Fix-It” he had been the pride of his McCandless suburb: homecoming king, prom king, and valedictorian. Everybody loved Vince. He had always believed in the Neo-Deputy program despite the fact that his home city lacked one, digesting all of the media he could whenever another new place adopted it, cataloging all of the new authority figures and recording their arrests. When his cousin emerged as an alter sapiens the rest of the family was mollified but Vince was excited, only to become utterly overwhelmed when Thomas was recruited by the Neo-Deputy program in Neo York. Thomas had promised that a job awaited Vince in the Big Apple, and that a cursory interview was the only thing between him and the lifestyle he so adored. A blaring horn was all the warning he had that first time he dodged a skycar however, sending the dwarf down into a dirty puddle on a street only a few blocks from the precinct and pitching him into an investigation involving at least a dozen police officers. Vince thought bitterly about the foolishness he felt after that dreadful meeting—a bit of dirtied clothing and a traffic accident shouldn't have posed any issues to his hiring, and now he was in the 8th step of the appeals process.

His reverie came to an abrupt and sudden end as the defensive leap sent Vince sailing across the sidewalk and into a small hobo encampment underneath the bridge above. Neo York has a lot of these ad hoc settlements; the city churns through people like the entire metropolis was a hypercorporation. People—people like Vince—come here with high hopes and big dreams, but most end up working themselves into debt inside a room

street. Some do make it, people like Thomas (whose subsidized apartment is fortunately big enough for two so his cousin is good for something), but he's the exception to the rule. In the middle are operators, but they rarely spend much more time in the city than a few days, quick to escape the heat put down by his cousin and Neo York's other Neo-Deputies. "Pothole? Is that you?", someone said as the dwarf picked himself up, using his powers to fix his recently-crushed digiboard and bringing the augmented reality display back online. The feed from his cyber-eye blinked and the worn familiar face and lanky blond hair of a friend came into view: Wise Jess.

A retired cyber ninja (a ridiculous title but accurate to a T), Jess earned her nickname for surviving the game. Being an operator is a dangerous line of work and when you can't afford the treatments to stave off aging or you piss off the wrong people, you're done. The half-elf worked out of Neo York for over a decade before a bad job against BioSpecs came back to bite her in the ass—literally. Some kind of robot snake in their research lab had sunk its fangs into her backside, injecting a venom she never quite recovered from. Now Wise Jess makes enough money to get by on rumors, though if her sunken cheeks and current place of residence are any indication, things haven't been going great as of late. "What a coincidence, you jumping into my yard—you're just the stout I was looking for."

Grinning at the use of the appropriated demigrant slight, Vince nodded, "that right? That's exactly what I was thinking as yet another skycar tried to pulverize me during the day job."

"That's good old Pothole right there," she replied, "anything for the Neometro Transit Authority!" The two laughed for a bit, Wise Jess taking out a deathstick and offering one to Vince, who politely declined. "I don't blame you—those short little legs need all the help they can get and you still haven't gotten any cardio mods like mine, have you?"

"No," Vince said, shaking his head, "not yet. Keep having to replace my drones, or blow what bytecoins I haven't spent on them to butter up Neo-Deputy

dubyas instead. You got something for that?”

Wise Jess' lips split into a grin of her own and she nodded, taking a long drag on the deathstick before exhaling a cloud of smoke into the wet air. “Maybe. If you think you're up for it.” Vince settled a stare on her that made it unequivocally clear that he was indeed up for whatever “it” was before she continued. “Word is that a very wealthy and very interested party is looking for a defunct positronic accelerator, some tech made by Kalvahn Industries a few decades ago. Lab was down in the Rockworks before the whole thing was scrapped, but guess who knows exactly where it is?”

Vince, already keying “positronic accelerator” into the Hypernet and finding only a few cryptic results (just enough for it to potentially be legitimate), sighed in reply, “Wise Jess?”

Her grin only widened, “damn straight. Invest a few hundred bytecoins in my future and the coordinates are yours, Pothole. I'll even key you to the buyer, no cut on my part—just the flat fee. We got a deal?”

A few days and a couple hundred bytecoins later, Vince sat nervously on the couch in the apartment he shared with his cousin. The dwarf was alone (every Tuesday night Thomas went out for drinks with coworkers) but consumed with anxiety at what lay ahead of him that evening. The source of his anxiety—also the means for Vince to better his life—lay on the floor in front of the living room, filling him with apprehension and foreboding.

Sitting inert on the carpet, gleaming brightly in the lamps on the wall, was his cousin's squad-sanctioned Neo-Deputy armor.

Thomas would lose his gods damned mind if he knew that Vince had removed it from his closet, and as soon as the department got around to fitting these things with proper scanning equipment, this trick would stop working. Hoping against hope that hadn't happened yet, the dwarf took a screwdriver to the biometric cortex behind the nose plate and smashed it, wincing at the thought of what would happen to him if his cousin ever

listening, Vince fit the helmet over his head and focused his mind on fixing the damaged sensors—breathing a huge sigh of relief as that system of the suit powered on and registered him as Thomas Smetanka, Neo-Captain of the 343rd District of Neo York.

Donning the vambraces, boots, chestplate, and belt, he already felt stronger and tougher—given the chance, Vince thought, he could definitely be a proper Neo-Deputy. Swaggering into the bathroom and taking in his full visage, he already felt better able to overcome whatever awaited him in the Rockworks beneath Neo York. Hell, if Wise Jess was an operator once upon a time, he can sure as hell manage that much. Besides, what's the worst an abandoned Kalvahn Industries research lab could do to him?

Getting into the subterranean network under the megalopolis was simple enough but the world below Neo York was practically a city unto itself, with rules all its own. Beneath the streets most people still had enough of a mind to avoid angering or confronting a Neo-Deputy, but the undergangs didn't pay much deference to Vince's stolen outfit and two of them gave the dwarf trouble. The first group weren't much more than thugs, appearing at the top and bottom of a curved stair terminal he'd thoughtlessly wandered into without his razor pistol out to threaten away observers. "Watchoo doin in Yancie tunnels, coppa? You jig? You jag? We dicers, coppa. You dice?" Grabbing face pics of the undergang and checking the suit's internal hard drive for any intel on the group before he responded with flechette rounds, Vince nearly soiled his armor.

The Yancies were apparently among the Yorkers undergangs, one of the Rockworks' biggest organizations. Predominantly made up of an alliance between the large gangs of the crime-ridden 2070s when they went to ground after the Neo-Deputies program was introduced, they're all fiercely loyal to one another and share a prejudice for alter sapien sheriffs. Vince figured that trying to overwhelm them from a flanked position wasn't out of the question, but knew that he had a ways to go yet and drawing the ire of a populous undergang would

probably be a death toll. Hands in the air and letting some of his anxiety slip, he produced a credchip from the hem of his glove and said, “No, I don’t jig, jag, dice, or otherwise. I’m, uh, handing out 10 bytecoin...tax refunds to citizens in the Rockworks, of course. Bad accounting program.”

For a few tense seconds none of them seemed to react and Vince worried they were too thick to get the jist of his bribe, or wanted more out of him—like blood. Was that code for something else, Vince thought, or were these guys mind controlled or something? Just as he was about to up the ante, a woman hanging from some framework on the ceiling piped up, “Taxes? I dig, I dig. We due taxes. You got beetees?” She peeked her head from out of the shadows, revealing a spiked mohawk woven through with barbed wire as she counted the Yancies around her, “Sixty beetees?”

Panicking, thinking there were more of the toughs in spots he couldn’t see, Vince nodded, sending another 20 bytecoins onto the credchip with a twitch of his fingers. “Sure do, ma’am, sure do. Just gotta get by is all, make sure to dispense the funds to all citizens.” Trying to feel confident the dwarf strode forward, tossing the credchip to the nearest, biggest Yancie in sight.

They seemed to buy that much, or at least stopped caring about him enough to let Vince go on unmolested. Then the feminine voice called out from behind him, “We be seein you later, tax depu-tee. Gotta thank ya for your seeerrrrviiiice,” and he picked up his pace, activating the boots’ thrusters as soon as he was out of sight and bouncing haphazardly down the tunnels deeper into the Rockworks. The undergang graffiti of the Yancies started to disappear after Vince made it through another dozen nearly abandoned passages and after he sneaked past an errant, angry maintenance drone (noting its location in his digiboard to see if he couldn’t recover and fix it later), the dwarf was beginning to feel more confident about his little foray into the life of an operator.

Then Vince began to see shadowy distortions on the very edges of his vision, dampening the small boost to his ego like a rainstorm on the butt of a death

stick—focusing on his cybereye and pushing it past its limits revealed that the shapes were humanoid before the hardware shorted out. Cursing, the dwarf scabbled at his eye in pain before concentrating on the piece of tech with his mind, repairing it in time to see he was completely surrounded by men and women a head shorter than him. Each was swathed in dirty black or brown bandages with only their eyes revealed, like the ninja henchmen from old kung fu flicks, and any of the bravado he'd managed to build up evaporated in a matter of seconds, replaced by the stoked fires of panic that nagged inside the dwarf's gut.

"Weifan," one of them said bleakly, prompting them all to put their hands on the hilts of straight blades, "eyes up." The dirty ninja with the least amount of filth on him gracefully slipped forward, unslinging a molecular whip and twirling the lethally thin cord through the air nonchalantly. "What you doing, shiny stout? Neo York's finest don't come down here much." Frantically searching the hard drive for facial and retinal recognition didn't do a damn, but 'Weifan' told Vince enough: these faux-ninjas were small time. Overloading his cybereye with a huge pulse of energy, the dwarf blinded the group around him while he kicked out at the gang leader and activated his boot's thruster, sending the molecular whip into—and through—another one's face while propelling himself out of harm's way.

Rolling to a stop Vince took a knee, unholstering his cousin's Rising Sun razor pistol and spraying the tunnel with flechettes before diving behind an old support strut made of iron, firing blindly until his clip ran out. The dwarf could hear three bemoaning creatures in the area behind him, but saw no returning fire until he took a moment to focus his powers and fix his cyber-eye again. Small, sharp metal discs (not flechettes, but heavier with fewer killing edges—shuriken?) were jammed into the concrete on either side of him, each dripping with a vile blue or green liquid. Vince grabbed at a plasma grenade from his belt and tossed it beyond the blast radius, though he balled up behind his cover all the same as it exploded in a ball of electrical fire, accompanied by two or three

more screams.

Leaping out of cover and kicking on his boot's thrusters again, the dwarf nearly rocketed out of sight from the antiquated undergang before their leader's deadly molecular whip flashed out from the darkness to loop around his foot. The sharp, practically invisible string nicked away a part of the precinct emblem from the boot before cutting straight down to the bone and lopping off part of his toe. Set off-kilter Vince went flying up into the ceiling before he could shut his jets off, slamming with enough force to crack a tooth despite his padded helmet.

Wincing at his bloodied foot the dwarf grabbed a medispray off of his calf, covering the wound in antiseptic curative the instant he hit the ground. As the whip-wielding ninja darted towards him, Vince grimaced and overloaded his cyber-eye again, blinding his assailant while rolling to his belly and kicking the boot's thrusters back on. With one good eye open he winged across the floor, snagging the shorn off part of his cousin's armored shoe before making it around the corner and into a long derelict train tunnel with enough space to really put distance between him and the Weifan. When he finally felt that he was far enough from the violent little undergang, Vince came to rest on an abandoned train platform and set about fixing his foot.

This wasn't the first time the dwarf had tried to heal flesh and the last attempt ended up costing more at the hospital than if he'd just gone there in the first place, but getting slowed down by a foot wound wasn't a handicap Vince thought he could afford. After wiping dirt and dust from the cut off boot tip—which he now had the time to notice was short one of his toes—the dwarf set his razor pistol against the intact part of his foot, lining it up to skid off the metal part of the shoe while biting down on his shirt. Looking away, he pulled the trigger.

For an instant his vision whited out from the pain, but he didn't lose his grip on the boot tip or pass out as he re-opened the wound so Vince counted it as a success. With blood pouring everywhere onto the floor of the Rockworks tunnel and wincing as he pressed the severed parts of his foot against his dirtied toes,

the dwarf focused his mind as best he could and to his great relief, the flesh and bone knitted back together. Breathing heavily for a few minutes and relishing the absence of pain, Vince checked his location in comparison to the coordinates Wise Jess gave him. If the retired operator's information was solid, he was pretty close to the scrapped Kalvahn Industries research lab. Concentrating again to fix the metal part of the boot before standing up, a sense of dread gripped Vince as he realized that part of the precinct's emblem was lopped off—without the fragment, the dwarf's restorative powers would not work.

Thomas was going to see it.

He was going to know that Vince did something with his suit and finally kick him out of the apartment. As the sense of anxiety grew, thoughts raced in the dwarf's mind—where was he going to keep all his stuff? Were all those appeals to the Neo-Deputy program a waste now? Did Wise Jess know of any good spots to hunker down? The biometrics within the borrowed armor were untarnished, and sensing an imminent panic attack within its user, released a small cloud of calming gas into Vince's nostrils, bringing his mind back into focus. Get the job done, the dwarf thought, then deal with the boot. A hundred bytecoins to a half-decent broker should be enough to forge the bit that was lopped off of the emblem. Besides, who was going to even see it? Thomas wouldn't notice for days, if he did at all.

Wrestling his mind back to the task at hand, Vince walked down another half mile of tunnels before reaching the spot where the lab's entrance was hidden behind a false wall. Running his fingers across the stonework and feeling the grooves of the rock carefully in search of anything awry, the dwarf pressed lightly on a brick, making it depress into the wall. After twenty minutes of carefully feeling out more of the passage, he'd found four stones similar to that one and, pressing them each in turn a few times, finally found the correct sequence for accessing the lab. With a hiss of hydraulics and the groan of grinding stone, part of the tunnel's side receded into the floor to reveal a stark, antiseptic metal interior with the Kalvahn Industries logo on the floor, albeit a version

of it from decades ago.

It was immediately clear that no one had been in this place for decades—the only signs of life were the mangled corpses of rodents and other critters that managed to wriggle themselves inside, only to die extremely violent deaths from something within. Something able to rend and sear flesh. Unholstering Thomas' razor pistol and trudging forward as lightly as he could, Vince swore fiercely as the door slid shut behind him and redoubled his cussing when four false panels slid up into the wall. A quartet of drones floated and rolled out to greet him, each one splattered with the dark brown stains left by dried blood.

Two were the size of a halfling and circular in design, equipped with arms that ended in grisly, sharp razor saws for balance as they rolled across the floor. The other duo of robots weren't much bigger than a dinner plate and hovered in the air on quad-rotors, the lasers on their undersides already heating up as Vince leapt for cover underneath what must have once been a dissection table. Turning it onto its side and peeking above to fire a quick spray of flechettes, Vince cheered to himself as one of the rolling automatons lost an arm and went swerving down on to the floor, spinning in circles. Its twin came whipping around the side and into view as the dwarf ducked back down, sputtering a series of sharp discs into it with his sidearm after batting away its attack with the superior metal on his vambrace.

Meanwhile the airborne drones were slowly whitening away the table Vince had taken cover behind, their lasers melting it thinner and thinner or lopping off bits from the corners. As one of the table legs dropped down, cut off by a beam of high intensity light, he scrambled to an equipment cart and knocked it over, jumping behind it before the lasers caught up. Concentrating hard while reloading the razor pistol, the dwarf kept the piece of furniture intact just long enough before having to dodge behind a corner. The flying robots followed straight away but Vince was ready for them and took the last of the facility's defensive measures down with a spray of flechette

Indicators were flashing from all around the helmet warning that the suit was heavily damaged, prompting the dwarf to take a seat in one of the undamaged rolling chairs in the lab to focus his powers. It took a few minutes for Vince to summon up the restorative energies of his ability and he was going to need a long night's rest after all this was said and done, but the dwarf was pretty sure that the armor was functioning at 100% efficiency by the time he was done—even if the power indicators flickered off every few minutes, it all seemed to be working alright. Besides, Vince thought, Thomas wasn't the sharpest knife in the kitchen anyway and the Neo-Deputy techs would never be able to tell that he was responsible for the damage; clerics were forced off of their payroll after the ruling came down on Ignis the Reaper, Scion of Gyuraisiiku v. Neo York.

Rooting through the place at his leisure, the dwarf salvaged a half dozen medisprays that hadn't expired yet, an old rebreather, some campy nightvision goggles (the military surplus store is always keen to get junk like that) and the only thing he couldn't identify the use or purpose of. Shrouded under a tarp in the corner of one of the closets was a device as long as a katana and half as wide, with a recessed globe in the backside, a latticework of gold and platinum holding the high-tempered glass in place. A small set of keys sat beneath the reservoir on the contraption, covered in buttons using an alphabet Vince couldn't recognize, but one thing was for sure: this had to be the positronic accelerator that Wise Jess was talking about.

Slinging his prize across his back and quickly hacking the outdated control panel to the exit, Vince girded himself for the journey back to the surface and began plotting a route to avoid the Weifan. Maybe, the dwarf thought to himself, maybe it doesn't have to rain every day in Neo York.

CHAPTER 3: IN ALL THE STREETS IN ALL THE WORLDS...

TIMESTAMP: PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA USA; MONDAY MAY 25TH, 1:42 PM, 2099

The sky is clear and the sun is shining as citizens gather to celebrate the last Memorial Day of the 21st century in the downtown area of the expanding concrete metropolis of Pittsburgh. 189-44-2X (or as ze was known in operator circles, “Negotiator”) decided to frequent zir condo in the Steel City to observe Earth’s native population commemorate its fallen soldiers. Negotiator always made a point of assimilating in the cultures of the planets ze visited, and on this world it seemed even more important than normal for survival. One of the few agreements that humans seemed to universally share was that artificial intelligences—that is to say, robots, synthetic sentient creatures, and other intelligent automatons like Negotiator—were highly illegal and heavily regulated, targeted with extreme prejudice. Through zir work in the shadows of society ze had learned that compliance with the rule was lax among the few remaining governmental agencies with any real power to speak of, and that the very notion was laughably disregarded by most hypercorporations, but caution was called for all the same if ze wanted to make zir time on Earth last.

Of course zir persona projection array made things much simpler, allowing Negotiator to take on any guise that ze so desired. Today ze wore the guise of a svelte elven professional redolent in the most popular executive attire from the recent line of products rolled out by Zap-paz! for the Spring 2099 season, a cutting blue and black suit with a royal, deep red trim and gold-platinum

tie. Negotiator had fit right in with the crowd and was enjoying the festive parade put on by the people of Pittsburgh, logging some of the music in zir internalized audio files for listening to later when an explosion rocked the Terra Firma hypercorporate skyscraper on the corner of 6th Street and Penn Avenue. Onlookers cried out in panic as cops descended on the area, holding back the crowd in time for two humanoid figures to soar out of the opening in the building and onto the concrete below.

As they hit the sidewalk and rolled to their feet, Negotiator's face recognition software picked out their identities and the robot sighed inwardly to itself. One of them was Cannonade, an orc able to throw any object hard enough that it might as well have been a missile, and she stood arrayed against a surly looking stocky human ze recognized as the Iron Bear, former lieutenant to a Muzhchiny Zhivotnykh warlord in Russia. Negotiator had met each before while working as a Mr. Gray (though neither recognized zir with the robot's disguise on) and both were temperamental at best, making the situation about as volatile as it could possibly get.

Then the situation got worse. Leaping from the newly blown-out hole in the side of the building were two more figures pursued by an armored duo firing off metapistols as their quarry leapt down to the street. Landing in a roll beside Cannonade was a thin fellow garbed in a suit of swirling colors that completely obscured his features; his less graceful dwarven companion hit the ground with all the grace of a drunk rhinoceros, causing the concrete to splinter into cracks. Negotiator's software had already recognized Gedrof despite the elf's colorful mask (noting that the float behind the lithe man was on fire but calculating that the heat of the combined materials wouldn't be enough to cook off anything inside the vehicle) but zir mood faltered as ze learned who the stout was: Dumbledorf. While the robot had never seen the dwarf in action, the litany of bounties and police reports that came up were too many even for Negotiator to parse quickly and ze couldn't help but think that maybe ze should just disappear before bullets started flying. Confirmation of the armored figures' identities—the Suedex Twins—and

a brief appraisal of the mechwarriors' files only raised the chances of violence breaking out.

Ze wanted nothing more than to flee but made an oath long ago to value all life, no matter how big or small—or how difficult it might become to preserve. All of the cops already had weapons drawn and Negotiator's ship (cloaked and hovering only a few blocks away) pinged zir with a warning that three powerfully-equipped CIPHER squads were en route; without zir intervention, things would undoubtedly get bloody and people would die. "Once again," Negotiator muttered to zirself, overriding all of zir self-preservation routines by walking out toward the aggressive operators, "a precarious situation."

With all the dust in the air neither team had seen zir yet and with the robot's audio sensors increased to full capacity, Negotiator could clearly hear the angry dialogue between Cannonade and Iron Bear. It quickly became clear that the two groups of operators had hit the same facility at the same time (maybe even the same job? Ze couldn't be sure), banking on the parade drawing away any attention that might have otherwise been paid to their illicit activities. One or another of them set off the alarms however, and an argument over which party was responsible quickly grew into a brawl that spilled right out of the skyscraper and into the attention (and jurisdiction) of the PPD.

As the winds of the city gusted down to reveal Negotiator in the dust, bringing the spirited discussion between the angry orc and stout human to a sudden stop, a notification flashed in the robot's vision—Lucky Mack was calling. Answering internally, ze opened up the channel and said, "Mack, now's not a great time. Maybe we can converse later?" Meanwhile, to everyone assembled in front of it, Negotiator said, "look, I'm sure you're all rightly upset, but this is hardly the time to lay blame. CIPHER teams are on the way already and if you are unfamiliar, they sport tech on par with most special ops. So let bygones be bygones and leave. Now."

"What's wrong with now?" the indignant half-orc replied inside the automaton's head, his gruff voice clearly recovering from a night of excessive drinking.

“Negosh, I get the feeling you often disregard my concerns unfairly, as if I can’t be fully trusted.” Well of course, Negotiator thought, that’s because you can’t be trusted.

Externally, before the operators or police could get aggressive, Negotiator shouted out, increasing the volume of his voice to be loud enough that even the crowd could hear it, “everyone needs to remain calm! I don’t think anyone would deny that this is a unique situation, but it doesn’t need to ruin the parade!” Internally he mocked at Mack, “Once again, my name is Negotiator. Aside from the fact that the last time we spoke you nearly caused my destruction, right now I’m in the middle of a bit of trouble and I’d like to focus on the deadly, aggressive people with guns pointed at me.”

The crowd seemed to calm and though the police still had their weapons drawn, they seemed to relax slightly as the operators with anything less than LED scramblers covered their exposed faces or hastily donned masks before the smoke fully dispersed. Mack’s gruff voice replied and Negotiator groaned to himself, echoing the half-orc’s words in his head. “Listen pal, my time is valuable too ya know? And that’s exactly why I’m calling you: I need somebody with mobility and an owed favor because there’s a load of bytecoins coming your way, friend.”

“Police, citizens—everyone, really, hear me out.” Negotiator stepped out toward the assembled police officers, hands splayed outward in a peaceful gesture, “today is a day that stands in direct opposition to wanton violence. For any of us to fight during this beautiful commemoration would dishonor us all, tarnishing Pittsburgh’s legacy with unnecessary bloodshed.” Slowly turning to address the operators opposing each other on the sidewalk, the smooth-talking robot continued, “especially, I would be so bold to say, when the conflict is ultimately due to individuals that truly embody the spirit of liberty in the face of authoritarian hypercorporations.”

Internally, zir conversation with Lucky Mack went very differently. “The last time we worked together, Mack, you practically left me to die with a half-dozen

enraged sec-ops that were hallucinating that I was a combat robot.” Though the accusation wasn’t entirely untrue—many of the components that made Negotiator’s synthetic body function gave him a talent for combat—the automaton had no desire for the secrets of his nature to be revealed to anyone. Those six men and women’s bloody deaths still haunted zir hard drives, and it took a great deal of the extraterrestrial traveler’s willpower to avoid deleting them. “I barely made it out of there alive, and though I am still grateful that you came back to pick me up, that was twenty minutes later, and right afterward you dragged me into another fight!”

“Neggy baby,” Lucky Mack’s voice pleaded across the comm channel, “these are some of the simplest jobs you could possibly get. Hand over, pick up, drop off with a mailing service, just a few times, and blammo—you’re 130,000 bytecoins richer.” At that even the robot balked, though his mannerisms and body showed no signs of it.

The operators on the street kept glancing to one another in search of what to do, prompting the Negotiator to wink sympathetically, silently urging them to make their escape while the getting was still good. Turning back toward the police as zir ship sent down another warning that the CIPHER teams were nearly on site, the robot pointed one perfectly disguised hand toward a ranking officer. “Sergeant Burdett, didn’t you remark just last month that the city of Pittsburgh should bear no responsibility for any damage done to hypercorporate property downtown? There have been no injuries, and I think Cannonade and Iron Bear would agree that whatever business they had here is ended, am I right?”

For a brief moment it seemed as if everything was going to be alright, but then Negotiator realized he might have let something slip, just as the cop ze addressed shouted out, “how did you know my name?” Whatever tension that had ebbed immediately returned as the Sergeant ordered arms up, and chatter on the police comm bands told zir that he was now a suspected plant. “Nobody move,” the cop shouted, “CIPHER officers will be here soon so just sit tight.” It was clear to Negotiator that

410 the operators—priming their weapons and already

looking for the best avenue of escape—were sure as hell not going to stand still to be arrested and before things got out of hand, ze relented to Plan B.

Negotiator really didn't care for Plan B.

Dropping a few miniscule smoke devices down his pant leg and spinning like a synthpop star, Negotiator kicked them out in all directions before the gadgets began to belch out a concealing fog. Tossing a full-spectrum image projector on the ground for anyone able to see through the gas (giving them the distinct impression that ze was squeezed into a ball and cowering on the asphalt), the robot threw itself out of the way between the operators and police. Narrowing zir speakers to a tight-band that only Cannonade and Iron Bear's sorties could hear, Negotiator sternly yelled, "get the hell out of the city now because I am done trying to distract the cops for you!" Internally, the robot didn't miss a beat talking back to his professional acquaintance—especially if the half-orc had a legitimate gig on his hands. "You've got my attention, Mack. All you need is a Ms. Grey? Hire, collect, pay? No fire? You promise there's no fire?"

Fiddling with zir watch, the Negotiator's appearance changed to that of a portly, rustic older gentleman in dishevelled clothes, allowing the robot to blend seamlessly into the fleeing crowd. By the look of things ze made it out just in time—one of the CIPHER trucks finally arrived and heavily armored cops were pouring out the back, each with a cannon-like DRAPA Pacifier in hand. Mack affirmed, "you got it. Sending the data for the first job now; glad to have you on board, Neg-O!"

As Negotiator escaped the scene, Cannonade and Iron Bear must have declared a truce of some kind because one police skycar was suddenly tossed up towards Terra Firma's building as another became consumed in fire. The file from Mack arrived in an instant and the automaton started to unpack it as ze wove through Pittsburgh's streets, toward his cloaked skycar. Apparently an old friend of the half-orc, an aging half-elf cyber ninja named Wise Jess, found one of the things he needs (a positron accelerator) or more accurately, since she's out of the game, sold the information of where it could be

found to an amateur operator friend of hers. Despite his name, Pothole must have been competent enough because the dwarf apparently managed to get into an old Kalvahn Industries lab under Neo York to acquire one of the devices. Though it's an old model, Mack is sure it'll work and besides, the communique reads, it's an easy pick up and a good way to get back into the swing of things as a Gray.

Slinking down into one of the huge gutters that filters rainwater directly into the covered Allegheny River, Negotiator called down his vessel and leapt atop the invisible thing, slipping inside and taking to the air toward Neo York. Settling into the pilot seat, the robot finally let zirselt partially power down, retreating into the mindscape of zir personal server while the ship rocketed eastward. In the span of a few minutes real time the automaton had scoured the Hypernet and found out Pothole's likely identity: Vince Smetanka, a dwarf road worker employed by the Neometro Transit Authority. That meant he was definitely an amateur operator, if even that, so Negotiator wrote off stopping by one of zir hidden weapon caches— with somebody that green, it wouldn't be necessary.

Sending an encrypted message to the address provided by Mack, Negotiator got a lightning fast reply— another sign of a rookie operator. Everything ze could find on Pothole seemed legitimate and the more ze pondered it, the more ze felt sympathy for the little dwarf. Few people suffered through that many appeals to the Neo-Deputy program, be it in Neo York or elsewhere, and all of his customer reviews of the mom-and-pop establishments he frequented in the metropolis were positive and uplifting. Deciding to give him a little bit of a field test in the tough world Pothole was getting into, Negotiator chose a spot in Jersey City as their meeting place; not a nice area but as discreet as one can reasonably get without descending into the Rocksworks. The robot prepared two credchips: one with 6,000bt and another with 7,500bt. If the dwarf really seemed like he could make it in this line of work, a little bit of a bigger cut for him wouldn't hurt Negotiator's accounts much.



Checking the newsfeeds in Pittsburgh, Negotiator

felt some solace at the lacking death count in the casualty total from what Fawkes Media was already calling the “Downtown Memorial Day Debacle”. The cops were still scouring all the neighboring districts for any sign of the operators, which meant none were captured yet. It sounded like neither team had succeeded in completing whatever tasks their gigs targeting Terra Firma required, prompting the robot to make a note to be very careful the next time ze encountered Cannonade or Iron Bear—they just got all of the heat with none of the reward and were no doubt ready to kill somebody for it.

As Jersey City came into view Negotiator jacked out of zir server and regained control of the metal shell ze called a body, reaching to zir watch to choose a nondescript Ms. Gray outfit as a guise for the meeting (one of a human woman with tightly kept blonde hair and a severe pantsuit bearing a chic platinum trim). Cloaking the ship is only so effective in the regrettably and perpetually raining environs of the region, and though Negotiator had an A-Class license and could cede zir vehicle to the city’s automated control (which would read it as an Eros Air Stallion rather than the spaceship it really was), ze wanted to avoid leaving any mark of zir travel here if it could be avoided. Picking out a derelict area below, the robot slowly dropped the vessel to a soft landing on the dirt in an obscure junk yard outside of Neo York city limits, sprinting three miles until ze was in range of the metropolis’ automated vehicles system. Walking along the Outerbridge Crossing until a vacant skycar appeared, Negotiator leapt 60 feet into the air before gingerly catching onto its bumper, hooking zir feet to the underside for support as it carried the robot into Neo York.

Several hitched and undetected rides later, Negotiator hopped onto a fire escape in Jersey City a few blocks from the site where Pothole was waiting. Checking the effectiveness of zir disguise in a puddle and digitally altering the angle of the chopsticks in zir illusory hair, the automaton walked confidently around the corner to confront the dwarf. Despite the unlikelihood that ze might get jumped while meeting this new, green client, Negotiator had zir Peretta SMG strapped on the small of

zir back and an ancient holdout pistol hidden inside zir left leg.

Even a cursory look at the unassuming operator would have been enough to put any fears Negotiator had right to bed, but a biometric scan of the stout told the story even more plainly—Pothole was practically sweating bullets, with an infection in his mouth from a recently cracked tooth. The robot was impressed that the shabby-looking dwarf managed to survive a trek into the Rocksworks, nevermind a hypercorporate research lab (abandoned or not). As Negotiator began walking towards him Pothole realized that the meeting was on, standing up straight to reach his full, commanding height of four and a half feet. Though the automaton found it hard to believe, with every step closer the stocky demigrant sweated at an even faster rate, and despite the heavy rainfall zir olfactory sensors could easily pick out his pungent body odor from two dozen paces.

“Pothole.” Negotiator called out quietly, using a soft but authoritative voice and wondering why the dwarf flinched at the mention of his name. “That is right, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” the dwarf replied, scowling, “yeah that’s right. You the Ms. Grey?”

Negotiator nodded, zir blonde hair bun bobbing up and down in the rain-soaked air. “It would be rather odd if I wasn’t.” Much closer now, the robot could clearly see the heavy dark bags under Pothole’s eyes, as well as nicks from what must have been a fearsome combat from sometime in the past few hours. The little guy must have had quite a hard day, ze thought.

“I suppose it would be.” The dwarf grabbed at a long trombone case resting against the wall, picking it up with one meaty hand. “You got the bytecoins?”

Fingering both the 6,000bt credchip and the 7,500bt credchip, Negotiator quickly considered the fledgling operator before him. Pothole was taciturn and direct, but there was undeniably something about the dwarf that appealed even to zir robotic nature. Producing the wealthier bytecoin stash in zir right hand, the robot strode closer.

44 “Right here, friend. 7,500 bytecoins—6,000 for the

job, and 1,500 extra for the effort. And your discretion, of course.”

At the mention of increased pay the stout’s eyes widened before one narrowed back into a near-slit, clearly suspicious. In a voice an octave lower than before, Pothole asked, “what’s the catch?”

“No catch,” Negotiator replied, putting the 7,500bt credchip in the dwarf’s stubby hand and taking the trombone case from out of the other. “Just keep things quiet. You did a good job down there and if you made it alone, I might have use for someone like you in the future. We’ll stay in touch.” Dumbfounded, Pothole simply nodded before slowly, cautiously turning his back to Negotiator and leaving the alleyway, casting furtive glances behind his shoulder until a torrent of rain started up that blocked him from the robot’s enhanced sight.

Heading in the opposite direction, Negotiator ducked into a doorway and clicked zir watch until a more appropriate guise popped up—a bearded, fedora-wearing musician of advanced age but with an appearance so surly that the robot couldn’t expect anyone would try to steal his instrument. A quick glance onto the Hypernet revealed that a secure courier service station was only a few blocks away from zir location so Negotiator chose not to bother with any automated vehicles, making zir way on foot instead. Twenty minutes later the positron accelerator (whatever that archaic device really was or what it could do, the robot never cared to consider) was packaged into a secure blindbox picked up via drone for clandestine delivery to an off-site shipping cartel. From there it would travel across the Atlantic Ocean before arriving in a hotel in Barcelona, Spain, but from that point on Negotiator couldn’t be bothered with it—confirmation of delivery would be enough.

A week of luxury in Neo York would be a nice change of pace, Negotiator thought to zirself. Ze had never been to Broadway and an AI-focused musical called, “001101st Street” was all the rage, breaking box-office records left and right. Humans love stage pageantry and their interpretations through the arts were historically some of their most rewarding, so the robot turned on heel

towards Fifth Avenue with an eye on the bright-lit stages of the best theater the Big Apple had to offer. Besides, ze reflected, at least ze was statistically less likely to get into a scuffle on Broadway.

CHAPTER 4: WHEN HELL COMES CALLING

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Unlike normal mortal teleportation, the forming of a hellgate is meant to be a precise art. It only made sense that Hell, bastion of order and law that it was, would pride itself on accuracy of location. With Deandra's long history of service to the plane, she knew this as well as anyone.

Which was why it was so confusing when what was supposed to be a church turned out to be the site of the biggest fashion show of the year. As she stepped out of the hellfire circle she could feel the thumping of the bass even before she saw the flash of strobes. There was an appreciative gasp from the crowd as she made her entrance and the devil couldn't quite make up her mind as to whether she was more relieved that they thought her part of the show, or irritated to be associated with something so banal.

Regardless she coaxed a bit more red-tinged smoke out of the residual energy of the hellgate, wrapping it around as her human guise shifted. Taking a quick glance at one of the models, she emulated their form: forwardly masculine but largely androgynous and dressed in a long tunic that looked like it was formed from liquid glass. She made a few changes to the clothes then followed the other model out onto the catwalk. The vaguely masculine form felt no stranger than the overtly feminine one had—devils were far too complex to ever conform solely to one mortal gender identity.

As she followed after the mortal and in front of the crowd, Deandra noticed an inordinate amount of deathly pale faces. Vampires. A lot of them, too. Without hyperbole, Vlad's children were truly a blight on the Earth; not that blight wasn't a necessary part of nature, but if the population of this room was any indication it was clearly out of control.

As the models finished their round the one Deandra had walked behind shook his head. "That was one hell of an entrance there! I don't remember that being in the script."

"I improvised," she said, shrugging before turning invisible as soon as he turned away. Already she had risked far too much attention, had to use far too much magic for comfort. This was supposed to be an extremely low-profile job—the more well-known the target the more subtle the approach, and these days it didn't get much more well known in Wallachia than Vlad III Dracula.

Making her way unseen from backstage, she returned to her feminine form—dark hair, dark eyes, deeply tanned skin. It felt comfortable, like a well-worn shirt and after all, it had served her well for centuries. Deandra's latest info had put Vlad at his private residence in Târgoviște, some distance north of her current location in the nation's capital of Bucharest. Because of the many wards (both technological and magical), that surrounded the undead prince, it had been decided that the best way to approach him would be through more mundane means (for starters, at least.)

Deandra had just reached the back alley exit when a slight whoosh warned her of an incoming projectile. Reflexively ducking out of the way, she saw a small cross-bow bolt burning with holy fire whizz by where her shoulder had just been. It slammed into the brickwork of the adjacent building and exploded in a burst of light. That meant at least two things: that someone could see her invisibly and that they suspected her to be something that was weak to holy energies. Even if they erroneously thought her a vampire—which wouldn't have been an unreasonable assumption—they were right about her aversion to the divine.

"It's always something, isn't it?" she growled to herself. This was supposed to be a magic-light job; leaving a swath of infernal destruction wasn't going to help that any, as tempting as it was. Spitting them on her trident wasn't exactly going to be subtle either, but it would do better than an inferno. Flicking her wrist she felt the cool metal of the weapon appear in her hand, comfortably charged with massive amounts of lawful and unholy power. Another flick and a circular buckler of black wood appeared on her forearm and whirling in a tight circle, she expertly caught the next bolt on the small shield and set her weapon for the owner of the incoming footsteps.

There was a scream as a very fashionably dressed gnome crashed onto the tines at an impressive speed, turning him into a colorful kabob. The two were briefly nose-to-nose as Deandra's spell gave out—she'd had no reason to think that she'd need the more potent version—before she wrenched the weapon to the side, flinging the gnome's body off and bloodily away.

"Zapp!" came a call from within the building. Through the darkness Deandra could see the crouching form of the one with the crossbow. The woman had the ashen skin of one touched by undead—something common in this country at least—and a shining silver symbol at her throat, barely visible behind the feathered collar of the designer gown that she wore. Deandra ground her teeth; always something. If it had just been operators with holy bolts and no practical knowledge she might have been able to let them walk away, but this mortal would likely guess some part of her infernal nature and that could not be allowed.

The plot rapidly thickened, however, as a well-muscled halfling came up behind the mortal with the crossbow and brought the business end of a spiked mace down on her skull. The woman was clearly down, but not quite out as she managed to gasp, "It's in the service of Hell, Victus. We must work together."

"I know that," the halfling scoffed, keeping his eyes on Deandra, "and that's why I'm going to gut it and sell the leftover bits to Viztao." As if to prove the point, he pulled out an improbably large knife that appeared

all the larger compared to his own small size. Deandra merely raised an eyebrow at him—an impertinent thing he must be, then, to flaunt his disrespect of Hell in front of her.

“Come then,” she invited, “and I shall teach you respect for your betters.” Her trident pulsed with a faint blue light, the lawful energies reacting to the halfling’s chaotic nature. He would make for an acceptable sacrifice for the Arbiter, but she unfortunately lacked the time for such things.

The halfling surprised her mildly when he pulled out a wand, and even more so when he competently wielded it. A searing beam of holy light shot out of it but she batted it away with her buckler and advanced on him—she had to make this quick or the rest of the models were bound to notice something, and a bloodbath was not on the schedule. Moving in close she touched him lightly on the forehead and as the infernal magic took effect, she pulled the knife from his grasp and shoved it through the neck of the second mortal with a satisfying squelch.

As the halfling writhed on the floor in silent agony, visions of hellscape and the tortures therein flashing before his eyes, Deandra contemplated just leaving him like that. By the time the spell had run its course he’d be mentally broken beyond repair, but even then she ran the risk of revealing her hand—even mortals could use that magic, but few as adeptly as her. With that in mind she pulled one of the crossbow bolts out of the woman’s quiver and rammed it through his eye, reluctantly putting him out of his misery.

Frowning at the spatter of blood on her stylish tunic, she ran a finger over the stain. If she’d already used magic once there seemed little harm in utilizing it in such a small way. The spot disappeared and her trident and buckler did likewise; now, back to the business at hand. There were several transport vehicles lined up in front of the club all eager to take advantage of the exodus of fashion show-goers. Sighting a red Automan’s, Deandra made for it. If she couldn’t get a ride here, it would be ages until she could get another, what with the crush of

There was a clatter of footsteps behind her as someone else ran towards the same car—a half-elf in a wrap made of shimmering plastic feathers and outrageously high shoes was attempting to cut her off. Deandra merely planted a hand in the middle of his chest and shoved, letting gravity do the rest. It was not a gracious move and at best the impetuous model would come out of it with a twisted ankle, but it was necessary. As she opened the car door and slid inside, a twitchy-looking fetchling at the wheel glanced back at her impassively.

“Drive,” she ordered, but he paused for a long moment, looking confused. Then he looked out at the half-elf, just now trying to stand.

Concerned, the driver protested, “But—”

“No but.” Deandra replied sternly. “You get twice your normal pay if you just drive now.”

His greed apparently outweighing whatever loyalty he was feeling, the fetchling maneuvered out into traffic, leaving the half-elf shouting at their tail lights. “Where to, boss?” he asked, looking at her in the rearview window.

“Târgoviște,” she answered, the corner of her mouth quirking up at his surprised expression.

After a brief moment of unsurety he stuttered, “I—I’m sorry, but I’m just a local car. I really don’t have the jurisdiction to—”

Her eyes narrowing to slits, she glared back. “Three times your usual. And it’s a big fare, I know.”

He shut up at that, looking pensive.

“You’re the boss, boss,” he said with a shrug, flipping a few switches off on the car’s dash.

Traffic was heavy (which was unsurprising considering the big event) and it took them over half an hour before they neared the edge of town. Before the driver could turn onto the hyperway however, a voice came out over the communicator ordering them to stop or face the full extent of the law. The fetchling started to reach for the knob—apparently under the impression that it was the Automan’s main office having discovered that he was out of his normal area—but then the speaker identified themselves as part of the Sange and the driver looked

at her, his face a mask of abject horror.

"It's always something," Deandra said to herself again. "Always."

The driver pulled off to the side of the road—what choice was there really, where the Sange were involved?—and they were soon approached by a figure all in black, the wine glass symbol of Wallachia's secret police emblazoned on the breast pocket of her uniform jacket and the stripes of a scarlet knight on her sleeve. She was flanked by two serjants, each of them well-armed with the latest DRAPA technology.

They were vampires (as all the Sange were) and of course they were fine-featured and noble-looking. Deandra wondered to herself if that was a requirement for turning someone into a vampire or just a preference, or if the magic of undeath somehow made all of its carriers blandly beautiful.

The officer demanded the fetchling's license and registration but clearly she was far more interested in the passenger in the back. "Alin Gane?" she demanded, a look of subtle triumph in her eyes.

"No," Deandra said bluntly, annoyed by this delay.

The vampire stopped, looked down at the augmented reality screen in front of them. They looked at it for a long moment, then at Deandra, then back at the screen, apparently displeased with what they weren't seeing—presumably this Gane person.

"We have reason to believe that a half-elf named Aline Gane has commissioned this vehicle. He is wanted for questioning."

"He did," the fetchling squeaked, wilting under the vampire's intense gaze. "Never showed."

"Do I need to remind you, citizen, the scarlet knight said, frowning and leaning slightly closer to the driver with his fangs just barely extended, "the punishment for aiding and abetting a traitor?"

Deandra did a quick scan of the driver's thoughts; he was terrified, and rightly so. Car chases were rarely subtle though, and ones involving the Sange least of all. Putting a hand on his shoulder she deftly wove an

to keep him from doing what he clearly so desperately wanted to do, but ultimately his will was no match for her own. The scarlet knight was staring at her now and she smiled, sifting through the vampire's mind—a more difficult task that demanded she be quick. No one became a scarlet knight without effort, and it would be a shame if the officer were to grow suspicious.

One potential idea would be to get herself arrested. If this Aline Gane were a high-enough ranking member of the Children of the Dawn, they might be taken before Vlad himself or at least to an official of high enough rank that would make her job all the easier. But if the half-elf wasn't that important, she stood a much higher chance of getting herself in headache-inducing amounts of trouble. Her brief look into the scarlet knight's mind revealed that Aline Gane was of middling importance alone, but the fact that he was a model meant that he might know of any operatives on the roster and what their assignments might be—funnily enough, Deandra's rough treatment of the half-elf might have saved his life. However, his identity was not useful enough for her to utilize.

"We're so sorry to have wasted your time," Deandra said, her smile broadening, "but I do hope that you find your man, officer."

The scarlet knight looked disgruntled and the two serjants behind her shifted warily. Clearly they had been counting on this bust and were not amused to have been denied it. Deandra couldn't blame them—no one understood a demanding employer like those who served Hell. The question was, what would satisfy them here? The Sange were Wallachia's elite secret police—if they decided to bring in a couple of citizens for questioning because they felt like it, no one would suspect a thing. But there was certainly no time for that.

"I would be very interested," said the scarlet knight in a low, firm voice, "in knowing where this traitor wanted to go."

The fetchling squirmed in his seat. Loyalty had lost the battle to self-preservation the moment the Sange turned up—now it was just a question of how best to save his own skin. Deandra kept a tight grip on his

shoulder, crushing his desire to run once more. “He didn’t say at the time,” the driver stammered, his voice pleading. Not that it would do him much good. “But! But,” he floundered, “I’d driven him before. He wanted me to let him off at one of the XYZ outlets. The one by Parcul Carol.”

The vampire nodded slowly and Deandra took her chance—clearly the scarlet knight would rather be tracking down the half-elf than standing here in the drizzle. “I’m so sorry for the inconvenience, officer,” she said, reaching for one of the credchips she’d prepared. “I know you clearly have more important things to do, so please take this donation and keep up the good work.” The Sange officer, clearly used to accepting bribes, reached out to take it. When their hands touched Deandra simply imparted the thought that the half-elf was getting farther away all the time, and that if he was to be caught they’d have to hurry.

“Your donation is appreciated citizen,” she said, nodding to the serjants. “However,” she said, looking pointedly at the fetchling, “the Sange are always interested in the movements of traitors.” Then the officer turned on her heel and headed back to the sleek black transport.

The fetchling breathed a slow sigh of relief and Deandra removed her hand from his shoulder. Clearly frazzled from the experience, he reached under the passenger-side visor and pulled out a stashed deathstick, lighting it with shaky hands. “We almost died,” he said, clearly having a penchant for stating the obvious. “I’m out of here. That fare to Târgoviște is getting me out of this godsforsaken country.” He started up the transport and pulled them back onto the road, driving carefully until the Sange were out of sight.

Deandra chuckled at how right he was. If he was bearable by the end of all of this trip, she might even give him a bonus.

It was silent for most of the trip but eventually the silence got to him and the driver asked her about her business in Târgoviște. She shrugged. “I’ve a very old friend there. I did him a favor once, many years ago, and now it’s time

“Not much of a friend if he took that long, eh?” the fetchling said, trying to be clever.

“It’s the way of things I’m afraid. I have many such friends.” And she did, though the sheer scope of her work would probably be beyond him—she’d bargained for just about everything in the book, from guitar skills to timely victories and world-famous discoveries.

Deandra didn’t go into further detail about her work but that certainly didn’t stop the driver, who nervously chattered the entire way. When she finally told him the address in Târgoviște that she wanted though, he shut up very quickly. It was not every day after all that someone wanted to go directly to the residence of the prince of Wallachia himself. “Your...friend?” he asked, finally finding his voice.

“Of a sort, yes,” she replied, handing him his fare and starting out of the car. “Though I advise that you leave the country. I really do.” He stared at her as she left, wide-eyed, then slammed on the accelerator and peeled away. Good; if no one found him, no one could find her magical signature on him.

Once he was gone she shifted her form to that of a female executive, the Dusktone logo prominent on her lapel. Smoothing back the non-existent frizz from her bun she started up the drive towards the royal palace, her stride confident.

Of course this job couldn’t be simple—it was always, always something. Of course one of the biggest jobs of her infernal career was proving to be the most infuriating to wrap up, and of course this was the one that the Arbiter had insisted on absolute subtlety throughout. It was for reasons like this that she preferred the making of deals to their collection, but the Arbiter had insisted that he wanted his most trusted servant on the job. Flattering and annoying in one.

After arriving at the palace in Târgoviște she had found that urgent business had called the prince back to Bucharest. Vlad had always made it a point to be out of town during the annual Zappaz! show—the models were often operators in the country for one reason or

another, frequently making assassination attempts on high-profile vampires. While hardly in fear for his life, the prince preferred a quiet weekend to any potential problems. Or that's what the receptionist had said; no word about the urgent business, but that didn't interest her anyhow.

Once she had finally acquired a ride back to the capital, Deandra found that her difficulties were far from over. The vampire who managed Vlad's personal schedule had been suspicious about her Dusktone guise, insisting that he knew all of the executives and that he didn't recognize her. While this was clearly not true—Deandra had picked her form carefully—he refused to relent. The fact that he had been discreetly looking from her to the small screen inset in his desk meant that he had picked up some sort of reading from her that he didn't trust. Using magic on him in that moment was hardly an option—they were on at least four cameras—so she had grit her teeth and left.

The next week had been a series of ploys all towards the same goal of finding the First Vampire alone. She had almost convinced herself to relax, that the presence of undeath meant that she could play the long game and that she still had time. Although it was all true, none of it brought her any comfort; that was until she finally got a shot. Posing as a reporter she had gotten close enough to him—which had been a trick considering how dense his bodyguards were—to say, "I have business to discuss with you, Vlad. Very old business."

But before she could jog his memory any further he'd looked boredly over at her and turned away, not even sparing her a word and disappearing into a luxurious skycar. She'd been so angry that it had taken all of her self control not to crack open the earth under his feet.

It had been over five centuries since they had first met, but Deandra remembered Vlad very well. Mostly in that he had been sickly and possessed of all the fear-someness of an angry kitten, covered in mud and probably worse after being hunted through the Maramures by her hell hounds all night. And after all that, after all

the power that she had brought him, he had

turned away from her as though she were a nobody? The nerve.

Deandra had seethed ungracefully after that, then took a deep breath and found her way to the local arcane supply store. She would find him where he was most vulnerable and put the fear of Hell into him.

A week later found Deandra putting the finishing touches on a truly magnificent summoning circle. She had rented a warehouse for the occasion ensuring plenty of space (as well as privacy) and proceeded to fill most of it with ring upon ring of ornate runes. One undeniable perk of Wallachia is that blood was never difficult to find and she'd used it liberally, tracing out each symbol with a fine-tipped brush. At the end of it all Deandra looked approvingly at her work—here was secrecy, power, and intent, all made into physical form. It even utilized arcane magic instead of divine, making it significantly more difficult to trace back to Hell's doorstep.

Taking her place in the center of the circle, Deandra lit the myriad of candles and incense burners on her way to the center. Once there she closed her eyes and started the chant; it had been devised by an elven wizard in the mid-20th century, with the hope of using it to aid the war effort. She'd taken his soul in exchange for time in Hell's vast libraries, only to find him at the gates a scant year later; apparently his initial attempts had been less than successful and had turned his body inside out rather than transporting it behind warded enemy lines. He'd had long enough in Hell to perfect it for her though, and now seemed as good of a time as any to use it.

As her chant continued the runes of the circle started to glow then rotate, starting at the center and radiating outwards. More words followed and there was a crackle of arcane energy as the circles lifted from the floor and formed a sphere around her. The world began to shift, from the drab gray of the warehouse to what looked to be a crypt, flickering from one to the other, back and forth, faster and faster. Perfect. Everything was going according to plan, and—

Everything shuddered around her and it took a great force of will to not stumble and break the circles. The blood of the sphere ran and turned black as Deandra felt another will pushing on hers. She met it head on—prepared to crush it—but it was soon joined by another, and another. It became difficult to both maintain the sigils and her momentum, and the cause quickly revealed itself: the Sange's blood mages had hijacked her spell.

Spitting a curse in Infernal, Deandra prepared to support her own arcane abilities with the divine might of Hell, but in doing so lost her focus. The sigils all simultaneously turned to liquid and the magic failed, shunting her away from her target and into a cold, crushing blackness.

It took some time and no little amount of effort, but Deandra eventually heaved herself onto a rocky beach. Her mortal form was twisted and broken nearly beyond recognition—the natural effect of oceanic pressure only partially negated by her supernatural resistance. She growled low in her throat as her human guise deteriorated and a viciously spiked tail shot from her spine, a crown of horns ripping out of her scalp while muscles rippled across her rapidly growing body and wings cracked from her back. Barring a mouthful of jagged teeth she squinted upwards as a white bird with a brilliant red tail flew overhead, its loud squeaking call making her head hurt even more. With a lash of her tail the squeak was cut short, the bird reduced to a puff of feathers and red mist. She tried to calm herself down, tried to rationalize that destroying one of the nearby Moari statues would solve nothing, but damn it all if she didn't want to smash something. Someone. The scrubby grass around her blackened and withered as she contemplated her revenge. It wouldn't do now just to call in the deal with Vlad. Something would have to be taken from him and, she thought, the half-orc had better deliver or her rage might turn on his regenerating face instead.

CHAPTER 5: ANOTHER TEAM FOR OVERRIDE

TIMESTAMP: PARIS, ILE-DE-FRANCE FRANCE;
MONDAY JULY 6TH, 8:24 PM, 2099

“Well that was kind of ironic, wasn’t it?” Override said, leaping down from off the top of a confessional. The elf landed silently despite the dozens of daggers strapped across his arms, legs, and torso, casually pulling one or two of his blades from the corpses of the priests that turned this stealthy exploratory party into an assault squad. “I mean, right? His name makes it ironic? It’s still, uh, you know, not good, but—come on. He called himself Farseer.”

The scrappy goblin Kajban cackled a little bit and Registrar’s lithe dark elven lips curled up in amusement, but the sorceress Emryell and her walking-armory-slash-ogre-friend Garçon weren’t having it at all. Override cursed silently to himself, realizing that the trio were unusually familiar with one another and that they must have worked together before on more than one occasion. Looking back towards the corner of the considerably-sized reliquary the (now) quintet stood in, their leader shook his head in what he hoped was a sympathetic fashion. That idiot couldn’t see more than 30 feet in front of him and had no business being more than a stride away from his human mage buddy; that’s the cost of doing business, though. Considering each of his companions in turn, the elf figured that this first casualty was well enough. If they were professionals, they would’ve known his reputation and never taken the job anyway, and he didn’t

need that hassle.

Emryell, Garçon, and their recently deceased and unfortunately-ironically-named gnome companion were all recommended on a Xypher forum that Override had come to trust over the years, and checking with his contacts around the region confirmed that the team was solid. The human sorceress' past was beyond the elf's considerable reach but he figured she was ex-military—nobody that young has that much bodytech and control over magic without spending a decent amount of time on the battlefield. Garçon on the other hand was much more recognizable; first of all, he was native to the region and never bothered to move anywhere else. Secondly, he was an ogre and while that in itself is not terrifically rare it is uncommon. Then there's the fact he was a huge Murderball star ostensibly in retirement, the latter being predominantly occupied by drinking wine in excess, sleeping with anything that moved, and brawling in the streets. Any doubts that Override had about the ogre went out the window when he saw the ridiculous number of guns the brute brought along however, "just in case". Conversely, Farseer was practically still in his diapers with only one or two gigs under his belt.

A small fit of the goblin's uncontrollable shaking caught the elf's attention and he reflected that Kajban was probably the next one to shuffle off the old mortal coil. Though the scrappy little brawler thought that Override hadn't seen him at it, it didn't escape their leader's notice that the group's live scout kept dosing on fastjak. He'd come recommended by someone that Override now considered might not actually be so much of a friend and perhaps more of a nemesis. The goblin had operated throughout Europe for over a decade and his reputation checked out, though they all warned that the fight was almost out of him; if he didn't retire soon, he'd be dead. To the elf it looked liked Kajban thought he'd found a way around the rigors of age without the high cost of hypercorp-executive level rejuvenat treatments, but he knew that sort of regimen wouldn't be able to last.

Registrar (or as she was introduced, "r3g1str4r") was a drow netjacker running the dead scout and

robot of some kind.

Shaking involuntarily himself at the thought of the supposed sentient automaton, Override stamped down the fear in his gut. This would even the score between him and Lucky Mack, and the payout was considerable—12,000, no, 14,000 bytecoins since Farseer bit the big one back there and didn't go in on insurance. If his instincts were right, the elf's share of the cut was probably going to increase again by the time this was over. With that much liquid capital he could finally buy a hyperpass into the Datacorps server and look into those weird leads ending in Bratislava, and if his luck could hold out for more than a fortnight, get some peace of mind.

Of course, Override thought to himself, if he'd had a look into here he'd have come of his own accord anyway. Something about the place was definitely awry; the priests packing heat was to be expected, but there was a sense of wrongness to the subtleties of architecture inside the church. "We should've brought a cleric," he said out loud, trying to empathize with his current comrades by saying something he thought was true, even if they were likely to infer a different meaning from it than he really intended.

"Oui oui, Outrepasse," the ogre grunted, haphazardly searching through one of the church's tabernacles, "it certainly seemz as though zese priests may have not been quite as holy as zey first appeared to be." Grinning with satisfaction, Garçon reached his huge hands into the cupboard and pulled out the communion wafers, ripping the box open to consume them all at once (conveniently contained as they were inside a plastic bag).

The human sorceress didn't say anything, just spitting in Override's direction instead. "Right. Well, there it is then," the elf said, grabbing another one of his daggers from out of a dead priest's skull and jamming the last of the room's corpses into his bag of holding. With a twist and a click he undid the complicated lock on the door to the basement of the church and it lurched open, revealing a short stone stairway curving out of sight. Stepping down silently with knives in hand, Override considered Garçon's musings—there certainly was

something wrong about those guys.

After the *tachyon flux* of 2076 the Theocratic Wars took on a different tenor and all of the catholic church's sects dumped funding into technological defenses. While the priests' guns were genelocked (which was unfortunate; LUCRUM rifles would've been a nice thing to salvage), their ammunition was the interesting bit. Override didn't mention it as he collected Farseer's body, but the wounds in the gnome's flesh were already festering and putrid—hardly the sort of thing one would expect from injuries inflicted by a catholic priest.

The lower level of the church didn't provide much consolation to Override, his suspicions only becoming more grave as he took in the faded mosaics all along the walls and ceiling of the basement. It wasn't that they were decayed, but the elf thought that there was a pattern to the wear. Depictions of grisly scenes seemed cleaner and easier to make out, and the holy scripture engraved along doorways was carved away in spots, erasing only certain divine symbols. Something was definitely off down here and Override dropped back, beckoning to Registrar with two crooked fingers.

With a thought the dark elf commanded her VIPER drone to slither forward, the small robot's metal body swiftly moving across the floor as its sensors oriented themselves to full capacity. Registrar threw down her hoverboard and tethered herself to her aerial drone, the robot inching her forward while the netjacker's consciousness dove into the mechanical serpent. Following the map in the augmented display projected on his vision by the digiboard on his belt, Override directed the dark elf and her drones across the church's basement for ten agonizingly slow minutes, winding down corridors that looked untouched for decades before the team reached the false wall hiding an entrance to the catacombs of Paris. Touching all the ornamental brackets along the wall until he found the trick lantern sconce his informant had told him of, the elf cautioned everyone to hold back, suspicious of more dangers below.

Kajban scampered ahead all the same—no doubt eager to take another dose of fastjak once he was

out of sight again—and that impetuosity cost him his life. Yelling out in futility as he stepped on a stair that depressed under his weight, the goblin only got out a vowel syllable before the walls on either side of him sandwiched together with resounding force, crushing his body in an instant. A pall of silence overtook the remaining four operators as Override dejectedly disarmed the trap and Registrar rifled through Kajban's few intact belongings, taking everything that survived impact; unlike Farseer, there wasn't enough left of the goblin to scrape off the stone for anything but the most powerful (and expensive) recovery magic to do any good.

After descending a few dozen feet past the pulverizing stone trap the hidden passage widened out into a long mausoleum covered in iconography and styled in a manner totally unlike the Christian house of worship above. The walls and ceiling of the Parisian dungeon were covered in seemingly random arrangements of profane imagery and ancient runes, signs Emryell immediately recognized as belonging to a newer (or if you were of an historical mind, far, far, older) religion. For the first time since Farseer died she deigned to utter something to her companions, "this place belongs to the Church of Cthulhu. What exactly have you gotten us into you insane pointy-eared narcissistic piece of shit?"

Refusing to be provoked Override instead focused inwardly and scanned his surroundings, searching for any traces of technology tucked underneath or between the stones. As an afterthought he flicked on his digiboard's visual recorders, tagging the file for later so he wouldn't forget to send it to Corruption—the shaman would be able to make out whatever these religious symbols were all about. "Precisely? I suppose it's safe to share now. We're looking for some very, very old holy water a few hundred meters ahead of us and down another level or two. It's hard to tell precisely, but we're close. We can leave straight away after I've got that."

Part of the reason it was hard to tell their location was that the digital blueprints from Override's contacts stopped being of any use once they got into the basement. Referencing an old map—made of dusty

parchment, of all things—the elf guided his shrinking team eastward until they reached a tunnel that quickly committed to a decline before widening into a large chamber with a floor of natural rockface. Halfway down the ramp to it everyone stopped in their tracks (except for Garçon, anyway), halted by a stink so foul that it hit them like a fist. Whatever was down there was definitely alive but it was positively unnatural. Drawing their weapons the operators edged forward carefully, their gait slowing to a crawl near the opening of the ramp as strange chittering and clicking began to echo up toward them.

Activating all of his innate abilities, Override gestured for everyone else to prepare themselves as he silently unsheathed a sextet of throwing knives. Emryell backed away to the entrance of the tunnel, spinning around and chanting the verbal components of her spells where whatever lay ahead of them would not hear her. The ogre simply unholstered his DRAPA Pacifier, checking the ammunition cartridge and grinning at his companions. Registrar ordered VIPER to slither into her pack, shouldering her metarifle and nodding grimly, silently pointing to the cans of medispray affixed to either side of her belt. When he finally spotted the human sorceress walking quietly back down the passageway, Override risked peeking around the corner and into the chamber they were about to assault.

A scene he couldn't possibly have expected awaited the elf and, disbelieving it at first, he dared to take a second look to make certain he wasn't hallucinating. The extremely large chamber was two hundred feet across and half as high (easily the biggest room they'd seen since getting beneath Paris' surface), and near the midpoint all of the strange symbology omnipresent elsewhere in the dungeon entirely gave way to natural rock formations to a network of caves oriented to the southeast. Large, complex apparatuses of all kinds sat about the natural stone floor to circle a dais holding a resplendent vial in the center of the room, each one of the machines a design Override couldn't recognize and performing a function he couldn't fathom. Most disconcerting of all, the dozen figures

Though robed in dark hoods and unnaturally graceful, the strange things had unusually-shaped heads covered in eyes and lumps, spiny insect-like wings appearing from under their robes, and a tangle of spiky, clawed legs on which to shuffle about, with two sets of forelegs and a set of forearms ending in taloned hands. Considering their options and realizing how outnumbered they were, Override began to back away when Emryell blurted out, "holy freakin' bjork, is that a mi-go?"

The operators had just enough time to shoot her glances filled with nothing but contempt and vitriolic wonder before the freakish things moved to attack.

Registrar broke left while Override went right, drawing the unnatural things out into a line for their ogre gunner to exploit. Garçon took the queue and unleashed a shot of flame from his heavy weapon that almost incinerated two of the mi-go, but did more to draw the enemy mage's attention to him than anything else. An extraterrestrial mage conjured a small fleet of energy motes in response, each one impacting the ex-Murderball player like a sledgehammer, but he kept pouring it on to finish off the two targets that survived his initial assault.

The team's drow netjacker ducked into a natural alcove in the wall, firing blindly with her sidearm and clearly counting on her aerial drone's metrics for accuracy. Though her shots repeatedly went wide it did drive the mi-go that were still out in the open to duck behind their bizarre equipment, putting them into Override's sights. Whipping his arm out the elf let fly three daggers as he leapt up to grab on a gargoyle jutting out near the top of the rampway, hanging off of it with one arm while tossing three more knives into the freakish aliens. Before he could scream for a counterspell from their sorceress, the elf watched in horror as the mi-go mage conjured a sickly green bolt that hit Garçon straight in his massive torso. The ogre cried out in pain for Emryell as the magical ray disintegrated his shoulder before spreading across his entire body, leaving only a few tusks and a sizable pile of ash where the girthy warrior formerly stood.

Soaring into the room, Emryell started unleashing a veritable torrent of arcane force that battered

away any defenses the enemy's spellcaster had prepared. For a brief moment everyone in the chamber stepped back as the human mage consumed the room with blasts of fire and acid, reducing Garçon's murderer to a purplish paste on the floor. Though still outnumbered by more than two to one, Override's team pressed the advantage and the two elves gunned or knifed down another pair of stunned mi-go while Emryell retreated back towards her ogre friend's remains, letting loose fans of magical flame to hold back the aggressive aliens. Using the drow's covering fire to pick off targets with throwing daggers was proving effective and though the strange creatures had produced unearthly weapons from behind their experimentations, none of them seemed to be warriors and it looked as though the fight would be over in a matter of seconds.

Just as Override began to calm down, tactically working out that his team was going to make it out of here, Emryell cried out in shock and pain before being quickly cut silent. Looking towards the entryway the elf let out a string of curses as the human mage's body slumped to the ground, a wicked sharp pick jammed through the back of her skull to emerge from her eye socket. Behind her corpse was a mi-go, bigger and stronger than the rest, producing another one of the weapons from under his robes and stalking into the chamber. Only Override and Registrar remained now, arrayed against eight of the otherworldly creatures—not good odds. If they were going to make it out alive, the elf thought to himself, they would need an edge.

One trick that led to Override's rise to the heights of power as an executive in the 2050s was the old world talent of legerdemain. With his uncanny grace, long slender fingers, and penchant for spotting a mark, it was a simple thing for him to swipe smartlights, plant miniscule transceivers, and otherwise engage in corporate espionage, giving him an edge that he used to its full advantage. Really though the elf just loved picking pockets, a habit he still compulsively engaged in as an operator. Producing a vial of fastjak lifted off of Kajban earlier in the day,

artificial substance into his nostrils, whitening out for an instant before the world slowed to a crawl.

The sound of pumping blood pounded inside his ears like the beat of a marcher's drum as the elf yelled for Registrar to take out the pick-wielder and dropped down into the middle of the fray, a trio of knives in each hand. Skipping into the air and over a half-dozen swiping claws he let loose all six blades into the skulls of two advancing mi-go, kicking off of the face of a third to sail through the air and out of reach of their talons. Landing in a roll and somersaulting into cover, Override winced as chunks of the strange device he hid behind began to fly off, battered away by alien weaponry. "More covering fire!" he screamed, jumping back out into the open in a backwards flip while throwing a flurry of knives into his attackers, catching two more in the chest and putting them down.

Over in her alcove, Registrar was barely holding her own as the leader of what she now believed to be a suicide mission got high and threw himself into the bladed hands of their enemies—at least that would grab their attention for a few moments, she thought to herself. Sparring a nanosecond to order her VIPER drone to stealthily return home and clean off her browser history, she reloaded her autopistol and ducked her head into the open, switching on the fully automatic setting and sending the entire clip of ammunition into the thing that just killed Emryell. The powerfully-built mi-go shuddered backwards as lead slugs bore through its hide, painting the dark robes it wore all the darker before slumping against the wall, dead (or unmoving, at least; at this point, Registrar would take what she could get).

Three of the aliens remained, all of their attention consumed entirely on Override's manic, darting form. The elf cartwheeled and leapt around the chamber in a blur of green, silver, and blue, flitting a dagger at the trio of creatures when they left enough time for him to attack between dodging the plasma blasts emitted by their strange weapons. Briefly considering just leaving, Registrar instead took a knee and carefully aimed her firearm, sending a bullet through the back of one of the

surviving mi-go and earning the attention of the other two as the creature went limp, falling to the ground.

A moment of distraction was all that Override needed and before their two assailants could turn back to deal with him, the elf unleashed a flurry of a dozen hastily-thrown knives that there was no hope of dodging. Taking cover herself from an errant blade that sailed in her direction, Registrar waited a second or two after the sounds of combat died away before her leader's voice rang out in between ragged breaths, "all clear." Sauntering around the chamber, his shoulders rising and falling as he breathed in large swathes of air, Override was covered in chitin and purplish, acrid blood. He grinned as Registrar rose into view, joking cavalierly, "What a surprise! If I knew these things were down here I'd have brought something along so we could bring one home."

Lighting a deathstick took a few seconds longer than normal—her hands were shaking too much to keep the flame to it for very long at all—but as the drow finally sucked in the toxic smoke she reflected on her lighter-skinned counterpart's methods and the events of the day. Her colleagues had warned against working with him, citing three dozen operators thought to have died while on a job run by Override and the fact he was wanted by just as many governments and hypercorporations didn't help his case. She laughed their fears off at the time but now, looking at the casual manner in which he shoveled Emryell's body and a pouch of Garçon's remains into his bag of holding, the netjacker saw good reason to look at him with apprehension.

"They paid for a priest's services, but Kajban didn't. With the docked pay and his lost cut, that brings you and I up to 15,000 bytecoins, and that includes some mercy pay for that Farseer fella." The elf grinned, a bit of mania in his eyes. "Not a bad day, I'd say. I can tell them that Garçon's weapons were damaged after they went down, too. I know a good fence and if you can keep your mouth shut, that can become 20k for the two of us." Registrar just nodded, still pondering his apparent lack of sanity. "Really," he continued, "I think this has been a bonanza; are the kids still saying that? This was a win, I'm

saying.” Kicking away one of the mi-go experiments and scanning the dais holding the ancient holy water they had been contracted to acquire, Override shrugged in surprise and just picked the glass bauble up, gingerly setting it inside his bag of holding-many-corpses. “Still, shouldn’t go pushing our luck.” At that he picked up Garçon’s DRAPA Pacifier, pointing it up to the far ceiling above the coterie of passages leading eastward (away from the way they had come), switching its firing mode before unleashing a salvo of deafening shots that collapsed a large swathe of the chamber.

With only themselves to worry about, Override and Registrar easily snuck back outside of the church to the smell of Paris’ overcrowded streets after dusk. Sending a message to the “Ms.” Grey that hired him and confirming that the package was safely stowed away (establishing a meeting place as well, the drow presumed), the elf shook hands with the shaken netjacker under the pale light of a full moon. “That was a great job,” he said, as if he were oblivious to the impromptu mortuary carried on his person. “You did some good work in there. We should do another job together sometime.”

Registrar just looked at Override in shock, uttering the only reply she could think of: “you’ve got to be bjorking kidding me.”

CHAPTER 6: OF ANGELS & DEMONS

TIMESTAMP: LAS VEGAS, NEVADA USA,
AUGUST 1ST, 2:10 AM, 2099

♪*The devil's in the details*♪
♪*I know he's been 'round here*♪
CLICK

Mack's music shut off suddenly. "Damn it! What's wrong with this @#\$%&! thing?" He banged on his left wrist, watching as his hand and Gertrude passed through the AR overlay of his music player. The image wavered and fizzled with static, but was otherwise unresponsive. Then he realized that someone was yelling.

"—the gun down!" Apparently it was someone who felt cocky.

He turned around slowly and found himself faced with four sec-ops clad in riot gear, shotguns in hand. "Hi, guys. When did you get here?"

"This is your last chance," shouted the squad commander. "Put the gun down and your hands up!" She motioned towards Mack with her shotgun and the rest of the squad closed in.

"Sure, sure. No problem." The half-orc lifted his hands up above his head. This is usually the point where his crew would come in and get him out of this mess—there was no crew this time. This is why he hated working alone.

Obviously losing any patience she had left and angry at his cavalier attitude she yelled, "Drop the @#\$%&!& gun!" Mack gave a nod and let go of Gertrude. The gun dropped to the floor and the firing pin snapped inward, barreling outward. Lead flew out of it, bouncing off of the

that pointed the bullet in the direction of one of the guard's exposed necks. Before he could register what happened, the sec-ops clutched at his throat, dropping his EMP suppression device and allowing all of Mack's tech to kick back into gear.

♪Lord knows I've been searching♪

♪For that devil that I fear♪

Things were happening too quickly and Mack would have to think on his feet for once; he hated not having a plan. Leaping forward, he tackled the nearest sec-ops as a chorus of bullets joined in with his music. Hitting the ground with a heavy thud, the guard and his gear absorbed most of the blow on Mack's behalf. His grappling opponent's Peretta SMG smashed against the floor and slid a few feet away, coming to rest under a nearby reception desk.

The half-orc gave the guard a parting gift of an elbow to the face before rolling off. Scrambling to his feet and sliding around the freshly polished floor, Mack moved toward the desk like a drugged up giraffe—he managed to stay upright enough to duck behind the makeshift bulwark, bullets quickly in pursuit. Fortunately they weren't able to penetrate the furniture in this place; leave it to Viz-tao to splurge on the retro-chic steel desks. Mack considered giving them a positive review next time he hopped on the Hypernet.

♪Babe, I'm your devil♪

♪Babe, you're my devil♪

Mack lay prostrate, his hand stretching out beneath the desk, reaching for the discarded firearm. Bullets struck his cover over and over but none punctured it. His hand was almost there. Casings plinked on the floor ahead of him, piling around the guards' scuffed boots. The half-orc's fingers barely touched the gun and he tried desperately to grasp the weapon—it was just too far.

"Go around and get him," barked the commander.

No time. Mack grasped for his belt and grabbed a grenade. "Take this, scum-ops," he growled, lobbing the jet black cylinder over the desk.

"Flashbang!" warned a guard, turning his body away from the grenade, forcing his eyelids closed



as tight as he could. He prepared himself for the explosion and... nothing. It was a dud. It wasn't even a grenade—it was an empty energy drink can painted black.

Mack bought himself enough time to lunge out and grab the gun, firing blindly from beneath the desk as soon as it was in hand. A spray of bullets connected with the guards' ankles and proceeded to connect with the rest of them as they fell to the floor. Rolling onto his back and catching his breath for a minute, he slid a hyperjack connector into the firearm before reaching around his cover to finish off the prone sec-ops.

♪*That devil's coming for us!*♪

♪*So no need to make a fuss!*♪

CLICK

Mack stopped the music, standing up and taking a moment to reassess his situation. Four dead sec-ops, one battered desk, and an enormous metal vault door—his target. After finding Gertrude he holstered her, pulling off his backpack and placing it on the desk next to him. Inside were all neat, miniaturized versions of various weapons, cases, and tools. He eventually spotted the case he needed at the far end of the bag; as he reached inside, his arm seemed to slow down traveling a speed proportional to the rest of the contents. He reached what felt like a lot further than he needed to before finally grasping the small, metal box. After pulling it out, it grew to the size of a deck of cards.

Inside the case was a small platinum orb with six thin extensions of a metal he couldn't figure. Mack gave the device a simple tap—it opened up, revealing a large blue eye that took up half of the orb's area. The thing sprung to life, its legs creaking from lack of use. The contraption surveyed the area for a moment and then gave an audible buzz, displaying a thick red X over its synthetic pupil.

Mack gave a terrible groan. He began to dial out from his arm, bringing up a display through his new sunglasses. A smaller frame popped up while his call connected—an animation of Ape CEO losing it in the boardroom. “And that's why you never give a gorilla power tools!” Of the 200 hours of cartoons saved on his

specs, he had about 190 of them memorized.

“Urgh.. hello?” Artie’s disgruntled voice vibrated through Mack’s ear canals. “Mack? What the hell do you want?”

Stifling a laugh as Ape CEO did something unpleasant to a junior executive he yelled, “Artie! I need you to remind me how your bot works.”

“ADA?” Artie questioned sleepily.

Looking at the curiously alien thing the half-orc shrugged, “I don’t really care what its name is. How do I make it work?”

An annoyed sigh rang through Mack’s head. “Every stinkin’ time,” Artie muttered. “Well, is she connected to the digiboard in your arm?”

“Yeah,” the half-orc replied with an air of unconfidence, “it’s hooked up.”

Talking almost fast enough not to sound condescending, Artie asked, “Is it giving you the red X?”

“Uh...” Mack hesitated. “Yes, it is.”

“Mack, you @\$%&! dummy! Just connect ADA to your arm and you’re set. It’s the @\$%&! future. These things are simple. How have you not caught up?” Artie took in a deep breath. “You just need to find ADA’s signal on your arm and the rest is neuro-controls.” Mack could almost hear the dwarf’s teeth grit between words. “Now, bring up the AR panel on your arm.”

Only taking half of his attention away from the scene of Ape CEO battling a mutant bananaman in the bottom corner of his vision he said, “I don’t think it’s there.”

Artie’s scream was loud enough to be heard by anyone a few inches from Mack’s ears, but anyone listening in would only have heard the half-orc’s gravelly laugh as it echoed throughout the lobby. “Artie, I really love ya.”

A grumble came through from the other side. “You owe me another bottle when you get back.”

ADA’s eye blinked green as a happy chime played to confirm the connection to Mack. “Okay, Artie, it’s good. Thanks for your help, sweetheart.”

Artie gave a mocking laugh. “Yeah, whatever you son of—”

The call dropped as Mack got back to work. He strolled over to the vault door and placed ADA on the digital panel. With a cough, the robot received its commands and its legs slid under the panel, removing it from the wall. With a quick pair of beeps, it made its way inside the wall, attacking the circuitry within. He went back to his pack to search for something else.

“You know what, ADA?” A beep rang out from hole in the wall, confirming the drop of the first digital lock. “I miss the old days, you now? It used to be someone took the time to learn about a vault and did some serious work to figure what made it tick. There was a real investment in the whole process.”

Two beeps—the second lock was down.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying. Now we have people who are two-thirds bot that don’t really have to do any work. They can just download schematics or whatever else they need without any real effort. I don’t think it’s really worth doing if that’s how you’re doing it.”

There was a loud buzz—ADA failed against the third lock and countermeasures were deployed.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying; it’s not that it’s all bad. I just feel like we lost something when we stopped doing it the old way. We used to take weeks to set up a job. I would get to know the other operators. It was a real team, you know?”

Three beeps—the next lock was down, but not without cost. A grate crashed onto the floor from the ceiling above and a trio of drones flew down, their guns instantly fixed on Mack. “ADA, look out!” He ducked behind the desk again, Gertrude appearing in his hand in the blink of an eye. Rolling out from behind the desk, the half-orc set his aim on a drone and fired. The bullet struck the automaton’s propeller and sent it spiraling towards a wall before tumbling to the floor, where internal security processes caused it to explode. A line of bullets missed Mack as he ducked once more.

Four beeps.

Mack sprung forward, scooping up the drone’s scrap from the ground and tossing it at its nearest ally.

Bullets blasted at the impromptu missile, giving

him the time to line up a shot against his other automated assailant. Another shot rang out from Gertrude, bringing the second one down—he turned to line up the shot on the third, but it was gone. A whizzing from behind Mack prompted him to turn around just too late, the last drone firing three bullets that grazed his shoulder while the rest shattered against his cybernetic arm. He let out a pained groan.

“The other thing about bots,” he yelled, circling the drone as best he could, “is that they’re always trying to kill you!” More bullets rained down on him, most of them blocked by the kevlar vest beneath his jacket. The spray continued, tearing up more and more of the coat (which was more patches than original material anymore). “And then, if they mess up your stuff,” he continued, blindly firing at the flying robot, “they don’t have any money to pay you back for it.”

The drone began reloading with a distinctive set of whirs and clicks.

“Ha, gotcha!” Mack stopped to line up another shot, but the drone was ready. It had received combat data from the other two and was expecting him to use the reload as an opportunity to attack. A trio of blades shot out at the half-orc, one slicing him across the cheek. He let out a vicious roar before continuing his one-sided conversation, “See? This is what I’m talking about.”

The assault continued with blade after blade lobbed at Mack—most missed but with each one that struck true he grew angrier. With another roar he leapt up and nabbed the drone out of the sky, slamming it into the wall again and again until the robot shattered into a shower of scrap. The half-orc’s eyes bulged with anger as his wounds closed up at an accelerated rate, completely closed by the time he stopped smashing the automaton. “I hate bots.”

ADA crawled out of her hole and gave a happy chirp. The digital locks were down. “Well,” he said, out of breath, “not you ADA. You’re fine in my book.” Mack returned to his bag and took a moment to catch his breath. Artie’s robot crawled along the vault door, stopping on the main handle. It brought three of its legs close

to the center of its body, creating a pyramid shape before they started spinning in tandem, creating a drill that began boring through the center of the vault.

Mack rummaged around the bag some more. Inside was another box, this one a bright yellow. A label on the lid marked it as a biohazard stasis box—a container that keeps its contents hermetically sealed to minimize natural decay. He withdrew the box and a mine from the bag, closed it up, and slung the pack back over his shoulder.

Across from the desk was a massive window looking out over the neon radiance of the Las Vegas Strip. As he waited for ADA to finish its work he looked out over the city—one of the few in the US to be opposed to the huge waves of technological progress brought about by the last few decades. Fair enough, he thought; it was a lot harder to prevent cheating when a netjacker could cause a slot machine to spill its contents after a minute of invisible tinkering.

The Strip was one of the few places where standard cars still outnumbered skycars, but the extravagance of the few who did have them would be considered over the top in Neo York. The most famous of these was the Sky Stretch, a city-sponsored skylimo a mile in length that travelled up and down the strip at all hours. It cost a pretty penny and then some to even be allowed to drive in the airspace beside the ridiculous vehicle, let alone enter it. Mack considered his recent trip on the Sky Stretch a worthy investment, though; the scotch they had onboard was something out of this world.

The half-orc spotted a line of white blobs on the ground that he assumed to be the Memphis Mafia—a cult of impersonators that worship the King as a god of more than just rock and roll. While they were a blast at parties their constant spouting of “uh-huh” and “thank you very much” grew on his nerves rather quickly. Because of the money he was pulling in on this job though, those were easy enough to drown out with the kind of drinks he was putting back each night, and those weirdos knew how to party hardy.

A loud clanking echoed from deep within the hole as ADA manipulated the vault’s tumblers directly; the

robot was almost done. Mack grabbed a nearby planter and dragged it over to the vault, placing it beside the door as the borrowed device finished its work and squatted down, placing the mine just behind the planter and linking it to his arm. The armament awaited his order. The last tumbler fell in place and ADA resurfaced with a second chirp, this one more triumphant than the first. Mack palmed Artie's little creature, returning it to the box and with a thought for his dwarf buddy's peace of mind, shutting it down before pocketing its case.

The estimate was that the next wave of sec-ops would be on the vault within three minutes of the first digital lock dropping—he was making good time but he had to hurry. The vault door was heavy, forcing Mack to heft most of his weight to pull it open and even then, it swung open at a snail's pace, giving a heavy groan the whole time. Once there was enough space for his body, he slipped inside.

Mack was hit with a cold blast as he entered. The room was chilled with a set of fans built into the ceiling that moved the refrigerated air throughout the dozens of feet ahead, its walls covered with drawers that took up every available inch of space on either side of a four foot wide walkway. The walls appeared to be made of a smoky, dark glass that prevented any light from entering, and a set of strange runes were engraved onto each drawer, all of them glowing a faint arctic blue.

Stomping boots echoed throughout the stairwell as the second squad of sec-ops rushed upstairs towards Mack's floor. Two sets of guards had made their way to the hallway leading to the chamber outside but didn't engage—their CO waited patiently in the elevator with his two lieutenants as the lift approached the same destination. His stogie burned down as he inhaled, the smoke filling the confined box, his eyes fixed on the indicator as floors passed below them with faint dings.

Using a note given to him by the Ms. Grey, Mack did his best to match up the symbols to the runes on the drawers. "Oh, sure," he grumbled, "we'll use the

stupid @#\$\$%&! symbols instead of something that makes sense.” He poured over the drawers as quick as he could but found himself doing double and triple-takes repeatedly. It was a mess. Eventually he tracked down his first set of symbols. When he tried to pull open the drawer however, it wouldn’t budge. “You have got to be bjorking kidding me!”

The elevator reached the thirtieth floor just as the stairwell door swung open and the first squad filed though as its doors opened up. A cloud of smoke roiled forth, instantly sucked up by the vents above. The CO and his lackeys stepped out and the CO gave a wide grin. “Even with our communications down, we are a well-oiled machine,” he said. “Good job, men—but there’s time to pat our backs later.” He spat the stogie onto the ground, putting it out under his boot. “Right now there’s an intruder we have to take care of.” With a single finger he pointed down the hall and the squad marched forward in lock-step, weapons at the ready.

After a few more tugs on the drawer, Mack had enough of being delayed. He growled as he punched the mounted container, smashing the front. His hand was immediately covered in some kind of fluid, a dark, tar-like substance that smelled of charred granite and was colder than the room. “Ah, gross!” With some hesitation the half-orc reached back inside to grab the contents; whatever was inside was thick and firm like an uncooked steak. He wasn’t sure what he had and it was no easier to identify in the light of the vault, but it appeared to be an organ of some kind. Without looking too closely he tossed into the biohazard box with a wet slap, shutting it closed.

The sec-ops hustled onward, stopping before rounding the corner. With a heavy step, the CO strolled up behind the squad. “Men, I need you to stay on your toes,” he warned. “We’re not sure what this target is capable of. Delta squad came here first and none have returned. We have to assume we’re dealing with a highly capable soldier.”



“Ah, man, this stuff is so gross” moaned Mack,

looking down at a stain on his chest. "It dripped on my jacket!" He looked at his note again, attempting to decipher the location of the next drawer. The fluid on his hand ran down the paper, almost obscuring the symbols but within a few moments he located the proper runes. Smashed through the container he found its contents to be similar to the first drawer and again, he threw the material into his biohazard box. When the two masses collided there was a small spark and loud sizzle followed by the smell of sulfur, but he tried not to think about it too much.

Bravo squad rounded the corner and stood before the vault door, taking up positions. The CO gave the order and his lieutenants rushed forward, each holding a briefcase. Setting them down and activating them, metal rods and plates rose out from within, actively seeking a partner from the other briefcase. As the parts connected, they joined together and formed a tripod that rose and grew into a large turret pointed directly at the vault door.

Meanwhile, inside and oblivious to the death squad of sec-ops just outside the door, Mack was down to the last set of symbols. This was an easier find though, as it was the lone drawer at the far end of the vault and stood out like a sore thumb. When he smashed through it a thin liquid reminiscent of mercury spilled out in large quantities and as the quicksilver made contact with the dark fluid on the half-orc's hand, it erupted into bright white flames. Caught off guard and especially surprised at the lack of heat from the flame he yelled, "unholy dubya's dog Barney!", prompting a curious look between the guards in the room beyond. Fortunately the spectral fire only burned for a moment before disappearing in a wisp of golden smoke.

The material inside was of a similar size to the others but significantly lighter and soft to the touch—it was no less slimy however, and definitely the strangest thing he touched that day. Mack pulled the thing out (a bright gray mass of organic substance that caused his hand to tickle with an uncomfortable light stinging) and placed it inside the box. The dark and light materials shot to opposite ends of the biohazard container like

magnets repelling each other.

Before he could think about how strange that was, a voice came echoing into the vault. “Whoever is in there,” the CO’s voice called from outside, “this is your one chance to surrender.”

Mack gave a heavy sigh—he’d been too slow. Wiped his hands on his legs, the half-orc played around on the overlay on his arm. Music blared in his ears once more.

♪*That devil came by again*♪

♪*Looking to make new friends*♪

As long as they were here, Mack thought to himself, he would enjoy it. He didn’t need to keep listening out for sec-ops at this point; he armed Gertrude and waited.

The CO stood patiently as he counted a minute out in his head. When the minute was up, he gave the nod to his lieutenants. One moved toward the vault door while the other continued to man the turret. The sec-ops moved slowly, his ally’s mounted machine gun at the ready. As he reached the door, a loud beep gave the only indication that the mine behind the planter was armed—unfortunately, it gave the beep only a split second before detonating.

Mack sprinted out of the vault before any of the smoke cleared, the sec-ops still reeling from the explosion and giving him a second or two to make a decision. Through the thick smoke he could only see the bright lights of the Strip—he’d have to go out the window. Gertrude fired her full volley into the glass, making him an impromptu exit.

♪*He brings that dark, dark rain*♪

♪*He’s looking to bring some pain*♪

“Fire! Fire!” the COs voice shouted from within the smoke. Bravo squad had no sight on Mack and shot blindly into the haze, filling the room with lead once more. Bullets flew everywhere but in Mack’s direction, his head start enough to keep ahead of the attack. Continuing his sprint the half-orc broke free of the smoke just barely into the corner of the COs sight. “There he goes!” he screamed. The squad turned on a dime and zeroed in on the half-orc: he was only a few feet away from the



glass. Gertrude fired another burst at the window, causing a huge crack to burst out from one of the bullet holes and a whistling wind to pick up. He jumped up and dove at the heavy glass, feet first—it collapsed against his boots, shattering outward and releasing him out into the night sky.

♪*Babe, you're my devil*♪

♪*Babe, I'm your devil*♪

Mack fell for what felt like an eternity. The bright, pale glow of the strip reflected in his sunglasses as he pondered—this was not one of his finest moments. He managed to escape the guards but didn't really think past that step and thought that this might very well be the end of the operation. Watching ads play out on projected screens hundreds of feet high way off in the distance, he was happy to have experienced the Strip like a true high roller at least once. Mack closed his eyes and prepared for the end.

“Oof!” The wind rushed out of him as something big and heavy crashed into the half-orc's gut. He opened his eyes to find himself splayed out on top of a delivery drone, the messenger robot passing by just in time to catch him from finishing a thirty story drop.

What stupid luck.

♪*Now he's back for us*♪

♪*There's no one we can trust*♪

Bravo squad stood silently for a moment, dumbfounded at the event they just witnessed.

“After him, men!” ordered the CO. The squad leapt to their feet and rushed to the window. For a moment, the half-orc was gone. They scanned the distance for a sign of him but there was nothing. Just as the first members stepped away from the cracked glass, they spotted a drone off in the distance carrying Mack towards a parking garage a few blocks away. Shots fired out at it but most missed entirely, and those that found purchase dinged away harmlessly. The robot picked up speed and eventually reached the garage, delivering Mack on the roof as he rolled off before it gained any more height.

Mack hopped into the car and started the engine. “Bots. Gotta love em.”



The car took off under a hail of gunfire from the skyscraper as he set the biohazard stasis container on the passenger seat. Curious, Mack lifted the lid to see the contents once more before replacing the lid. The different organs continued to flop around, avoiding each other and creating an effect similar to a centrifuge. He replaced the lid, more unsettled than anything else.

“Gross.”

♪*We gotta send that devil back to hell*♪

♪*Yeah, straight back to hell*♪

CHAPTER 7: FINDING YOUR VOICE

TIMESTAMP: ESPINAR, PERU; FRIDAY AUGUST 28TH, 7:33 PM, 2099

A small box rolled down the assembly line. Karina continued her work routine, sticking out her arm to catch the box and pull it down onto the table before her. A small mortar and pestle rested on the corner of the table, already lightly dusted from a few hours' worth of work. Beside it was a grinder, rusted from years of neglect.

The metal box was chilled and frosted over, prompting Karina to shake the cold off her hands for a moment after handling it. From inside she drew three dried organs—one a bland, muddled gray and the other two a mix of dark red and inky black. The pieces were dried and shriveled and shook the table when dropped upon it. She then threw the box back on the rollers, pushing it down the line to the next station.

She took a knife and cut into the first dark piece, slicing off a portion sized for the grinder. After tossing it inside she began to turn the crank; it resisted her effort like it always did, rumbling as the rusted components wore against each other. The meat of the organ pressed out of the bottom into a small bowl beneath, dropping in chunks that stuck together as they crashed onto the plastic. Thawed, gutted, and minced, the inside of the organ released a pungent odor of burning sulfur as it came out of the old device, stinging her nostrils and causing her eyes to water.

Next she placed the small chunks inside the mortar, using the pestle to pound them down into a powder, a process that took a significant amount of force. Karina insisted that the chunks had minds and wills of their own, intentionally fighting against her efforts and doing their best to rejoin

each other while she pulverized them. After a few minutes of work they were no more, crushed into a fine dust. She reached for a small plastic bag beneath her table, grabbed the mortar, and began the delicate process for pouring the powder into the bag. No matter how careful she was it would always billow out, crashing against her facemask—Karina believed this was the remains of the organ fighting against her one last time before being put away.

In the ten years she had done this work, Karina had gone through thousands of pounds of organ meat. Unbeknownst to her, trace amounts of powder would always find their way past the mask and into her respiratory system, coating her lungs with a thin layer of the pure, base form of ancho, the best selling drug in the world. So far the narcotic had remained inert. Ancho made use of a catalyzing agent added down the line and thus, Karina was completely unaffected, even after a decade of work.

Her fellow workers did not fare so well. Over the years she watched many of them deteriorate both physically and mentally from exposure to uncut ancho. One of her good friends, Patricio, was the latest to succumb to the locura de ancho—the ancho madness. He had been unwell for a few weeks leading up to his incident. He insisted on working though, as anyone else here would.

Patricio was missing his right leg but he worked as hard as everyone else, if not harder. He was clearly unwell on that day, pale and shaking. Karina noticed a large number of capillaries on his face and sickly yellow eyes. She asked if he would be working but he didn't reply, seemingly lost in his thoughts. Throughout the morning she would look over to find him staring blankly for minutes at a time until finally, half-way through the work day, she saw a group of workers rush over to Patricio's station. It was a bloody mess and he died shortly after it began, the overseers ushering everyone away before she could get a closer look. Karina later learned that he was screaming out that God was calling for him to provide his arms and remaining leg—so he did, hacking away at them with a serrated knife. The higher ups only cleaned enough of the area to prevent the ancho from becoming tainted and left the floor permanently stained.



Although it wasn't very palatable work, it was work

nonetheless. Most everyone here (including Karina) worked to provide assistance to their families. This was one of the few places that overlooked disabilities, such as her deafness—in fact, she learned over time, these were preferred. It was easier for a worker to keep his mouth shut about the job if he was blind and the guaranteed work bought loyalty like very little else could.

Karina placed the bags of dark powder in a small bin alongside the rest she'd prepared in the last hour and started putting the gray organ slices through the grinder. It was always easier to work with that meat, so she generally saved it for last when it came to her in batches. After years of toil, she guessed the only reason that her grinder didn't need replaced was because of this meat, a small amount of rust seeming to disappear whenever the drab organ's interior passed through it. The chunks were also easier to pound down and she went through them quickly, filling the bin before placing it on the rollers as another cold, metal box arrived.

Karina continued her work with a nervous heart. Her shift was ending soon and there was one more important thing to do—if all went well, today was the day she escaped this hellish place once and for all. Thinking of returning home, Karina's mind drifted to the strange encounter that set all of her plans for today in motion.

It was a two mile walk over unpaved roads with little to no lighting, which always put Karina on edge when on her way back from the facility. She had been surprised before, though only by groups of children attempting to pick her pockets for enough coin to eat for the day. Karina was adept at stopping these attempts—she knew all their tricks, having picked them up herself when she was young and did the same thing. But ahead there was a man standing beneath one of the only working street lamps along the road and he was completely out of place. He wore a pressed charcoal suit (the kind Karina saw in advertisements from Lima) and brown hair slicked back, held in a ponytail. His right hand fiddled with a lighter, throwing sparks left and right. Karina was prepared to give the fellow a wide berth, but something caught her eye; his empty hand, hanging languidly towards the bottom of his expensive suit jacket, was signing a greeting to Karina.

Very few people around Karina knew Peruvian

Sign Language as there was very little need for it these days. Anyone with an impediment to communication (like blindness or deafness) strived to purchase a specialized hyperjack that allowed for mental communication with the rest of the world, or if they could ever hope to afford it, cybernetic replacements for their malfunctioning sensory organs. Karina found herself with plenty of opportunities to purchase one of these devices but opted instead to save the money to provide for her family (though she also found the concept of permanently attaching something to her spinal column unpleasant.)

Over the years, she scrounged what little money she was willing to spare to purchase books on Peruvian Sign Language, teaching herself first to read, and later, to sign. Karina's family learned alongside her, picking up enough to get by in everyday life. The only person she really communicated with was her friend Rosa, who could not speak herself. To find someone else that could also sign was amazing to her and at the very least warranted her attention.

Karina gave the man a greeting, albeit with some trepidation. He presented an air of sophistication but also one of mystique—looking him over, she wondered why someone so out of place would be here. His expensive shoes (not boots or sandals, but shoes) were muddied from the path. She assumed that this would be the kind of thing to cause the man to be upset if he were to notice, so she did her best to avoid averting her gaze. That was an easy thing; his face was warm. In his eyes however, Karina saw what could only be years of turmoil, like a powerful current churning beneath the gentle waves of the sea.

The man signed back, but did so in a way that was slightly difficult to understand. She wasn't sure if this was because she taught herself improperly or if the man didn't understand how to sign very well. The conversation started simple enough. He mentioned that it was a nice night for a walk. She agreed. She was not prepared for him to know her name, however. Her chest grew tight and she grew short of breath.

The man did his best to calm her. He explained that he was going to help her and her family. Karina grew more concerned and began to walk away, fearing this man may attempt to bring more harm to her life than the last time she was given

prospects and landed her in the warehouse handling ancho. She felt his hand on her shoulder and she spun around, raising her arm to strike him to escape. He quickly signed that he had a means to provide a new home for her family.

Karina paused, staring into his eyes and searching the blue-gray to verify his claim. He was telling the truth, but also that there was much more to be shared. She lowered her hand and asked for his name. Señor Gray. The little English she learned in school came into play. He was a man the same color as his suit. It was fitting, Karina thought, as though she was unsure about him, he seemed content to remain that way.

She questioned what she would need to do but Señor Gray had some questions for her first—she verified that she was still working at the ancho processing site. He then asked if her older brother was still ill. This, too, gave her pause; very few people knew about her brother's cancer. The family was struggling to bring enough money together to even pay for the check-ups, let alone any proper treatment. She only gave him a nod. A smile ran across his face. He told her that not only would he be able to move her family, but he was willing to pay for her brother's treatment as well.

Karina's heart skipped a beat. If the man could keep his word, she would do anything he asked without question. She kept her worries in check and asked for details; Señor Gray was asking for very little. It was only a small sample of a material. Acquiring the sample would require her to steal from the processing site, though. Her heart sank into her stomach. She could never risk a slight against her current employers. The cartels gave harsh punishments for poor work and did much worse for any attempts at theft or rebellion. Karina had made it ten years without an incident and was not about to start now. She shook her head and began to walk away.

Señor Gray's hand landed on her shoulder once more. She turned back to see him holding out a small card. The card was of a similar color to the suit, but seemed to waver between shades of gray under the glow of the street light. Karina saw an insistence in his eyes, asking her to at least take a look at the card. On it was written a number larger than she had ever considered, ending with the distinctive "bt" afterwards—bytecoins. Real currency, worth thousands of pesos. He was offering more money than she and her family



could ever make use of in three lifetimes.

Her mind reeled for a few seconds. It was an enormous offer: it was enough for her to consider doing what was asked of her. Karina had to be sure this was not a hoax first, and she took a moment to wipe the visible shock from her face before asking if this was some kind of prank, searching the man's placid eyes for signs of deceit. The smile returned to Señor Gray's face, followed by an animated laugh. He told her it was an honest offer and she could see the truth in his eyes once more. There was no passing up the opportunity. The two shook hands.

Señor Gray gave her a wicked grin that looked more eased than his previous smiles, as if the expression was the natural state of his face. He handed her an envelope and inside it Karina found a small card with a string of numbers and letters written upon it, as well as a dozen or so bills. He explained that it was a sort of signing bonus, but it was a sign of good things to come more than anything else.

He went over the details again—she was to find the material that matched the number on the card and return it home with her. At that point, Karina and her family would be flown out to wherever they liked and set up with a new home and access to all promised funds. She was permitted to use any means necessary, including asking others to assist her. She gave an understanding nod and left the security of the street light. As she ran home that night, she couldn't shake the feeling that there was something bigger at play.

Another bag of powder was placed in the bin and shipped off just as her shift was ending. Anyone that still had material at their station would stick around to finish their work. Karina didn't receive another box, so she was cleared to leave for the evening. Instead she made her way towards the bathrooms at the far end of the facility. The guards ignored her as she walked past. Most of them knew her by now and would leave her alone as they knew of her deafness; it would be her one advantage today. She entered and made her way into a stall.

Karina waited. As she did, her mind filled with the possibilities of what she could do with her newfound freedom. She dreamed of returning to school and earning the education she felt she deserved. The possibility of finally making



true friends and meeting people entranced her, but her day-dreaming started to fall apart. What if she was caught? What would happen to her? What would happen to her family? Her heart raced with fear.

Short of breath, she reached into her jacket and withdrew a small photograph. It was of her and her family on one of their only outings since she began working at the plant. They were all seated in the bed of a truck beaming with joy. Her uncle Hector had said a crass joke like he always did, and snapped the picture right after. She could see her brother, bright and full of energy, only a few months before his diagnosis. Her father, normally the stoic pillar of the family, cracked and gave the smallest of smiles. It would be only two years later that his heart condition took him away. Her mother's head was thrown back in rapturous laughter, something that was a rare commodity these days.

It was for them, she reminded herself. She had to do it for them.

Ten minutes. She gave herself ten minutes to collect her thoughts, allay her fears, and prepare herself. When the time was up, she took a deep breath and slipped out. The next shift was already hard at work. The smell of sulfur was in the air once more, so she brought her mask on again. Just down the way was the entrance to the storage room. She sidled over and crouched behind some unwashed metal bins. After a few minutes, one of the supervisors came out carrying a large load of organs for the rest of the shift. She moved up to him as quietly as she could, intentionally using a light step to feel out her movement. She snatched the badge clipped to his side and returned to the storage entrance. The light on the panel blinked green as she ran the card by and the door slid open.

Inside Karina was confronted by freezing air and her breath coalesced before her, something she only saw on the rarest of winter mornings. The room was far larger than it appeared to be from the outside. Its walls were lined with large containers and drawers, each fashioned from glass that allowed visibility of the contents within. These varied from the organs she worked with to strange bones longer than her torso, to what appeared to be sections of brains. A long metal table sat in the center of the room, surrounded by more metal boxes—a preparation area for all of the materials.

She had to brace herself against the door by the sudden light-headedness brought on by the ghastly sight. Most of these things appeared alien in nature and Karina was unsure of what use they could be in this business. Her eyes ran across the containers in search of the label she needed, but she kept finding her sight pulled away by the latest grim substance: an impossibly jointed hand, a scalp with hair that floated eerily above it, a set of black eyeballs with neon-orange musculature still attached. She forced herself to concentrate. The containers were organized without rhyme or reason and the tags were completely different from one to the next, making her search more difficult.

After a few minutes she finally tracked down the container she needed. Its door was ajar and inside were a half dozen glass vials filled with a bright green powder—two of them were sealed with rubber stoppers but the rest were open. As she reached in for a vial, Karina felt light-headed once again. Her head throbbed and she started to heave in short, gasping breaths, leaning against the containers for another moment before regaining her composure.

A dramatic change was underway within Karina. The open vials released trace amounts of catalyzing agent into the air of the chamber. It wasn't much, but it was enough to begin the reaction with the substances that coated her lungs after all those years of toil. The change was usually enough to knock grown men out for hours, but the nature of her reaction seemed to allow her to keep functioning.

She pocketed the vial and took a deep breath. In her daze she was finding it difficult to stand, let alone move. Her mind returned to her family. Karina focused on them and found the will to continue forward, wavering and using the table to keep her upright. She struggled to produce the badge and properly swipe it to leave. When she exited, she took another few seconds to rest against some boxes, unknowingly knocking a few of them over.

A nearby guard turned in the direction of the toppling boxes to see Karina standing before the open storage door, watching her from afar to determine what was going on. She stumbled forward, seemingly in a stupor—this wasn't the first time a worker had snuck inside the storage to make off with product for themselves, but this was the first he saw of



it being consumed on site. He casually followed her for a minute, knowing that she was deaf and unconcerned about giving his position away in her current state.

Karina continued, trying her best to not bring attention to herself, but shortly after knocking over the boxes a pair of arms wrapped themselves around her. Panic set in and she gave a terrible shriek. She felt her body quiver and the air before her seemed to reverberate. Her ears were filled with a brief hum—typically reserved for only extremely loud noises—until she felt a little better, as if the shriek relieved pressure within her body. Instantly, the arms pulled away and she fell to the floor. She turned around to find a guard rolling on the ground, his face marked with extreme agony. He held his hands to his ears and screamed, blood seeping between his fingers.

She looked around and saw that the whole facility had stopped production and was staring directly at her. Three guards rushed towards her, mouthing some kind of screams. One drew a handgun on her and panicked once more, another shriek escaped Karina's throat. She watched the reverberations travel towards the guards and knock them off their feet when they made contact. Like the first guard they fell over, bleeding from the ears and again the scream acted like a release valve, easing her swimming head.

The supervisor from earlier ran at her with two more guards in tow, his eyes beginning to glow a deep violet. An instant later a beam of bright purple light shot out from his gaze, rocketing directly towards her. With a gasp she closed her eyes—and immediately felt herself lifted off the ground. Daring to look, she found herself in the arms of an older woman from her town, Leticia. The scene around was a blur and she couldn't discern anything that was going on around her, but it seemed that her savior was moving faster than lightning.

Leticia stopped running and the world caught up with Karina. The facility was in chaos, the workers fighting the guards and higher ups. Some had taken up arms while others were fighting barehanded, using whatever tools and objects they could find. Flashing muzzles indicated the spray of bullets, which Karina felt as the slightest of thumps, giving the fight an almost rhythmic quality. Leticia gestured towards the nearest exit and Karina acknowledged her instructions

with a nod before the swift older woman was gone in an instant, lost among the fighting. Karina started to make her way, doing her best to remain hidden by slipping between crates and beneath tables.

Magnificent things were on display throughout the site. Abilities were coming from both sides of the engagement. Karina saw a man spray ice from his hand to batter a guard while a narco lifted two workers standing a dozen feet away without ever touching them. Chairs and bins were tossed into the air as a woman slammed the ground with her fists, causing the earth to erupt upwards from the strike. An overseer snuck up on a worker appearing from nowhere and she retaliated by tossing a punch, knocking her assailant ten feet back.

Karina was almost there. She scrambled to her feet just a few strides from the door and ran for it but a nearby supervisor saw her running for the door and put his hands up and palms out. A small reverberation blasted forward from the ends of his arms, striking the stone wall above the door. It crumbled and buckled, threatening to fall upon her but with so much at stake, she couldn't stop for anything. Noticing only too late, as the first pebbles fell, Karina looked up to see the rest of the wall toppling in her direction. A blur entered her field of vision and she saw Leticia stop with an elderly man in her arms. He hopped down and grew three times his size immediately; the stone bounced off his back, rolling onto either side of Karina as Leticia opened the door and gestured her through. She sprinted away without looking back.

Karina ran most of the way home. After ten minutes of sprinting she finally slowed down to catch her breath, her legs aching and her lungs burning. Whatever ill effects she felt earlier were gone, it seemed. Short of breath, she walked the last leg of the path home; she could only hope that Señor Gray would keep his word.

As she approached her home, she saw a strange plane parked just a few dozen feet from her house. It was almost over-designed in appearance with a sleek shape and odd wings that flared outward like a starfish. Standing just outside the vehicle was her family and Señor Gray. He walked to meet Karina with another card in hand. He put his hand out without any other indication and she reached into her pocket and produced the vial of green powder. The exchange took

place and Karina held the card indicating the tens of thousands of bytecoins stored within. Señor Gray gave a pleased smirk and escorted Karina towards her family.

Their faces were full of confusion. After a quick back and forth, Karina was happy to learn they were not harmed, and that he had only questioned what the situation was (politely, even). She gave a brief rundown and presented the card and an elated grin. The entire family broke into tears as Señor Gray gestured towards the ship, its door now open. Karina's family made their way in and Señor Gray was all too happy to receive their thankful hugs and handshakes. When everyone was onboard he closed the door and set a course northward; with a load roar, the ship took off into the air, in the direction of Mexico.

CHAPTER 8: THE CALL MUST BE ANSWERED

TIMESTAMP: TRANSYLVANIA, WALLACHIA;
MONDAY SEPTEMBER 7TH, 1:14 AM, 2099

In the center of the courtyard, a fountain cheerily burbled, without a care in the world. It didn't care about the zombie laborers slowly moving heavy stones to repair the crack in the Eastern wall. It didn't care about the woman creeping across the Western side of the courtyard, and it certainly didn't care that it was filled with blood, rather than the water almost any other estate in the world would use.

Tatar, who was the woman slowly working across the courtyard, did care about the blood. She hated it every painstaking minute she had to listen to it as she waited for all of the cameras to be facing the other way to make a few more feet of progress. She wondered how many people had to die just to fill that fountain. Six, she estimated. But it depended on how big the underground reservoir pumping it was.

She hated that she had time to wonder that. Her unique alter sapiens physiology made her undetectable to common, mindless undead but those cameras, wired together the way they were with an eye instead of a lens? They could have some intelligence, or they could be wired up to a screen a proper living creature was watching. She had to be careful—she wasn't entirely invisible, especially in the midmorning sun.

Normally morning would be about the worst time for a B&E, but this wasn't a normal infiltration. Tatar wasn't here to break or even steal anything, she was here to kill the very particular vampire who owned the estate. She wanted the sun to be as high in the sky as possible, even if she was going underground.

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It was nearly eleven by the time Tatar made it through

the estate's front doors. Out of sight of the cameras, out of earshot of the bloody fountain, out from underneath the cold grey spires that loomed over everything for miles around. Inside was as dark as a tomb—which was no real surprise—but Tatar couldn't risk giving her eyes time to adjust. She pressed a rune on her wrist and felt the familiar burning sensation as the spell stored within triggered, and the much less familiar feeling as every other tattoo on her body buzzed in anticipation. There had been hundreds of them marked on her skin over the past few days, and they felt like crawling insects whenever she called upon even the smallest mote of power. She had to physically stop her allies from imbuing her with any more of the enchanted carvings under fear that she might explode if she sneezed.

The triggered rune gave her a small light that only she could see—a real pity considering the surroundings. The place was devoid of color and less cheery than the average tomb, with a ceiling that arched high overhead, supported by pillars every twenty feet that resembled men and women bound to the walls in chains. Between them, equally gruesome frescoes depicted humans and monsters of all kinds falling prey to vampires. Classy.

At least, Tatar thought to herself, it looked exactly like the blueprints said it would. The last thing she needed was to find out this was some sort of setup and they knew she was coming. Sure, they had come from the head of the order, but Tatar hadn't been a professional hunter for twenty years without being a little paranoid. Her mind drifted to a month earlier, in the far more welcoming environs of the anarchist collective she called home. The cry of a hawk had awoken her from a mid-morning torpor. She'd had a late night and was trying to catch a few extra hours of sleep before she had to be back on the beat. But the sound of the hawk brought her to her senses in an instant because they weren't native to Skull Island. The cry, instead, was her smartlight's ring for a very important person: her boss. Not one on Skull Island either, where she worked as a part-time correctional officer, breaking up bar fights and keeping monsters and thugs off the streets. The settlement in which she lived might be full of anarchic free spirits, but they still had some value for their own safety on a day to day basis.

No, the call was from her real boss: the head of the Children of the Dawn, the leader of the global organization whose goal was to fight the ever-growing threat of undeath subverting society. “Tatar Binary.” She answered the phone as clearly as she could manage, “what’s going on?”

“It’s good to hear from you.” Aurora’s soft, familiar voice was on the other end of the line, “It’s been far too long since we’ve talked. And I’m afraid this isn’t a social call, either.”

“It never is.” Tatar replied. “What’s on the docket?”

“The big one. Starting today, you’re training to kill Dracula. You ship out in 72 hours.” The call was both the most incredible and terrible thing that could have happened. Every monster hunter—and every Child of the Dawn—wanted a piece of the First Vampire. Vlad III Dracula was a blight on the world, a source of endless pain and a horrible monster besides. He also happened to have killed every vampire hunter, mercenary, or vigilante to so much as look in his direction wrong. Even with millions of bytecoins of gear, the best wards the Children could write, and her being one of the best vampire hunters in the business, this was a suicide mission. It would take an army to even make the First Vampire flinch.

Wrenching her mind to the task at hand, Tatar lightly touched the ivory stake tied to her belt. An army, at least, was something she could provide. But first she had to manage to get to him, which would require some finesse and a little luck. Finesse she had, as well as detailed knowledge of the estate and the few known secret passages leading down into the catacombs beneath it.

Luck, not so much. Rounding the second corner, Tatar found herself face to face with a vampire. It wasn’t Vlad, but he was still a blood-sucking abomination of nature—and besides, if she didn’t take him out now, he would almost certainly go and raise the alarm. Her nature as an alter sapiens gave her an advantage over the stunned undead, as it took him a moment to recognize her as a living, breathing creature. By that time she had already closed five of the ten paces between them and drawn her sword, the ebony blade. Two and a half feet of dark, polished ebony, the blade was stronger than steel and honed to a razor’s edge. Better yet, it was infused with so much positive energy that to touch the handle would burn the skin of any undead unlucky enough to try.

By the time the vampire was turning to flee the blade had already driven home. Tatar felt the supernaturally tough flesh and bone crack under the weight of her charge and the magic of the blade. She felt the vampire give away under the aim of her blow, going directly through its heart. With a practiced motion, Tatar regained her balance and wiped the blade clear of gravedust—one down, only a few million to go.

Normally, Tatar did her best to hide any evidence of a confrontation to give her as much time as possible before an alarm could be raised. Not today: she was confident that no matter what she did, she only had a handful of minutes at best (about as long as it would take to clean up). Instead she pulled an elaborate crystal and silver vial from one of her belts, cracked it gently against the ground so that the glass spiderwebbed in fractures, and tucked it into the pile of discarded clothing. With any luck the first person to come across the pile would investigate and set off the makeshift trap—that would be another one down and dusted.

She looked at the wall the vampire had been standing in front of—from what she knew of the blueprints, there should be a secret door here (likely where he'd been coming from.) She didn't know exactly how to open it but she didn't have to; pressing her hand to the wall and focusing on the rune on the back of one of her hands, the buzz of magic filled her body and a mechanism within the wall quietly clicked. Tatar pushed and the side of the passage slowly gave way to a spiral stairwell descending into the darkness below.

The information Tatar had about these catacombs was shoddy at best. Some of it was gathered directly through divining with the gods, but much more was coerced from captured vampires—any or all of it could be incomplete, or just plain wrong. Slightly anxious considering the circumstances, she stayed on her guard as she descended twenty, forty, a hundred steps. Finally, after what seemed to be at once five stories and a hundred underground, the stairwell opened into a small chamber, where tens of thousands of bones had been carefully fit together to make up the walls, floor and ceiling.

Tatar crept slowly into the room, hoping that the bones making up the floor weren't sentient and wouldn't mind her walking across them—it wasn't the bones coming to life that she needed to worry about however, because only

a few feet into the room, one of the bones clicked under her foot. She heard the creak and grind of machinery in the walls, and then the twang of a dozen bowstrings snapping taut. Arrows came out of the wall behind her, from the eyes of a row of taunting, grinning skulls. Tatar dropped like a rock but she wasn't fast enough and one struck her in the calf, another in the side. If she hadn't already been down, she would have dropped. The other arrows hit the ground around the room, in locations that seemed random at first.

They were far from that: each arrow hit a different pressure plate throughout the room, triggering another trap, hazard, or alarm. They may not know who she was or why she was here, but the alarm was raised. Adrenaline pumped into her body as she buzzed the next rune, which began to knit the flesh together around the arrows that hit her. Between the pain and adrenaline, she could swear the buzz of all her magic tattoos was almost enjoyable this time, like a rush of good drugs or the thrill of a stimulating conversation. Impulsively she thought back to the last time she'd felt so much mirth—Tatar was sitting in a comfortable living room, with a handful of friendly faces sitting and drinking wine. Despite the casual setting, everyone's eyes were on Tatar.

"My ride will be here tomorrow morning. It has been an honor and a pleasure working with you all." She was tearing up a little as she spoke, and she wasn't the only one. "I'm shipping out to Wallachia. Technically, I'll be back in four weeks. But it was the Big Call." Sharp intakes of breath went around the room. Skull Island's Children of the Dawn had always been good at their jobs, but to get called to take a bite out of Vlad III Dracula was a big deal. "Magdaline. You've been the best friend and second I could have ever asked for. I'll need you to cover for me while I'm gone. Keep things running smoothly, and tell the kids I love them."

Magdaline stood up slowly, a tall thin woman with skin almost too pale to be natural, and no hair. Rather than her usual snow-white complexion, she was flushed and nervous. "Tats, I..." She started to reply, clearly struggling to get something off her chest.

"Tell me when I get back." Tatar interrupted, "Or when we see one another next." Tatar's mind snapped back to reality, the surge of magic coursing through her searing her



mind and forcing her to concentrate.

Every rune that she burnt was a high, and every time her blade cut through an animated corpse she felt a surge of pride. She was up to thirty-seven now, a personal best on a single mission. The dead were coming out of the walls. Skeletal arms were trying to grab her from below, but she crushed them beneath her heel when they couldn't see her. Vampires were trying to fire at her from a distance, but the arrows were bouncing off an invisible shield she called up once she knew what to expect. Even ghosts were trying to catch her off guard from the solid walls, but they couldn't see through it any better than she could and she kept moving. Tatar had no idea where she was going and was working from her gut—wherever the resistance was thickest, that was where the most important things were stored. So she continued pushing, cutting down anything to get in her way, the ebony blade moving in a dark blur, up and down, left and right.

Finally she caught sight of a unique door—it wasn't just any door, with dark wood and iron (or even a modern thing of glass and aluminum or steel). It was a tall stone door, engraved with elaborate scenes of Dracula himself slaying angels and demons alike. Very imposing. And it was exactly what Tatar expected the First Vampire's tomb to be.

A single blow brought low the two vampires standing between her and it, and she took off at a sprint. Her sword arm was getting tired, but she wasn't flagging yet. As she was about to reach the door she focused on a pair of runes that had been written on her throat—ones that would have triggered if anyone attempted to bite her—and she crashed into the door at full tilt, slamming straight into it, leaving fractures throughout. Slapping a rune on her thigh and shaking her head to focus she dissipated.

On the other side of the door Tatar reformed from the mist, pushing herself through the cracks. Even before she was solid again, she had prepared another spell—one that would seal the door against anything attempting to follow her—and then, finally, she allowed herself to take a moment to examine the room. The chamber was sizable and far taller than was practical, extending some fifty feet above before the room's eight walls all came to a peak. In the center of the room was a huge throne of bone and gold upon which sat a

familiar and somewhat bored face: the First Vampire, Vlad III Dracula himself.

When Tatar finally noticed him, she began taking mental stock of what she had left. Spells, bombs... everything was in order. Vlad just stared at her, frowning. "I suppose you're this month's assassin, here to rid the world of the scourge that is the vampire, Dracula." He didn't sound impressed, and Tatar believed him. "I do like to keep track of who my enemies are, of course. Could you tell me who sent you? It's been a long time since the Vatican has sent anyone, so they're about due."

"I don't have to tell you anything." Tatar scowled, angered by how casually the First Vampire was taking things. "You don't get to interrogate me—all you get to do is die."

Vlad shrugged and stood up languidly from his chair. "Very well, I'll fight you. But try not to bleed too much, hmm? I hate to waste good blood. I even try to make use of the blood of fools who poison themselves to infect me. I keep their blood in the fountain outside, for everyone to see and hear. Sometimes for hours, as they—presidents, hypercorp CEOs, and other pitiful humans that wear socks worth more than you—wait for an audience with me."

Tatar set her teeth in response. She had been so careful, but obviously there had been some sort of sensor outside she hadn't taken into account. She hadn't just been lucky—Vlad was leading her here. Instead of delaying things any longer with a reply she pulled a grenade from her belt and hurled it at the First Vampire. Rather than dodging he caught it and allowed the explosive to detonate in his hand. Positive energy lashed his arm and face, but he didn't so much as flinch and in seconds the damage was gone.

"So rude. I'm going to have to teach you a lesson in manners, aren't I?" Vlad scolded, a slender rapier appearing in his hands—a weapon of speed and grace. Tatar didn't wait for him to move first and launched herself across the room, pulling on as much magic as she could to try and outspeed the vampire, to make herself strong enough to endure his blows, to do what she came here to do. But still, Dracula was faster, parrying all of her strikes with disinterest and minimal effort.

One after another her blows were knocked aside, though she hadn't been aiming to kill—Tatar was

waiting for an opening. Vlad's blade struck out, severing her sword arm, but Tatar didn't have time to bemoan it or even flinch. The ivory stake at her belt was in her other hand, driving up and into the First Vampire's chest; his expression changed from bored, to very, very surprised.

"Well, it was a solid effort," he muttered, baring his fangs, "but you missed my heart." Vlad let his rapier fall to the ground and in a motion too fast for Tatar to see, his clawed hand punched straight through her chest. "This is where your heart is."

A rune on her spine made the world painless and Tatar only smiled—she hadn't been aiming for Vlad's heart. As she began to black out the anarchist assassin felt the unfamiliar pull of space twisting about her as the "stake" she had plunged into the First Vampire's chest punched a hole through his incredibly powerful wards, sending the pair of them hurtling far away from the throne room.

In Rome the sun was high overhead. A team of druids had been renewing spells all day to prevent even a single cloud from obscuring the sky. In the Coliseum hundreds of accomplished wizards and clerics had gathered, united in common purpose, and without knowing exactly when that common purpose would appear, they were all on the metaphorical edges of their seats.

Mastering magic either arcane or divine requires patience, however, and despite all the waiting that they were doing, it took the spellcasters nary a moment to react when Vlad III Dracula and Tatar Binary appeared in the center of the Coliseum—just long enough for the First Vampire to realize what was happening and feel the sun searing his skin like fire.

"Gotcha you sunnav..." Tatar managed to cough out, but her final words were engulfed in fire, lightning, and spears of plasma and lead. Every wizard and cleric unleashed their most potent spells at Vlad and his victim. They were, at long last, dealing out vengeance for all the centuries he had been preying on the demigant and human races.

The force of such an epic accumulation of magic unleashed all at once shook the Coliseum to its foundations and in a matter of seconds—despite being reinforced for this very event—the floor collapsed into the passageways that



ran underneath the structure. Dust filled the air, but the assembled mages and priests didn't relent. Every sort of magical and technological artillery that could be mustered was fired at once, a cascade of explosions one after another; they were taking no chances.

After minutes of chaos, the assembled execution squad began to tire. First the spells ended, and then a few moments later the artillery halted. Smoke filled the air before quickly being funneled into a vortex by one of the nature-oriented priests, creating a single dark blot that hung above the arena against an otherwise unmarred sky. Everyone waited. A minute passed, then another. There were no bodies—the ground in the center of the Coliseum had been fused to glass. One of the wizards, a man with a glorious mustache, dared to hope. “By George, I think we've done it!”

As last words go, they weren't spectacular. The moment he finished speaking he began to choke, then gag. A moment later with his friends gathered around him, offering potions and casting spells in an attempt to help him, his body exploded as a viscous black cloud burst from his chest, spraying blood and guts over two dozen priests and mages.

They, at least, had a moment to look surprised as the black cloud began to expand rapidly, covering them, and then the row of seats in which they had been standing, and then the entire side of the Coliseum. It wasn't dark enough to keep them from seeing, but it was a perfectly suitable darkness for a vampire to comfortably abide. But Dracula was well beyond merely abiding—he was furious.

Reforming from a cloud of dust at the dead wizard's feet, a huge black scimitar appeared in one of his hands, a short stiletto in the other. He was scowling, fangs fully bared and expressing the full terror of his true, demonic self. The howling of wolves filled the arena, and the flapping of many thousands of wings. The sun itself darkened, as though wincing from the First Vampire's power.

Vlad slayed the closest mages in the blink of an eye. He drove his shorter blade through one skull and cleaved another man in half, moving fluidly and with a speed unmatched by any but the most magically-imbued mortal. The First Vampire's dance was one of death, every movement perfectly executed to deliver another fatal blow; a thrust there

through an eye and into the cleric's brain ends a life; a cleave of his scimitar fells two halflings in a single strike (sending the halves of their corpses flying in different directions); a kick crushes the chest of a wizard, splattering him against the stone behind him. Blood and viscera flew as he diced men and women into smaller and smaller pieces, cutting through powerful defensive magics with ease. The smell of rent flesh and the screams of the dying filled the air, overpowered only by the scent of bile and blood mixing with the ozone and sulphur from so many freshly cast spells.

For the first time in centuries, the Coliseum became a blood-soaked abattoir of death once more.

Tatar was dead—it wasn't very pleasant, she had to admit. She was able to see the world around her body through some sort of faint haze, and watched as Vlad took the first few blows with a stunned silence before dissolving into a seemingly invulnerable mist as the first explosives struck him.

Pulled by the power of thought she rocketed towards the mages, trying to warn them—but to no avail. They had to stop their assault: they were exhausting themselves and the First Vampire would survive! It was no use; try as she might to cry and plead with the living, they were beyond her reach.

"Come with me." A calming voice called out behind her. It belonged to a large raven wearing a plague-doctor's mask, who beckoned the long snout of the thing toward her. "The matters of your old world are no longer of concern."

"Like hell they're not!" Tatar shouted back, tears streaming down her face. "Dealing with Dracula is a bigger issue than my life and we both know it!"

The psychopomp—for that was what the creature was—cocked its head. It said nothing for what felt to be a very, very long while, and then it flew off into the sky, vanishing in a wisp of smoke. The battle was over now, the assembled spellcasters waiting to see what would happen. They didn't know the doom that lurked in their midst. How could they?

"Run, dammit. Dracula is still alive! Run and hide!" This time however, her voice was heard. Not by everyone, but by one man, a young wizard who had been tapping his fingers on the end of his wand.

Then Vlad's vengeful attack began. She could

see him lashing out, rapidly crossing the Coliseum with blades perpetually soaked in the blood of his would-be murderers. A group of spectral wolves—black as night—emerged from thin air and began to launch themselves at the nearest group of mages. “Run, dammit! Save yourself!” Tatar screamed.

The young man seemed to hear her again and took off, away from the chaos; he didn’t try to stand to fight only to be slaughtered. He fled. If that was my last act, Tatar thought, then so be it. She knew full well that by spurning her death she may have forsaken her eternal life, but she could live with that—in a manner of speaking.

Then much to her surprise, she felt herself seized from behind by a rough, clawed hand. One that was very familiar to her, as it had just minutes ago torn out her heart. “You.” Vlad seethed, soaked in blood and gore from those he had slaughtered. “This is all your fault,” the First Vampire wrenched Tatar’s soul around, forcing her to look at him in the eyes, “and you have a very long time to make it up to me.” The anarchist’s eyes began to glaze over as Vlad’s power pushed itself into her mind, corrupting her very soul.

Her reply was simple and straightforward. “Yes.... Master.”

CHAPTER 9: QUASHES AT THE GRUDGE MONSTER

TIMESTAMP: ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA USA;
TUESDAY SEPTEMBER 29TH, 10:42 PM, 2099

The last Tuesday night of September was the same as every other night at the Grudge Monster: a raucous, wild party to the tune of manic, thumping, primal beats and catchy, melodic electrosynth-pop. Situated on an artificial island in Lake Erie that straddles both American and Canadian waters, the nightclub is a neutral ground on all fronts and frequently used by operators and Mr. Grays as a meeting place to negotiate contracts. With the militaries of both nations wary of the area and rumors that its owner is Metronome—a member of the legendary Soldier Corps—only the most insane individuals try their luck with the bar or the GM Bouncers. Most end up spending an hour or two swimming to the nearest coast after getting physically ejected (and with the aquatic dangers let loose in nearby Cleveland, not many make it that far).

There were also the regular patrons that made up the bulk of the Grudge Monster's clientele, though they rented out the discrete back rooms of the nightclub for entirely different reasons. Autoturrets overlooking the island's docks watched over their luxury party boats and a small team of elite netjackers made sure to collect exorbitant nightly fees for the privilege. The drinks were overpriced too, but nobody comes out onto the water just to drink—people come to the Grudge Monster to either cut a deal or party. Pulling himself up from out of the brackish water and onto the lip of a small, secret entrance to the nightclub, Override figured that if the night went the way he wanted it to he might get to do both.

Slinging a quick message to the GM netjacker squad to let them know he'd arrived, the elf shook out as much

of the cold water from his trench coat as he could before checking the arriving message in his digiboard. Though she was clearly afraid of him, that drow netjacker from the gig in France was a talented and reliable information broker. For a princely sum, Override had convinced Registrar to push her way into DataCorps, making a contact there that was ultimately responsible for the prized government ops document recently arrived to his inbox.

Hunkering down on the cold stone and resting his back against the private entrance to the nightclub's metal door, the soaked elf plugged in his digiboard and sent his consciousness inside. After a blinding instant of green the digital world opened all around him, arranging itself into the globular sextant that made up Override's server, with the pins and notes for hundreds of conspiracy theories arranged along the curved walls, floor, and ceiling. Resting on a table floating in the air was the message, manifested as an old treasure chest with a lock on the front made from perfectly wrought platinum—easily the match of even a master thief or hacker. Fortunately a cord and key were attached to the sturdy box, along with a small note that read Open with care and be prepared. Even a crazy bjork like you might find what's inside overwhelming, or so I'm told. —R. His curiosity piqued, the elf couldn't resist the urge to take a look before getting to the meeting with the old team.

Carefully sliding the key into the padlock around the chest, his avatar unlocked the package and crouched down, wedging it open barely a millimeter to peek inside. Suddenly he yelped, a gravity all its own dragging Override's digital body into the device to fall onto a hard, dark green floor with a resounding thud. "Glad nobody saw that," he muttered, looking around at the interior to see what he'd gotten into. There was a hard gravity in the place so though the elf could see the exit far above, flying out was out of the question. Thirty foot high walls of neon green light were on either side of him, disappearing behind corners a few hundred feet away. Looking very closely at the barriers, he noticed that they bore the digital watermark of Jester. If this wasn't a fake, it was the creation of a Hypernet legend, rumored to be a founding member of DataCorps (and to have survived an encounter with Jarrikol, a feat only a handful of elite netjackers could

claim.)

Not a great situation to be in, Override thought, hoping that nobody would come across his comatose body before he could get out of here. Had he prepared the time for it this would have been a dream come true, but the longer he was inside the tesseract the more likely somebody would come by, plug his flesh and bones, take his gear, and dump the elf's corpse into Lake Erie. Carefully edging forward with his ears and eyes out for countermeasures, he crouch-walked down the hallway towards the exit.

The first trap triggered when Override was nearly a dozen feet from where he landed, an invisible sensor activating and sending a storm of razor discs flying in his direction. Flipping into the air he quick-coded a large shield to block the flechettes but the tesseract firewalled it, leaving him exposed. Ripping off his trenchcoat instead he balled it and threw it open, the small armory of knives within catching and blocking most of the deadly missiles. Contorting into a twist that nearly shattered his digital spine got him out of the way of the others, but set off another counter measure that spread a wall of flame that destroyed the remains of his coat, singeing his avatar as well.

Standing precariously on one foot and frantically sending command routines back to his physical form, a crazy idea dawned in the elf's unhinged mind. Issuing a subroutine command to his cyberarm pinged back a response and, after a minute or two of balancing and crafting an algorithm, Override caused it to raise his wrist towards his inert physical face, releasing the aerosol concoction of fastjak he had stored inside it. Time instantly slowed and not knowing how long the drug would work in the digital world, he began sprinting toward the exit.

With a few digital minutes of hyper reflexes (though only 30 seconds of real time) the deadly labyrinth became far more manageable and keeping at a swift pace, the agile elf easily outpaced or dodged almost all of the dozens of countermeasures that tried to burn, corrode, electrify, crush, eviscerate, and pulverize him. The narcotic wore off while he climbed onto the stairwell leading to the exit, but Override couldn't care less—the danger had passed. As he rose to his feet something began to materialize in front of him

and he reflexively grabbed for a throwing dagger that wasn't there. With his reflexes reduced to an agonizing crawl he didn't realize that this threat would meet him unarmed until it was too late, and for a brief nanosecond he thought that finally his struggles were coming to an end.

Quite the opposite happened. A desk appeared before him, arrayed with a slew of documents. Quickly scanning each, Override's eyes stretched almost cartoonishly wide in surprise at what lay before him and despite the after effects of fastjak slowing his metabolism down, his heart started to race. If what these said were true (which was likely because this was almost definitely a genuine Jester Box), this changed everything. Everything. His mind rapidly started formulating plans—who would he need in Bratislava? They'd have to be experienced, with the ability to stay quiet about a job, and with Jarrikol involved (and it definitely looked like it was) there could be no talking about it on the Hypernet. What on Earth would they need to deal with a robodragon? Was there seriously a robodragon in Slovakia?

Grabbing all the files he didn't think would compromise his digiboard's security and marking a time in his schedule to come back for a more thorough assessment of the Hypernet rarity, Override tiredly willed himself up the steps and through the exit. Emerging bloody, scorched, and generally worse for wear in his server, he quickly crafted a self-destruct lockbox of his own, stashing the documents inside before sending his consciousness back into the real world.

Though it felt much longer to him, all told he was comatose only a few minutes and fortunately nobody had come by while he was out. In a familiarly unpleasant and juttering shift the chilly air coming up from the cold lake water snapped the elf's eyes open, prompting a lengthy coughing fit. Silently swearing to himself that he needed to stop relying on the debilitating narcotic, Override pressed his back to the wall and rose up off the ground, shaking his head to clear away a wicked headache from the digital feedback dealt to him by the Jester Box. Still overwhelmed by his revelations within the tesseract, he pulled out a deathstick and lit it, drawing deeply on the toxic smoke and reflecting on everything the files from Registrar portended. Halfway through a reminder that he was due at the meet flashed in his augmented reality

display and he swore, tossing the butt into the water and mentally preparing himself to display the bravado people have come to expect from him.

Keying this week's command sequence into the panel beside the door, the heavy steel slab slid open to reveal a blue-lit staircase up into the club and spilled rapid, searing hot techno beats out onto Lake Erie. His head still groggy from the drug and already late for the meeting, Override wearily bounded up into the nightclub. Rounding a corner he nearly knocked a server drone out of the air and just barely managed to stop in time to avoid throwing a knife into the robot, thinking of the last time he had to deal with one of the place's bouncers (each of which was part of a Murderball team with an all-star record).

Reaching the main dance floor his hackles raised a second time—DJ Simmoji was on stage, his features covered over entirely by a mask that made him look like a demonic Japanese oni. Override had never trusted the musician and if what LANrefn1 had claimed about his synthetic origins were true, Simmoji was on the elf's to-hit short list, but even he couldn't deny the supposed robot's talent. The dance floor was filled with ravers and toughs moving to the rapid beat of the music, the walls and structure resonating as a choir of speakers in perfect unison amplified everything coming out of the cutting-edge audio tech on stage.

Making his way back to the appointed room and punching in the key code his half-orc colleague sent along with the request to meet, Override quietly opened the door to an argument between the aforementioned hitman, Corruption, and LANrefn1. Pausing around the corner in the small outer hallway and briefly eavesdropping, he overheard Lucky Mack saying, "listen, two heads are better than one, three heads are better than two, and it follows that four heads are better than three, right?" The half-orc was hot off a job in Cleveland, where he bagged a gorynych (a three-headed dragon) so Override wasn't surprised at his line of argument—Lucky Mack had a penchant for talking himself up after finishing a prestigious job and the elven thief expected to hear about it for some time. "I know what I'm talking about. You know I just killed a three-headed dragon last week, right? Freakin' Cleveland Incorporated was short on payment though, so

be wary of those people, but I'm just saying, I know what I'm talking about."

"No no, my friend, if you knew what you were talking about, everyone would have been on time and we wouldn't be waiting on a suicidal maniac." Judging by the polite tenor of the voice coming from around the corner in reply to the half-orc's smug self-confidence, Corruption was in a fit. "But no, no, we're waiting. For Override. Most people avoid him and we should do the same. I know a cyber ninja in Toronto that could be here inside an hour, a reliable, sane woman I would trust with my life. Let's call her instead. Or, hey, there was a hobo I saw on the beach on my way here. Let's go get him!"

LANrefn1 sighed heavily but before she could chime in the elf audibly shut the door, abruptly putting a stop to the conversation. "Is that Corruption I hear in there? Honey, I'm hooooome!" Finally rounding the corner and joining the group, Override was met with an exasperated expression on Lucky Mack's stern features, amusement from the tiefling netjacker (who was curiously not in disguise at the moment), and a very sour looking, dapper, modern shaman. "You know of all the mages I've met, you are far and away my favorite. You know that, right?"

"That's a nice thing to say," he replied, "but aren't most of the mages you've met dead? Also, why is your nose bleeding? And are those scorch marks around your hyperjack?" Putting his fingertips against his nostrils and pulling them away covered in red crimson, Override quickly ducked into the bathroom and stuffed some toilet paper into his nose, taking a good look in the mirror. He looked like he'd been in a car wreck—the skin around the hyperjack in his neck was inflamed, the input port was charred black, and both his shirt and trenchcoat were caked with drying blood. Not the best way to kick off this conversation, the elf thought to himself, especially with how things went the last time this team got together.

Memories from the nearly botched operation swam to the fore of the thief's mind. After things went sideways in the agricultural research lab they had infiltrated, LANrefn1 and Override had managed to steal an NYPD skycar. Norrasan sec-ops teams were in hot pursuit and weren't bad shots either, so their escape from the food giant's skyscraper



headquarters in Queens wasn't going very well. The vehicle was losing altitude fast and he was fighting to maintain control while the netjacker worked desperately to keep the thing from being slaved back to the Neometro Transit Authority. Meanwhile Lucky Mack was braced in the back, firing off Gertrude in one hand and holding onto a cable dragging Corruption in the other. Wheeling through three air lanes of traffic nearly took off the shaman's head, but a few spells managed to cut Norrasan's security from following. Diving down and banking off the sidewalk, Override blared the horn in time for a dwarf—a stocky fellow in a suit—to leap out of the way and into a puddle, dirtied but alive. While the maneuver slowed or stopped most of their pursuers and made the team's escape from Neo York possible, Corruption did slam into the street hard enough to knock the otherworldly wind out of him and break a few ribs, so the elf could understand his apprehension to working together again.

Reflecting on the importance of this conversation going well and thinking about the data he'd found while floating on a raft toward the Grudge Monster, Override sauntered back into the room, jauntily ignoring the paper stuffed up his nose and trying to hide an involuntary twitch. "Well look, yes, yes my nose was bleeding, but it was worth it." The shaman's eyebrows perked up and everyone looked at the elf expectantly. He balked, "what? I'm fine. I'll be fine. The after effects of the fastjak will wear off in a few minutes and I'll be right as rain." Everyone groaned. "Whaaaaaat?"

LANrefn1 shot him a critical look, absentmindedly swiping at something in her augmented reality display that only she could see. "Is it really a good idea to mix fastjak and the Hypernet?"

In response Corruption said, "certainly not!" at the same time that Override replied, "absolutely," and Lucky Mack simultaneously answered, "who cares?"

Before he could be derailed again the half-orc continued, "look, we're glad you deigned to join us, Override. Take a seat. We got business to talk about." Stepping over the elf and putting a gloved hand up to his mouth before he could interrupt, Lucky Mack finished, "120,000 bytecoins of business—that's per operator—with an advance of 10,000, each" Corruption whistled and Override relented, settling

back into a chair as LANrefn1 gave her full attention to the matter at hand. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Now that everyone is focused, there’s a clause in the contract we have to address; you take the job now and I can detail what we’re up to and against, or you walk. Making your way here and into this room is favor enough, so I won’t have any hard feelings if you pass, though I will think you are an idiot.”

“Where do I sign?” LANrefn1 asked with a grin that showed all of her worrisomely sharp teeth. “For 120,000 I’ll steal the President’s kid.”

Corruption just nodded, his expression a shade less grim than usual.

Override, touching the fingertips on each hand against one another thoughtfully, shook his head left and right. “That’s perfect, but..”

“But,” Lucky Mack chimed in, “you’re an idiot? I already think that, Override, but I like you so I invited you anyway.”

“No,” the elf said curtly, “I was going to say I want all of you to take my payment. But I need something in exchange.”

Corruption didn’t trust the elf as far as he could throw him (which was a few feet at best), but even he couldn’t scoff at a guaranteed 40,000bt on top of the small fortune Lucky Mack was offering. “I’m interested,” the shaman said, the rest of the group nodding in agreement. “What do you want from us?”

Override leaned forward, spreading his joined hands forward and cracking his knuckles. “I need your help for something in Europe at the end of the year. Something big.”

“How big?” Lucky Mack asked. “Because what we’re up to tonight is pretty gods damned big.”

The elf grinned wide, his mouth stretching the expression into a thing of mania. “Huge. I think I’ve found a robodragon.” Each of them drew in a short gasp of breath in surprise—robodragons were cutting edge tech. Even a data dump from a sensor array pointed at one of the ultra-rare things was worth a fortune, and if the team could take it down, they’d each live out the rest of their lives like royalty. “I know what you’re thinking,” Override continued, “but it’s even bigger than that. This thing is tied to Jarrikol.”

LANrefn1 visibly shivered, reflexively pulling the datacord out of her hyperjack before saying, “f#\$%ing

bullshit.”

Hands up in the air, the elf shook his head slightly and replied, “No shit. If my research is right,” he said, pointing to his stuffed nose, “and I’m positive it is, there’s going to be tech the AI developed that will be worth more than millions, maybe even billions of bytecoins.”

The group went silent for a moment, considering Override’s offer. They all knew about Jarrikol and why the elf was obsessed with it—after all, he played a part in its inception. Unleashed six years after the Hypernet went online in 2052, the artificial intelligence went rogue and escaped into the digital universe, amassing power and becoming a veritable cyber death god. It was thought to be supreme on its home turf, but in the real world of flesh its influence was limited to drones and proxies slaved to a signal from the nearly omnipresent Hypernet (which could, from the thief’s personal experiences, number hundreds at a time).

A robdragon was nothing to dismiss cavalierly and it was clear there was serious doubt; even if they didn’t already know Override, his reputation was enough for most people to pass on the jobs he finds, and they all knew the elf fairly well. “I’ll have details for you soon enough, but look—if you want me on this job, you go to Bratislava with me later. For 40,000 bytecoins and whatever goodies are around when the dust clears. That’s the deal.”

Lucky Mack was the first to acquiesce. “Well, I need a good thief willing to go the distance, so I’m in. Besides, getting drunk in Eastern Europe is one of my top fifty favorite things to do.” The half-orc figured that with the rate Override’s teams died off, the chances he would have to make good on the deal were pretty low anyway.

LANrefn1 got a vibe from her digiboard and—now that the dangerous talk about Jarrikol was over—plugged it back into her hyperjack. An alert from one of the hundreds of dead-boxes belonging to Adam Braxas was flashing a dull purple light in her peripheral, and before telling her colleagues that she couldn’t agree to a job she knew nothing about, opened the message inside. To her surprise it wasn’t addressed to her father, but directly to her. It read simply, Take the deal and there’ll be something special in it for you. —DD. Intrigued by the mysterious offer and any opportunity to find out

where her father was or what happened to him (so she could kick his ass, if he still had one), she nodded. "I'm in."

Corruption had been silent the whole time, searching for what to do. The shaman's thoughts went back to the pictures Override had sent from that church in France; what he could glean from the photos was that something of great import was imminent at the end of the century. If his interpretations of the signs were right, whatever his compatriots had collectively bitten into was too big to ignore. Thinking deeply on his feelings for the situation confirmed his suspicions, and with great reluctance Corruption nodded, adding, "I don't trust either of you to get by without me so sure, why not."

"Excellent," Lucky Mack said, reaching into a paper bag and producing a can of beer, cracking it open, "we're all in then." Finally taking a seat himself and casually kicking his legs over the side, the half-orc became a portrait of relaxation. "Remember that everything said from here on in is very proprietary and hush hush. Certain details about the job are on a need-to-know basis—which includes even me—so if I don't know, I'm not jibing you, I really don't know. A lot of the intel I've got right now is based on deduction."

"Full stop," LANrefn1 said incredulously, "based on your deductions. You are deducing things now?"

"Yeah I can deduce," Mack replied, affronted. "It's like uce-ing but you dae first. If you're done being the world's-least-humble-genius, I think we're looking at an assault somewhere in Europe against a very dangerous target, so make sure you're in tip-top shape."

The netjacker wasn't alone in her suspicions of the half-orc's reasoning skills, and Override jumped on. "What makes you think that? What did the Mr. Gray or Ms. Grey tell you? It's not that shlock android you sent me, right?"

Mack shook his head, "no, no, that woman is with me and she's solid. Different hire entirely." Reaching into his coat pocket he produced a small datachip, tossing it to LANrefn1. "First of all there's that. I've already tapped another specialist to help you with it, but you and she have to build something called a positronic shifter array. It looks like a gun."

The tiefling passed the datachip near her digiboard, downloading all the information inside and pulling the schematics up into her field of vision, whistling. "Wow;

this is some complicated stuff, and a lot of it is still only theorized. She'd better be really good."

"Oh," the half-orc said, grinning wickedly, "she's really good, I promise."

LANrefn1's expression twisted curiously as she scanned more of the readout, noting the device's odd output signatures. "You know this isn't a laser, right?" After a few seconds of weighty silence, Mack slowly nodded in a way that he hoped was convincing (it was not). "What else makes you think this is an assault?" she asked. "We might be firing this off at a shrine or something, I think."

The hitman laughed at that, shaking his head left and right before chugging his beer and grabbing another. "That would be the other bit of prep work I need done." He gestured candidly towards Corruption and Override. "You two need to acquire us some suits of power armor."

"Not a problem," the elf said wearily, fingers rubbing his temple as the last effects of the fastjak wore off. "One of my contacts was talking about a DRAPA warehouse where they've been storing prototypes, real cutting-edge stuff."

Holding out one hand, Mack cut him off. "No, no, we need very specific suits of power armor. That was made very clear to me. No others will do." A sense of dread crept up in Corruption's gut and he looked hard at the half-orc, already regretting agreeing to do this gig and feeling a groan coming on. "We need *3645-AS-EL Sanctus Apparatum* battlesuits—you two are breaking into the Vatican."

CHAPTER 10: AN INFERNAL DEVICE

**TIMESTAMP: NEO YORK, NEW YORK USA;
TUESDAY OCTOBER 13TH, 12:27 AM, 2099**

The flashing light of the Big Apple's holo-boards reflected off LANrefn1's gem-toned skin as she stepped out of the transport. "Hm, I haven't been back to Neo since that necromancer business. Place still smells the same, though." The half-elf driver grunted at her—in no mood for a bout of nostalgia from his passenger—and she shot him the payment with an idle flick of her hand.

Stepping back into the shadows of a nearby alleyway, she made sure that no eyes were directly on her before mentally activating the magi-tech in her hoodie. The strong-jawed oread flickered into a waifish elf with too much eyeliner in the span of a second, changing gender and losing 6 inches of height and 50 pounds of perceived muscle mass in the process. There was no use in taking chances after all—gods knew that she and her previous team had burnt a lot of bridges. It would be nice to actually complete a job without having to leave town.

Damn did she hate handling negotiations alone, though. It was times like these that LANrefn1 missed having Sam's muscle on her side. Not to mention the fact that he did all the walking. Hell, she even wouldn't have minded Warp's lackluster lawyering.

The operator snorted, shaking her head. The devil in the details going and getting sentimental? She must be losing her edge. Snapping her fingers for emphasis, the elven guise flickered into an androgynous, ethereal-looking sylph, tall and thin and resplendent in black silk tailcoat, fine sandy hair flowing in a non-existent breeze.

Pulling two softball-sized metal orbs from her belt, LANrefn1 tossed one into the air with practiced ease,

watching with satisfaction as it unfolded into a tiny, cyclopean devil, atrophied limbs dangling as its thrusters kept the rotund form in the air. The drone burred at her, the light array around its eye flashing blue and yellow.

“You know the drill, Pain,” she told him. “Eyes in the sky. Lemme know if any heat turns up, okay?” It chirped at her and spun around in a tight circle before shooting skyward. The second orb unfolded in her hand into a thin, almost serpentine blue devil, its claws reminiscent of a set of lockpicks. “And you, stay put,” the netjacker said as she stuffed it gently back into a pocket. Panic chattered angrily for a moment before begrudgingly going into sleep mode.

Starting across the street, LANrefn1 comforted herself with the fact that *too chic* for that was rumored to have an excellent drink menu, and that she was going to order the most expensive thing on the menu. Twice, if it was any good.

The inside of *too chic* for that was fashionably smokey, the artificial vapors designed to lull the senses instead of irritate the eyes. Ever the hedonist, LANrefn1 resisted the urge to take a deep breath, thinking instead of the pricey booze that lay ahead. Mack had said that the Grey would be upstairs in the back, leftmost booth, so she made for the stairs, thankful that the cloying smoke was restricted to the lower levels.

In the designated booth was not a Ms. Grey, as promised, but a woman with shimmering skin and anachronistic robes straight out of *Veranthea: Life & Death*, sipping at what looked to be a dainty cup of tea (which reminded LANrefn1 that she should see if her gold farming trick managed to slip by the MMORPG’s admins). This must be the operator she was supposed to be working with—the one that was supposed to be so good. LANref1 made a derogatory noise in her throat and the woman turned, giving a good view of the faintly glowing symbol of Lucifer on her forehead. Then it started to click into place; she’d heard of this person before.

“You’re Rhime, right? That techno-whatsit?” She paused, taking in the glowing skin, the silvery white hair, then snorted with laughter. Really good indeed—she’d have to congratulate Mack on the joke when she saw him next (or punch his teeth in.) “And you’re an aasimar? That’s pretty hilarious, actually. Can’t believe I didn’t know that.” Grabbing a

chair, she threw herself into it and propped one foot up on the table, leaning it dangerously far back.

Rhime frowned, deliberately setting her teacup down slightly too hard onto its saucer. “Technocleric, yes,” she said, her voice clipped. The air around her was starting to chill but LANrefn1 hadn’t had to wear a jacket since her horns had sprouted, even in sub-zero weather, and so paid it no real mind. “And you are?”

“The real tech support for this job,” the netjacker replied, flagging over a waiter. She picked up a menu, scanning it briefly. “I’ll have a—aw man, does the Last Jack actually have fragmented consciousness in it or is that just a metaphor?”

The waiter’s look of polished indifference didn’t waiver. “Only the most traumatic for our guests, madam.”

“Great, great, I’ll take a double.” Quickly perusing the rest of the menu by price, she added, “and one of those dragon egg omelettes, yeah? Just put it on the Grey’s tab, would you?”

Rhime’s frown deepened. “Ah, I see. You must be LANrefn1, the famed ‘devil in the details.’ Seems as though ‘alcoholic’ might fit as well as ‘devil,’ though.”

LANrefn1 clutched at her chest as though shot. “Madam, you wound me. You didn’t pronounce the ‘one’, though, so I’ll give you that much. But yes,” she lolled her head to the side, allowing the magic to slip for a moment, showing a patch of reddened skin and one orange eye, “right in one.”

Rhime looked affronted. “You should be wounded. You’re Tilla Braxas, Dread Adam’s offspring, touched by the Right Hand of the Arbiter. And yet you’re one of the most slapdash, fly-by-night operators in the business. Hell is about order, Braxas. About the control of others, and the control of self.” Almost in defiance of her face, the technocleric’s expression became even more disdainful. “And you can’t even manage to be professional by human standards.”

The netjacker made a retching noise. “First, it’s LANrefn1 to you. If we’re going to be professional, then act like it. Second, Hell can go fuck itself for all I care. I didn’t ask to be fast and brilliant and utterly charming.” She shrugged. “I was just born this way. Third, I’m far from his only kid. I’ve got several siblings out in the world, all of them leading

utterly boring lives and trying desperately to forget the fact that daddy went and made a deal with the devil. I'm just the only one born afterwards. Mom and dad didn't exactly want any more bundles of joy after me—can't imagine why."

"Oh yes, such talk about leaving behind one's roots for someone whose handle is 'infernal' backwards," Rhime pointed out, primly taking a sip of her tea.

"Ooh, you went and deciphered outdated 1337 speak from last century, how impressive," Tilla shot back, itching for that drink about now. She was distracted momentarily by Pain's desire to zap a pigeon (which she vetoed) and noticed Rhime's smirk behind her tea cup.

The drink finally arrived and saved her the decision about whether or not a laser to the technocleric's face would solve any problems. The Last Jack was thankfully a sight to behold: it was the exact neon blue of the Hypernet with a layer of bright purple at the bottom, permeated throughout with jagged, acid green shards, and served up in an opalescent hurricane glass with encrusted clear crystals all along the rim. A lime slice and a chunk of green apple bobbed at the top, impaled on a twisting swizzle stick.

"Hello, lovely," she greeted it, "it looks like you're everything I didn't know I needed." She then fished out one of the green bits, using the swizzle stick and straw like a pair of chopsticks. "D'you actually think it's the shattered consciousness of doomed netjackers?" she asked melodramatically as she pressed it onto her tongue.

Rolling her eyes, Rhime said, "Really, you're going to be that far into your cups before our contact even arrives? Do you even try to be mature?"

Tilla raised one eyebrow, still holding the shard to her tongue. "No," she said, speaking awkwardly around it. "Why would I—" That's when the smoke started to drift up. "Feck!" she squawked as the acid of the crystal burnt her tongue, nearly toppling backwards in her chair and letting go of the shard as it fell to the table, still smoking.

Rhime looked ready to leave but before she could stand up, a woman in a slate colored business suit took a seat at their table, glancing at LANrefn1 dabbing at her tongue with a napkin. "Thank you both for coming," the woman said, something bordering amusement on her face. "I'd invite you

to order whatever you'd like, but I see that you need no encouragement." Tilla saw Rhime glaring at her and so looked pointedly at the aasimar's tea, more than willing to pretend that it had cost even a fraction of what the Last Jack had. "I believe that the two of you are aware of the general purpose of this contract?"

LANrefn1 was about to open her mouth to make some sort of snide comment involving technology not being powered by wishful thinking when a wave of emotion from Pain distracted her. It seemed like the pigeon had decided to make the first move and had given the drone a white, sticky plop to remember it by. Nothing had been damaged of course, but the tiny robot was adamant that it be allowed to retaliate. She vetoed it again, but not before she heard Rhime speak.

"Well I know why I'm here, of course, though I'm a little perplexed about her." The aasimar seemed to be as short-sighted as any church head and just as stubborn. "I heard that most of what LANrefn1 and company made were messes."

"Oi!" the tiefling objected, deeply affronted. "I'll have you know that my boys are the best of their class, thank you." She glared, taking a deep drink and hoping that it would relax her enough to not resort to magic to solve her problems.

Rhime chortled in response. "I'm sure they're downright shoddy next to my Hubris, but you're welcome to be happy with the little junkers, I suppose."

Tilla slammed her chair to the ground, seeing red for a moment, and Pain and Panic both mimicked her feelings with small, burbling growls, the latter sticking his head out of her jacket to hiss. The technocleric's longsword was suddenly in her angelic hand, crackling with blue light.

"Now, now," said the Grey, laying her hand on the table, her every syllable so laden with charisma that every word seemed to contain volumes within it, "I'm sure that we can all get along here." And like that, it was over. LANrefn1 felt her heartbeat slow back to normal and Panic tuck back inside her coat, leaving only Pain annoyed and slightly confused. The aasimar had calmed as well, sheathing her sword and looking for all the world as if they were talking about the weather instead of being about to come to blows. It was all very strange, really, but it was time to get down to business.

120 LANrefn1 chewed idly on her swizzle stick as she

cocked her chair back again. "Right, so what are we looking at?"

The Grey pulled out two data sticks. "The contract is for building a device, the name of which is classified until I have your signatures. The plans for it have been provided by a third party, with the request that it be constructed as quickly as possible. Due to the...unique nature of these plans, it requires those with special talents. My client and I believe that these are your special talents."

The tiefling and the aasimar both raised an eyebrow at each other, but neither commented.

"As I mentioned, time is of the essence. You have a week to construct the device and conduct the necessarily trials to ensure it is in good working order. The payoff is 45,000 bytecoins each, with an additional 10,000bt for every day you shave off of the timetable. Ensuring it works, of course."

LANrefn1 nearly inhaled her swizzle stick at that. Almost fifty grand for a job that didn't require getting shot at? On top of the money that Mack's job was covering? She glanced over at Rhime, trying to subtly gauge the other's reaction. She was putting a lot of effort into looking unruffled, but she was clearly impressed.

"Lemme see the contract first," Tilla said, pausing to take a long drink from her glass and reflecting on what happened the last time she didn't have her erstwhile teleporting lawyer look over an agreement. Was that low-grade fastjak on the rim? It was giving her the jitters if nothing else. Ms. Grey turned over one of the data sticks and the netjacker pulled up the document on her digiboard. Damn legal jargon, always taking fifteen words to say what five could manage just fine. Not for the first time, she wished that her old crew were here. Warp had more know-how, but there was nothing quite like the towering Cripplebeast pulling out his spectacles to confuse a contact. She bit her lower lip, scanning the clauses and parsing out what seemed to be the relevant details. Looked like they'd be in isolation for the time that they were being hired, which was slightly concerning, but if it went south she'd yet to find a place that Panic's claws and her own wits couldn't spring her from.

After some time of looking over the document, she finally nodded in what she hoped looked like a

knowing way, added her signature, and flicked the stick back across the table. "I'm in." Mack would never let her hear the end of it if she turned it down, anyway—and if this was part of the job that he had in mind, well, that job had Override on it, and the more control she could have, the better. Not that he didn't usually dig up lucrative commodities, it just that people with him died all the time getting them. Maybe she should put a good chunk of her new funds towards getting revived. And when was that omelette getting here?

The car provided by the Ms. Grey had not been quite big enough for LANrefn1's tastes (or the drones for that matter, as Pain and Panic grumbled their discontent). In stark contrast to her own automatons, Hubris had turned out to look like a winged ball of icy blue light that reflected Lucifer's sigil at its core. Unable to quite resist the urge, she had tentatively asked the technocleric about its function, itching to know what made it tick. It was, it turned out, a support unit, meant to enhance the power of Rhime's spells and to service as reconnaissance in a pinch. All of this nonsense about combining tech with divine magic seemed suspicious to Tilla, but being stuffed in a car together had hardly seemed the right time to say it (even to her).

"Well, no worries on that account," she said, rubbing Pain between his horn stubs. "Pain here's a top-notch surveillance unit." The rotund drone burred happily, waving its tiny arms, its eye lights glowing yellow and pink. Panic, feeling left out, slid his long body from around her neck to in her face, chirruping at her indignantly. "Yes, dear, and you're the best infiltration drone there is," she assured it with a scratch under its beaky chin.

She glanced up to see Rhime staring at her, baffled. "You built them yourself, yes?"

"Of course!" LANrefn1 exclaimed, both she and Panic looking at the aasimar in disbelief. "They've been with me in one form or another since I was a kid."

"Well your youth at least explains why you initially gave them emotions, but why did you keep them?" Now it was LANrefn1's turn to be confused.

"Why would I not?" Panic had slithered itself up to perch between her horns, making as if it were riding her like

some titanic mount, clutching and ineffectually pulling at the bony outgrowths. “They’re my boys, they should be able to express themselves. That’s why I installed Pain’s ocular lights—he doesn’t have the range of movement that Panic does, so he needs something. Doesn’t Hubris feel anything?”

“Duty,” Rhime answered simply. “To me, to Hell. Whatever the task, whatever the cost.”

“Right,” Tilla said with a snort. “To me it sounds like you’re both here out of duty to your bank account. How’s that factor in?”

The aasimar didn’t take the insult in turn. “Hell does not limit its devotees in their financial matters, but aside from that, it was revealed to me that the building of this device is a part of Hell’s plan.”

“Funny,” LANrefn1 mused, turning her head to look out at the dark, rain-swept landscape sweeping by, “I was getting that idea, too.”

The private bunker they were working from was far into the Adirondacks, built into one of the sides of the mountain deeply enough that it could have withstood a nuclear blast. Tilla found that just as worrisome as it was comforting, though—what were they mixed up in that they might need that level of protection? The tiefling netjacker sniffled, trying to get the scent of Rhime’s pepperminty perfume out of her nose as the three of them (plus drones) rode the elevator down. It was a nice smell, which was hard to reconcile with Rhime’s unholier-than-thou brand of asshole.

“So you said that there was some data that we had to retrieve before getting started?” the tiefling asked, looking over at the Ms. Grey.

“Yes,” the woman politely replied, ever charismatic. “The client said there is data needed for the correct calibration of the device’s power source, but they were unable to acquire it in a straightforward manner.”

“And you need us to acquire it in a way that is less so,” Rhime said, looking pensive.

“Exactly,” Ms. Grey said as they reached the bottom floor. “Despite the remoteness of the location, I believe you’ll find that access to the Hypernet is quite reliable here. You will both be provided with secure lodgings from which to jack

in; your corporeal bodies will be quite safe, I can assure you. There are sensors in the rooms, however, which will automatically unlock the doors if you are killed. No need to have your corpse locked in here, after all.”

LANrefn1 bit her lower lip in thought as she followed the suit down a gleaming white hallway. The sentiment was hardly a comforting one but then again, the kind of money they’d been promised hardly came without effort. As if on cue Panic stuck his head of her coat collar and nuzzled at her chin. “Thanks, boy,” she said absently. “And who are we doing the hit on? XYZ? I can’t say I’d regret wrecking their systems one more time.”

The Ms. Grey shook her head. “No. The knowledge necessary is of a more divine nature. You’ll be looking into the assets of Kalvahn for this mission.”

LANrefn1 snapped her fingers in disappointment, attempting to ignore Rhime’s prim smile as they came to a stop in front of a pair of rooms.

“The accommodations are sparse but I think you’ll find them adequate. Once on the Hypernet, you will find a neutral server that you can meet at. Transportation to an entry point in Kalvahn’s firewall will be provided.” Turning on her fashionable heel to leave, the Ms. Grey added, “just remember: you’re looking for the energy calibration algorithm. Be ready to jack in within thirty minutes. A timer will alert you.”

The inside of the rooms were just as spartan as the hallways, featuring all white walls and chrome fixtures. LANrefn1, who often kept a few cans of indelible spray paint in her bag—just in case there was a camera to disable or a building to write rude phrases on—had to physically resist the urge to pull one out and start livening the place up a bit. She contented herself with getting a glass of water from the sink, brushing her teeth, and all the other little things she did before jacking in. After slipping into a comfortable set of pajamas and buckling on her weapons belt over-top, she set her bug-out bag in an easily accessible spot and double-checked the security of the room, popping a slow-release NutriU pill as she did so. There was no telling how long she’d be under, and it wouldn’t do to come back to a body sixteen hours past its last meal.

The room seemed sturdy enough, braced at the bottom of a mountain. The locks all checked out, and

aside from the aforementioned biosensor and a small intercom, there seemed to be no surveillance of any kind. Nodding in satisfaction, LANrefn1 activated Pain and laid down on the cot that had been provided. She briefly considered letting down the sylph disguise, but decided against it—on the off chance that she'd have to bug out in a hurry, she didn't need anyone seeing her true form.

Not long after she got both of her drones situated on the cot with her, a long, low tone sounded from the intercom. "Showtime, boys," she said, laying back. With a surge of green behind her eyes she began falling downwards as virtual muscle memory took hold and she reached out, grabbing hold of a horizontal pipe just in front of her and effortlessly swinging from it to the next, and then the one after. Adept at parkour as well as all things technological, LANrefn1 was even more capable on the Hypernet where her body was as fast as her mind. Besides, the unorthodox form of her own server meant that few appreciated the sudden drop onto the unforgiving data shards below. Swinging from the last bar to the circular platform in the middle of the room, Tilla moved past the wall of maps and sticky notes that marked where she had enemies, booty calls, and favorite bartenders, moving towards the Hypernet equivalent of the front door. It swung open at her approach and, as Pain and Panic each found their place on her shoulders, she passed through it and onto the digital byways connecting the real world together.

Almost uncomfortably close loomed a large white dome of a server—undoubtedly the neutral server that the suit had mentioned. Taking a quick moment to make sure that her sylph guise had indeed carried over to her avatar, LANrefn1 made a few deft flicks with her wrists to change her clothes from evening wear to work gear, opened the hatch, and went in.

Rhime apparently had a similar timetable and was also entering, albeit from the other side. As soon as they were in, however, the doors locked with an audible click and the entirety of the room began to spin, slowly at first, then faster and faster.

"The hell?" LANrefn1 swore, her hand going to her spiked chain.

"Relax," Rhime said, though she didn't look too relaxed herself. "The Ms. Grey said that transportation to the

firewall would be provided. This must be it.” The technocleric didn’t look entirely convinced, though, and she kept her hand on the grip of her longsword.

Just as the spin of the room was starting to get dizzying, there was a brief flash and the rotation started to slow. Once it came to a stop, both operators—hands still on their weapons—made for the only unlocked door, which pulsed gently with a green light.

Outside the mobile server crackled the expansive parameter of Kalvahn’s firewall, the company logo emblazoned on it every few yards. Unlike many firewalls that the netjacker had encountered, this one didn’t crackle with fire or electricity, but with an equal measure of positive and negative energy. The effectiveness of the precaution seemed obvious; a flickering after image of the desiccated husk of an operator was caught halfway through, the jaw broken in the middle of a silent, rictus scream.

“Oh,” LANrefn1 said simply. “Good.”

“Well that must be what’s making a weak point in the firewall—maintenance hasn’t gotten to it yet. Must have been why the meeting was bumped up. Here, cover me while I try to find us a way through.” The tiefling’s mouth was half open to protest when Rhime rolled her eyes. “Do you know more about negative energy than a technocleric of Lucifer?”

Frowning, LANrefn1 shook her head and took out her chain. “Right,” she agreed. “Make it quick, though, yeah?”

“I can make it quick if you can protect me. I’ll be vulnerable during the time the ritual is being cast,” the aasimar said, activating Hubris.

Taking a deep breath, Rhime began to chant, moving in a slow circle as she drew Infernal sigils in the air with one hand, leaving blue contrails as she went with the drone following behind her, repeating her words and movements. Then without much warning, her skin and musculature simply sloughed off, falling with her robes to the ground in a heap with a gut-churning plop. Tilla nearly choked in her attempt not to scream, thinking that it was some sort of backlash from the firewall, but managed to recover herself somewhat as frost suddenly coated the bones and the corpse continued Rhime’s movements. She’d heard of technoclerics taking on forms

akin to their deities on the Hypernet, but she’d never

seen it firsthand. The ice continued to morph until the figure looked almost alive again, crystalline wings forming from its back and elegant horns sweeping away from its forehead.

The netjacker was jolted from the mesmerizing scene as Pain flew in front of her face, burbling wildly, his ocular unit flashing—incoming! Ordering both of the drones to take cover, LANref1 whirled to face the oncoming threat: two child-sized angelic figures, the perfection of their forms marred hideously by the sloppy stitches criss-crossing over their bodies, leaving their eyes and mouths sewn shut and stray sections of skin flapping wildly. They had no wings but were instead held aloft by crudely attached thrusters that gave the appearance (and smell) of continually scorched cherub's skin.

“What sort of messed up shit is this?” the tiefling said aloud, wondering to herself and letting the length of chain drop from one hand as she took her starknife from her belt with the other. Pausing for no more than a split second of hyper-time, she let the knife fly, grinning in satisfaction as it took one of the monstrosities in the eye, showering bits of data everywhere. On cue the weapon returned to her hand as her spiked chain hissed through the air, crackling with energy.

In response one of the cherubs stopped and, as LANrefn1 looked on with disgust and horror, started to open its mouth. It took a moment for the digital flesh to give, but the meaty tearing sound was as biological as one could ask for. The orifice was almost perfectly spherical and rimmed with tiny, studded teeth, but it was the echoing wail that tore from it that was worst of all—it was the sound of nails on a chalkboard, a nephrectomy without anesthetic, and a mother losing a child all in one. Distantly, her head spinning from the effort of still standing, LANrefn1 could hear the wet slushy plop of melting ice: Rhime. Her concentration must be slipping. Not that Tilla could blame her—she was rather short of it herself.

An angry electronic squeal brought her back to reality as she saw Pain distracting the second cherub, its tiny laser at the ready and Panic swiping away with one claw, dangling just underneath its sibling's thrusters. Gritting her teeth, LANrefn1 tightened her grip on the chain and flung the starknife again; it was a bad shot but it managed to glance at one of the jets holding the cherub aloft, sending the creature off course just in time to follow it with a blow from her spiked chain,

first from one direction, then from the other. The second hit was a solid one as the weapon wrapped around the thing's leg. Pulling hard, she sent it flying into the firewall, narrowly missing the still-dancing form of Rhime's skeleton. The freakish abomination exploded into shrapnel and meat chunks as it impacted the pulsating energy, letting out a disturbingly child-like scream as it blew apart.

Still more arrived. Pulling a delicately carved ivory wand from her belt, LANrefn1 hummed the vague tune of an old hymn and brought a curtain of quiet down on the battlefield, silencing the unnerving cries. Thrusting it through her belt, she blasted another with a well-aimed laser to the face. The tiefling turned around to deal with the next threat just in time to see the eyes of the second abomination open, the threads tearing the eyelids apart. Under the stitches were doll's eyes, the glass reflecting the shifting light of the firewall, and in that moment LANrefn1 could tell it was focusing on Rhime, threatening to disrupt the delicate dance of the ritual.

"Oi!" LANrefn1 barked as loudly as she could manage as the starknife reappeared in her hand. The cherub's head snapped around with an audible crunch, its glass eyes fixating on her. As the tiefling's vision blurred she threw the weapon one more time—and then everything went dark.

Everything was hot, close, claustrophobic—somewhere in the distance she could hear the distinct tick of a clock. She could feel the slow slicing of a scalpel making its way down her arm, while the point of a needle pricked at her eyelids, first only annoying but quickly becoming excruciating as the metal dug deeper.

In and out. In and out.

She went to scream but her lips had been sewn shut. In and out. The panic in her gut spiked to an almost unbearable hysteria, her limbs itching as if slowly being devoured from the inside by thousands of tiny insects.

In and out.

"Tilla! Tilla!" It was Rhime's voice. LANrefn1 felt a cold hand on her own as her eyes slowly fluttered open. There was the technocleric, glowing holy symbol in hand, skin back in all the right places. "Come on," the aasimar said, taking one of the tiefling's arms and slinging it over her shoulder. "We're in."

122 "Thanks," LANrefn1 mumbled, managing to find her

footing. Sure enough there was a small, darkened hole in the firewall where the crackling energy had been halted. The drones all zipped through, and as she mentally switched over to Pain's eyes she saw that the interior was clear. Making another attempt to stand on her own, she shook off Rhime's arm and followed after. Her head still pounded, and her skin itched where the imaginary needle had pricked her. "What happened to the other one?"

Rhime followed her in, shrugging. "The drones and I finished what you started. You took it in the eye with that last knife throw."

LANrefn1 immediately began patting herself down. "My knife—my chain!" All there on her belt. She looked sideways at Rhime, who gave her the smallest bit of a smile. "Thanks." Shrugging again as they started down the corridor, Rhime said, "You watched my back. Kept that thing from getting me while I was in my exemplar form."

"Exemplar form? Is that what that ice skeleton was?" Tilla forced herself not to shiver at the memory.

"Yes. It's different for every technocleric, but when we cast anything but the weakest spells on the Hypernet, we begin to manifest in a way fitting to our deity—and that was anything but a low-level spell."

Silently thankful that she'd never been inclined towards a religious path, LANrefn1 ordered Panic ahead. As they continued forward, the hall narrowed, but made no sign of stopping, and she felt an itch at the back of her mind. That could only mean—

Prismatic data spikes launched out of the wall at blinding speed, but the tiefling was faster. Grabbing Rhime by the robes, she spun the aasimar away from the threat, barely registering the pain lancing through her arm as she dragged the other operator down the hall. Another set of spikes, this one casting a far larger net, burst up through the floor before it was engulfed in pale fire. Reaching into her hoodie, LANrefn1 produced a vial she saved specifically for these digital eventualities and knocked it back in one slug. She rarely had a use for natural charisma but on the Hypernet, personal magnetism equated to physical strength. Feeling the warmth of the potion flow through her, she hefted Rhime up into her arms.

"I'll run, you shoot," she explained, her eyes starting

to glow blue as she tapped into her inner reserves. Pain and Panic, long used to this maneuver, moved to intercept her, the magnets in their bodies drawn to those in her belt. As the tiefling dashed along the hallway she felt both of them click into place. Springing lightly from one perceived safe tile to another, she ducked and wove around the rapidly triggering traps with practiced grace, moving from floor to wall to ceiling with the help of her infernal abilities. The hallway was impractically long, clearly intended to be as full of data spikes as possible with the hope that intruders would tire long before they reached the end—Kalvahn's mistake, then. As long as it was, the netjacker estimated that they would reach the end well before her strength ran out.

With a murmur of prayer and a taste of wintergreen Rhime sent healing magic into LANrefn1's injured arm, healing her. It certainly couldn't be denied that working with a cleric of any stripe was helpful—maybe she'd have to make a habit of it more often. The tiefling was interrupted from her train of thought as she spotted a new trap type just ahead. Between the speed they were moving at and the hazards behind them, there was no way for them to slowly approach with caution so their best bet was to avoid it entirely. Gathering herself for a jump, she pushed off of a horizontal spike and tried to leap over the blast radius of whatever this new obstacle was.

The maneuver simply wasn't quite enough; a powerful soundburst thudded into the pair, the magical force of it enough to knock the netjacker and her passenger off balance and into the yawning pit that suddenly opened up below them. Before LANrefn1 could scream or even fully comprehend the imminent doom that awaited them, she was suddenly aware that she was holding an icy skeleton. The exposed skin of her forearms burned even through her innate resistance to the cold, and as the bony hand reached out and touched her forehead her entire body felt as though it had been plunged into freezing water. Her head throbbed as a secondary set of horns, visible even through her disguise, crunched into place; her back screamed in pain as a set of huge bat wings sprung from it. Wings—she had wings.

Slowing their rapid descent almost broke her newly formed bones, but the wings were strong and soon bore them upwards with all the extra speed that the Hypernet

provided. “The hell was that?” she asked, yelling over the mild hearing loss they were currently experiencing and trying to blink blood out of her eyes.

“Exactly!” Rhime replied, the ice around her melting as the flesh returned to her bones. LANrefn1 shook her head, though without rancor. From the looks of the door at the end of the hall, they were close to their target. Once across the pit she could have technically landed, but why should she stop using her lovely new wings? Instead the netjacker took a moment to gain some height before diving down the hallway. A few darts shot out of the adjacent wall, but she merely angled to the side and buffeted them back, then twisted to sit Rhime down safely on solid ground.

“I could get used to these,” the tiefling insisted, craning her neck to get a better look at them.

“That’s not all that the spell does, but it’s certainly the flashiest. You’ll also have some resistances—most of which I’m sure you already have—and the ability to fight chaos a little more effectively,” Rhime said, brushing dirt from her robes. “But enough about that. We should get moving. No telling when more security is going to arrive.”

Hurrying onward, LANrefn1 activated Panic after a quick visual examination of the area surrounding the door barring their way. The thing was almost certainly trapped but they had the time to search thoroughly, and no drone did that quite like Panic. She turned on Pain as well, allowing his superior scanners to contribute to the effort. One counter measure after another—a shock screen, a poisonous gas trap, and a final, particularly deadly data spike—were found, identified, and disarmed by the little robots. Rhime nodded approvingly, leaning in to talk directly into the netjacker’s still-ringing ears. “They’re solid work. Artistry even. I take back what I said at the club.”

LANrefn1 felt her cheeks pinken and mentally adjusted the sylph disguise to hide any sign of blushing on her avatar. “Thanks,” she said simply, keeping her eyes on the drones instead of the aasimar and wiping a smear of blood from below one ear. Once the door was safe the tiefling approached it herself, cautiously taking the handle and gingerly turning it. It swung open silently, revealing the subtle glow that generally accompanied an unoccupied information hub.

"Bingo," she muttered under her breath, tapping at her digiboard and then at her augmented reality display. That should keep the sensors from turning the lights on at their approach.

The two entered the massive room carefully, wary for any further traps or more corporeal forms of security.

"Here," Rhime said, taking LANrefn1's hand. The netjacker almost jerked away out of reflex but relaxed as the taste of wintergreen filled her mouth again and her hearing came into sharp focus. With a quick mental command the two drones re-attached themselves to her belt and she moved forward, eyes darting over the massive rows upon rows of filing cabinets.

"This is going to be fun," she muttered sarcastically under her breath.

Working together, it didn't take more than five digital minutes for them to find the right file. Wary of additional security, LANrefn1 let Panic and Pain take a crack at the filing cabinet holding their prize. Sure enough, a virus bomb was lurking at the back of one of the drawers. Tossing the disarmed thing inside, the tiefling went to grab the file that they had come for when a deafening roar shook the floor they were standing on.

"What was that?" The netjacker demanded of no one, stuffing the file into her hoodie.

"I'm not sure," Rhime admitted as the ground continued to rhythmically shake, "but it sounds big. We need to move."

There was a thunderous crash and a screech of metal as one of the far walls was suddenly clawed open, causing the nearby filing cabinets to start falling against one another in a domino effect of data failure. Staring in through the still too-small hole was one giant red eye surrounded by a cyan glow. LANrefn1 swore and went to pick Rhime up again, quickly realizing that the effort was in vain—her potion had worn off some time ago. She promised herself that it was the last time that she'd opt for the cheaper option.

"I've got you," Rhime said, her arm turning again to ice as she touched the netjacker's shoulder. The tiefling felt the strength run in her veins as a chunk of ceiling smashed into the ground feet from where they stood. Chirruping fearfully, both drones returned to LANrefn1 and immediately

went into sleep mode at her belt. Even then she could still feel their terror—clearly this was not something to stick around for. “\$*#^king Override and his \$*#^ing robodragon,” she cursed, promising herself a punch to the mad bastard’s face when she saw him next.

They made their escape with all the speed and dexterity Tilla could bear, both on foot and wing. Despite her incredible swiftness it was a close thing as chunks of the building fell around them, shards of inert data spikes cracking and shattering into stray binary in the process. The creature had clearly arrived in search of something and determined that they had it.

“Are you sure that the hole in the firewall is still there?” LANrefn1 asked as they neared their exit.

“No,” Rhime answered, muttering another prayer as a glowing force field formed around them. “But I don’t think we have a lot of choices here.”

Nodding grimly, the netjacker added her own magic to the shielding process and sprinted as hard as she could. The hole was certainly still there but shrinking every minute—quickly doing the math, LANrefn1 didn’t figure they’d make it, even as protected as they were. There was no sense in letting that stop her, though, so she just ran all the harder. Not for the first time she felt something in her unlock as her already blistering speed doubled, serving the dual purpose of putting her just ahead of the robodragon’s virus-laden breath attack and letting her slide, Rhime still in her arms, through the gap in the firewall as it closed. Even then the regenerating bulwark singed off a piece of her bangs.

Exhausted from the exercise, LANrefn1 simply relaxed for a moment before coming to the uncomfortable realization that she was still holding Rhime as they lay there on the faintly glowing floor of the Hypernet. “Uh, sorry,” she apologized, unsurprised that even the spell cast on her couldn’t help her eloquence in the situation. Unsure of what else to do and without much energy, she let her arms fall to the side. Even so it took the aasimar a moment to move, and only when she was prompted by another roar sounding from the daunting skyscraper-cathedral server they’d just escaped.

“Come on,” the technocleric said, again hauling the netjacker to her feet, “no stopping now.” Her body

aching in protest, LANrefn1 followed the other operator towards the mobile server. They reached the door just as the robodragon crashed into the Kalvahn firewall with enough explosive force to break through, roaring in pain as the thrumming energy did its work. Activating the entrance the pair collapsed inside their transport, listening to the reassuring hiss as the door slid shut and the digital horror outside charged towards them, too slow to catch up.

Three days had passed since they collected the calibration data and the work was going well. The lab space was top notch—filled with shining tools of all sorts— but the food (mostly made up of nutrient bars and MREs) was noticeably less exciting. The blueprints of the project were even worse. Once she had taken the time to give them some real inspection, LANrefn1 had discovered they were incomplete, the gaps in the tech meant to be filled with magic. Theoretically, this was where her own infernal abilities and Rhime's faith-based blessings were meant to come in, but the whole thing was unsatisfying.

"I find that technology reaches its true potential only when bolstered by a proper amount of faith," Rhime said, glancing at her sideways.

"Yeah? I got your proper amount of faith right here," the tiefling replied, taking a break from her typing to flash the other operator a rude gesture with a flick of her wrist. There was no bite to the words on either side, though, and both of them knew it.

"Then perhaps I can show you the error of your ways." There was something about the way the aasimar said it that made it sound far more salacious than religious, but LANrefn1 tried not to think about it. Bad business to get emotionally—or physically—invested while on the job.

Building a device only partially based on reality was proving as frustrating as LANrefn1 had expected. She'd lost count of the times that perfectly good wiring shorted out as she attempted to delicately blend it in with her own personal brand of infernal magic, and of the times the result would have shocked her had she not been resistant to that sort of thing. Even now she wiped soot from her face, coughing as brimstone-scented smoke made her lungs burn.

Damn, but did she hate crafting magi-tech.

From Rhime's side of the work table there had been little comment, but LANrefn1 had to begrudgingly admit that she had a knack for the work. Her soldering jobs were immaculate, her wiring jobs almost beautiful to behold; it was, well, almost magical. Certainly nothing had blown up in her face yet. The tiefling tore her gaze from the aasimar's diligent work and instead called for Panic.

"Grab me those snips, yeah?" she asked as the robot scampered over, the tool clutched in his tiny claws. She traded him the snips for a treat of her own invention. It held no actual caloric value, but was instead made of grease and low-grade maintenance nanos meant to lubricate the drone's complicated inner workings. Pain—now aware that there were treats to be had—left off trying to goad Hubris into playing and instead settled on the bench, waving his otherwise useless arms, his ocular lights flashing green.

"So on top of making them emotional, you made them want to eat?" Surprisingly, Rhime's question didn't even sound accusatory this time.

"I don't know that I made them do anything. It's almost like," she paused to pop the treat into Pain's mouth, "they already wanted it, I just enabled the process. I mean, I want things all the time, so maybe I rubbed off on them."

Rhime said nothing and just pursed her lips in thought.

The morning of the fourth day they tested their infernal device. The end result looked something like a small bazooka, the external casing made of magic-infused aluminum with a beautiful gold and glass reservoir where a revolver would have its hammer. Inside glowed the powersource, a solid lump of divine energy made solid; LANrefn1 herself could attest to its potency, as the thing had caused her to break out in hives when she'd set it in place. She'd even worn gloves!

"Do you think she'll be happy with this?" LANrefn1 asked, staring critically at the device. "We don't even know what it's supposed to do, so how are we supposed to know if it works?"

"Ze," Rhime answered from where she was tightening a few remaining screws.

"What?"

"That Ms. Grey. Zir preferred pronouns are ze/zir."

“Oh,” the tiefling said, now feeling like something of a dubya for not having asked. “What about you?” she asked, suddenly worried she’d been unintentionally insulting.

“She/her is fine,” Rhime answered. “You?”

“Eh, they’re all fine, really. She/her is a habit, so that’s my go-to.”

They nodded at each other as the first subject was let into the testing chamber—a shuffling zombie, brought in from who-knows-where (they were thousands of miles from the nearest Necromanagement so it must have been local). After taking down a few notes on her digipad, Rhime pointed the device at the sad thing and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened; no lasers, no explosions. They both frowned.

“Is the power source integrated properly?” Rhime asked, getting ready to pop off the side plate and have a look.”

“It’s fine,” said the Ms. Grey, appearing suddenly through the side door. Ze held up a small screen. “According to our client, these are the exact readings that we’re looking for. We should run more tests for consistency, but you’re on to something here.”

The two exchanged dubious glances, but said nothing. Those who pay the piper call the tune after all.

The rest of the day and part of the next was spent entirely running tests and fine-tuning the machine according to the Grey’s readings. Ze never said how exactly ze knew what to look for, and ze never volunteered the knowledge. The client, apparently, valued discretion above everything and had more than enough funds to buy it. And not only were they paying for confidentiality, but also for the additional 25,000 byte-coins LANrefn1 and Rhime each collected for their troubles.

At the end of it all the Grey returned them to Neo York, shook hands with the two operators, and wished them luck on their endeavors. Then ze climbed back into zir private car and merged back into traffic. “It all seems...strange,” Rhime said, staring after the rapidly disappearing tail lights. “I’ll admit the money’s good, but I’m glad to wash my hands of the whole thing.”

LANrefn1 sighed. “Lucky you.”

“What?” The aasimar asked, incredulous. “You’re still tangled up in this mess? And you still don’t know why this thing needs to be built or what it does?”

“Mum’s the word, yeah.” LANrefn1 pulled her hoodie up, concealing the face of her already changing disguise. “But it’s definitely a mess.”

The technocleric frowned. “Before you head back into the fray, perhaps there’s time for a drink for the road?” she offered unexpectedly, tilting her head towards the blinking signage of too chic for that.

The tiefling grinned widely. “Always.”

CHAPTER 11: OH, HOLY KNIGHTS...

TIMESTAMP: VATICAN CITY; FRIDAY OCTOBER
25TH, 11:16 PM, 2099

The air high above Vatican City was crisp and clear, free of the smoke and smog so common in other metropolises of such density. It was free even of cloud cover, which made tonight's job a little more risky than it otherwise would have been. Only a little more risky, of course, because breaking into the Vatican's most secure vaults was something dangerous enough to turn most people away from the idea.

But not everyone. In a shielded skycar, parked a half mile above St. Peter's Basilica, two operators were calming their nerves before the most psychotic stunt of their lives.

"This is one of the most insane things I've ever done." Corruption muttered, turning over a small runestone in one hand to try and burn off some nervous energy, "and I joined the Church of Cthulhu. I mean, aside from getting yet another god angry at me, I can see hundreds of ways this could go horribly wrong."

"It's all about risk management," Override replied, grinning. He had the skycar set to park and was halfway leaning out the door to get a better view of the building below, "and comparing it to the potential reward. When you evaluate each risk separately and consider its odds, I know that by leveraging our unique talents, the compensation offered is excellent when compared to the risks involved. Plus—I offer dental."

Corruption grumbled in response. It wasn't like he could turn back now, and Override was right—even considering the dangers, his accounts were as fat as they had ever been, and the odds of him seeing the inside of the Vatican for any legitimate reason were slim to none.

"It's time to fly!" Override shouted, tearing open his door and leaping out into the night sky without further

warning. Nearly dropping his rune as he scrambled to get his own door open, Corruption saw what pushed Override into action: a pair of missiles were closing in on the skycar, fast. As the car exploded into shrapnel, Corruption shot downwards, the wind ripping through his hair, his coat, and his thin shirt. Almost casually, he caught the zipper and pulled it up halfway as the pair of them fell. It wasn't that he was too cold—he had long since acclimated to worse—but the flapping coat threatened to catch his arms when he needed them to grab onto Override before the madman hit the building below.

Once he had a firm grip he pulled up—and the pair of them careened to the side, through one of the basilica's windows, and into the main chapel below. Glass rained down as the pair freefell another twenty feet before crashing onto a floor of polished marble.

"You couldn't have broken our fall any further?" Override muttered, pulling himself up slowly from the ground, a knife in his hand in anticipation of some sort of sentry he might have to put a blade into.

"I could have." Corruption answered, having landed more gracefully on his feet, "But I decided to conserve my magic in case there was another goddamn missile; besides, that window broke your fall just fine."

"Hey, watch your mouth." Override shot back, looking over his shoulder as if someone in earshot might be offended by the curse. The fact that there weren't alarms gonging and armed guards storming in was almost too good to be true.

"What, you're worried about swearing now?" the shaman asked, fitting the fedora on his head to snug.

"No, but you're in the most heavily warded church in the world." Override said, gesturing at the religious icons around them. "Let's try not to set off any alarms we don't need to, and keep the capital-D word to a minimum."

Corruption just checked his person to make sure nothing important was lost in the chaotic airdrop. "So you actually do have a plan this time. I'm impressed."

"Absolutely." The elf was peeking around corners, ensuring they had a moment of peace. "From here we go through the papal throne, into the basement, left, right, right, down again, and then to the vault doors behind the third crucifix on the right."

“And then...?” Corruption asked, hoping ‘get into the vault’ wasn’t the entire plan. When Override didn’t answer with more than a placating shrug, the shaman merely sighed and traced a symbol onto the elf’s chest. Then a second, and a third. “Protection, tracelessness, insight, quiet. That last one is just a suggestion.”

If Override was listening he didn’t respond in between downing potions one after another. At five, he grinned his usual manic grin. “This way.” He waved for Corruption to follow and set off across the broken glass, deeper into the Basilica.

Most of the time the chapel was packed with people. In the quiet, the massive statues in their high alcoves seemed almost to follow the operators, already dwarfed by the scale of architecture around them.

The deeper the pair went, the more anxious they became. “This is too easy” Corruption warned, as they neared the second stairwell. “Where are the guards? The alarms? Someone must have seen the explosion when we arrived.”

“I don’t like it either.” Override agreed, “but the alternative is running for our lives already, so let’s assume this means we’re on a mission from God, right?” Corruption threw a thousandth look over his shoulder and considered that maybe, just maybe, they were. After all, they weren’t breaking in here just to stuff their pockets; they were planning on fighting the father of all vampires, a monster so abhorrent to the natural order that even the Church of Cthulhu—who wanted to destroy the world—had been working against him. Maybe that was just professional jealousy, but the more Corruption learned of the First Vampire, the more he hoped their efforts were to succeed.

“Corruption! I found the door, get down here!” Override whispered loudly from down the stairs, having gone ahead while the spellcaster was lost in thought. He expected the second basement to be bigger—before considering the size of the vault. The room was circular, about fifty feet across, and aside from the mural on the floor and crucifixes on the walls, utterly empty. Override had lifted the third crucifix off the wall already, exposing a complex security panel behind. “I wish LANrefn1 were here for this.” Override lamented, his fingers flying over the smartlight he had hooked into the panel. “She’d have this cracked already, even with what I suspect

is an AI trying to lock us out. This is turn of the century security. But, like, the turn of last century. Ah, got it!”

With his exclamation, he grabbed his smartlight and practically danced backwards, expecting the wall to suddenly give away and reveal the Vatican’s vault. His grin was just starting to fade when the room began to move—the entire building shuddering with the weight of the floor folding in on itself to create a massive, brightly lit stairwell leading down into the ground.

Then, the alarm started to go off. “Jump?” Override suggested, hopefully. A sixty foot drop was a lot more than he was interested in falling right now, and the five-storey deep stairwell would leave them fully exposed to fire from above.

“Just run, I’ll give us some cover.” Corruption’s fingers were already beginning to glow. “Keep your hand on the wall. Don’t let go until I tell you to, no matter what.” Override opened his mouth briefly to object, but a group of Vatican knights was already in the mouth of the room, heavy white cloaks doing nothing to conceal the armor beneath, blades naked in their hands and burning with holy fire. The Swiss Guard had arrived.

Corruption pointed his hand up to the ceiling and the heavens beyond, and the lights went out. The darkness that enveloped them all was deeper than night, inside of even the lightless places underground. This was a darkness called from the void between stars, where no light touched in centuries, and a cold so intense that warmth was nothing but a distant memory. It was a darkness in which things existed, both living and dead at once, whose existence rattled the core of mortal sanity. A darkness not even their holy lights could breach.

“Sorry.” Corruption muttered, “mind not to fall down the stairs.” Almost casually, he turned and leapt over the precipice to the vault below, landing with the grace of a cat just ahead of a slightly blanched Override.

Stunned, the thief muttered, “I think I saw—”

“Don’t dwell on it. That way leads only to madness,” Corruption stated plainly. “Let’s just get inside. Do you know where the armor is?”

Shaking his head, Override stuttered, “not entirely, but I only see one door down here. Keep an eye out for wards and traps as well. My sources went dark after the third crucifix on the right.” The door at the bottom of the stairs turned

out to be unlocked and swung open easily into a massive room flanked by rows of alabaster statues of angels and saints, each painstakingly crafted and absolutely beautiful. In the center, a marble sarcophagus was set into the ground, chased with gold and surrounded by a circle of flaming oil. “Don’t wander off,” Override warned, “we have no idea what’s in here. Let’s start with those doors in the back.”

Corruption silently nodded, but kept his eyes turned behind them. He could sense that something was starting to cut through his spell upstairs, which meant a powerful spellcaster had arrived, maybe even an angel. That meant they had minutes at best before the paladins caught up to them—since they had no way of knowing what was down here, that wasn’t a lot of time.

Override gave the next door a quick once over, but it continued to hold that the Vatican wasn’t locking their doors or setting traps for the unwary. Had they asked they were sure the answer would have been something about having faith in their congregants (though of course the heavily armed knights and powerful wards that surrounded the entire building also worked wonders to deter potential thieves.) It made them do crazy things—like leap out of a skycar from a half mile up in the air.

The corridor was cramped in comparison to the massive room before it. Statues of angels stood every twenty feet, holding up the ceiling with one hand and lanterns in the other. Set into the walls between them were small alcoves, each home to what the pair assumed were holy relics. The undulating width of the hallway made it difficult to keep an eye for traps, or to know what corners might be passages. Override kept leading the way deeper into the vault, and Corruption padded after him, pausing every two dozen steps to see what sorts of things the Vatican kept sealed away. “Don’t touch anything” Override warned.

“Mmmhmm” Corruption absentmindedly answered, studying the nearest alcove. Most were the sorts of things he expected to see: a polished jawbone missing a tooth, four silver coins on a velvet cushion, or a broken sword. Others were more obscure: a decanter of clear liquid, or a portrait of an incredibly handsome man that had been slashed across

the center.

After probably three hundred feet, Override finally spoke up. “Okay, this matches the thirteenth century maps. I know where we’re going. Don’t get seperated.”

Corruption wasn’t entirely listening. The latest alcove they stopped in front of contained what appeared to be a palm-sized white stone. “The tooth of El’kaj’ek. This is where it’s been.” The shaman grabbed it from the pedestal, muttering, “I hate churches sometimes. All the time really. Do you know how much damage has been caused since this went missing?”

“THIEF!” a voice shouted, neither Corruption’s nor Override’s. The statues on either side of the altar released the ceiling and took up defensive positions, “INFIDEL!,” they called out—calmly but incredibly loud.

“This way!” Override shouted, taking off down the hall at a half sprint. Corruption hesitated only a moment (trying to decide if he should try to stand and fight or not) before the decision was made for him as he heard the clatter of armor down the hallway; he wasn’t about to get stuck between a rock and a bunch of paladins. The statues were moving to strike so Corruption dove sideways—out of reach of one, but into the blow of the other. It was a calculated risk, but it paid off. The statue’s swing cracked a few ribs, but pushed him out of reach as it took another swing at him.

At a full sprint he took off after Override, wincing at the pain that flared in his chest with every breath—maybe it was more than a few cracked ribs. Fortunately Override wasn’t so far ahead that he couldn’t be followed, even though the entire vault seemed to be coming to life around them. As the pair ran the polished white stone was replaced by carefully fitted granite blocks, and the sound of armored feet was hidden by running water. Override didn’t slow even slightly until a portcullis blocked the way ahead, but rather than looking for a way around, he ripped a canister from his bandolier and hurled it ahead of them.

With uncanny precision, it struck the gate and went off: not with a bang, but with a whimper followed by the rattling of chains suddenly gone slack. The portcullis—and a good chunk of wall and floor—was simply gone. “What,” Corruption struggled to ask as he slowed to catch his breath, “was that?” “Trade secret. We’re here—get inside.” The room

beyond must have dated from the first millennium. A pool of crystal blue water stood in the center, glowing under its own light and surrounded by tall, armored figures. “Here they are, 3645-AS-EL Sanctus Apparatum battlesuits, built for Pope Leo XVI and the other bishops in 2084.” Override was already up against the side of the nearest suit, searching for an external port so he could jack in.

“Hack now, history lesson later, okay? We have maybe thirty seconds before they get here.” Corruption’s fingers twitched almost imperceptibly, trying to sort out the best spells. He didn’t want to call on the darkness of the void again—mostly because it would interfere with Override doing what needed to be done. Hacking the Pope’s armor in the dark would be a little harder than climbing stairs.

“Jacking in,” the thief said, brimming with excitement. “I’ll be as fast as I can.”

“Good,” the shaman replied, looking down the passageway and hugging the wall, “because here they come.”

Though little of their faces were visible, the knights didn’t seem to be phased by the darkness from upstairs. Or maybe they were a different group of guards—they all looked about the same: broad chested, armor clad, wrapped in heavy white cloaks and each bearing a small army’s worth of weapons. In the center of the unit was one dressed differently, a woman with a high peaked hat and a crimson robe. Unlike the knights around her she carried no visible weapons, though the literal halo around her looked suspiciously dangerous.

Energy arced between Corruption’s hands and like a dart he shot it down the long, straight corridor that he and Override had come down moments before. Paladins were blasted from their feet—or dove for cover, it was hard to tell—but the cardinal caught the bolt before redirecting it harmlessly into the wall beside her, resulting in a shower of sand and sparks.

“You’re trespassing on holy ground.” The woman’s voice carried effortlessly down the corridor, “surrender now and repent, and we will spare you. Continue this farce, and you will be treated with the same deference you are showing us.”

“So, you’ll try and avoid us? Because that’s what we were trying to do. Or you’ll take something we’ve got

locked in a closet somewhere?” Corruption could see out of the corner of his eyes that Override had jacked into the battle-suit. He was all but dead to the world now, so all the shaman could do was bide time.

It seemed that the cardinal wasn't eager to end things immediately either. As her men picked themselves up, she replied slowly, choosing every word with extreme precision. “We will uncover your deepest secrets and reveal to the world the truth of you. We will tear from you that which you hold dear and when we are done, we will offer you to the one true God for judgement. God will decide your fate, or we will slay you where you stand for your sins.”

“The one true god? You mean Cthulhu? Man, I do not need him deciding my fate.” Corruption barbed. The two churches had been at war for centuries, but no more so than in the last century once Cthulhu's servants revealed themselves to the world, hidden in the guise of a series of catholic churches.

The cardinal spat at the name of the great old one. “Very well. May you be judged in the next world.”

Corruption had expected, even hoped for that response; now he wouldn't feel guilty about cutting these guys down a notch. “I'm afraid that won't qualify.” The magic was bubbling up within him almost unbidden, a sinister sort of magic. The voice that came from his mouth was not entirely his own, “توميولي وحت.”

The result was dramatic. A scream rose from the cardinal's throat, a harsh sound not entirely human. Her bones twisted and snapped, pulling her skin taut. The paladins all looked to her, startled, but she was a foot shorter now than she was before and continuing to shrink. Assuming there was nothing to do for their leader the nearest three charged, but they still had thirty feet to close and Corruption was full of a spirit other than his own. He was filled with the voices of the heavens, with the knowledge of entities who were older than the entire race of man. Some of these beings, even, claimed to be older than the “one true God”. If there was anything to doubt in this age of high magic, it would be that there was only one deity.

“!الفساً اعيمج مكل برض دعر دق” Corruption screamed, electricity spilling from his hand to the closest

paladin, then the next, and each one down the corridor. This time the bolt sought their hearts—it gave them no room to roll away.

The suit of armor Override had jacked into lashed out suddenly and grabbed the elf by the shoulders. The sudden movement distracted Corruption, who turned to see the battlesuit unfolding to engulf his ally. Hopefully, he thought, that was a good thing. Turning his attention back to the paladins a moment too late, the shaman took a steel fist to the gut as one of the holy warriors collided with him. Unexpectedly the fist was followed by a mechanical whirring before a blade was driven from the man's arm.

The paladin pushed backwards, short blade emerging from one wrist, and long blade held expertly in the other hand. Behind him three others were steaming with divine light, already recovering from the lightning bolts of a moment ago. The other two, and the cat that was all that remained of the cardinal, still lay smoldering on the floor of the hallway. "Thou shall not steal," he stated plainly. "Thou shall not kill."

Corruption did his best to look critically injured, making a big show of coughing up blood. "You're kinda failing that one, yourself." The blow had been bad but like the paladins in the hall, he had magic on his side and it had already knit together the worst of the man's blow.

"You'll live." The paladin said, remarkably frankly, "I'd also like to take a moment and point out that there's no commandment against kicking your ass." The paladin's foot shot out and connected with Corruption's chin. The shaman's head snapped back before cracking into the stone behind him; the next blow was to his already injured ribs, only barely starting to heal thanks to his mental spell a moment before. Corruption waited for a third, wincing on the floor and pretty sure he was bleeding internally—but it didn't come.

He rolled onto his back just in time to see the paladin staggering backwards, a hole burnt clean through his chest. "Alright, I'm in!" Override's voice came over the speakers on one of the suits of power armor, "and not a second too soon. Pick yourself up, we're out of here the moment the path is clear."

Override shot forward like a bullet, knocking the front paladin to the side as he passed. The three behind him

looked almost like they were moving in slow motion and unable to react, their blades skidding harmlessly over the power armor. A single punch from the elven thief's augmented form drove the first into the wall, nearly breaking him in half. Another clash of steel on steel didn't even slow Override down, and the holy defenders' best blows couldn't scratch his battlesuit. His hands glowed with energy and each shot melted through steel, flesh, and the stone behind—in a matter of seconds the paladins were little more than ash.

From the direction they had come was another wave of reinforcements, however: dozens of stone statues of angels, wielding swords and spears made of shining celestial silver. "Pick your favorite suit. I'm through the master firewall already." Override strode back to Corruption, who had slowly picked himself up off the floor, blood spattered down his formerly clean shirt.

"I'd rather follow on my own. I let you drive here and our ride got blown up, remember?"

"Suit yourself—or don't, I suppose. Going up!" Override's hands thrummed with power again and he pointed them upwards. Three adjacent suits made the same motion and all at once they fired upwards into the ceiling, collapsing plaster and stone on top of them.

Corruption only had a moment to worry, as seconds later Override rocketed upwards, out of the rubble and up through the hole he had made in the ceiling. Muttering another spell, he took to the air to follow. They were going to have half of Italy following them at this rate.

Override punched his way through several floors before rocketing through the last ceiling and up into the open air of the Piazza San Pietro, but it wasn't the same calm night it had been moments ago. Instead they were met by hundreds of paladins, siege weapons, and Pope Bontiface X himself (in his thirty-foot tall golden power armor), all arrayed around the plaza, waiting for him.

"Yeah, okay. I think we can still get out of here if we—" Override was weighing the options, but even the slaved *3645-AS-EL Sanctus Apparatum* battlesuits wouldn't be quite enough to punch through this sort of force.

"Up!" Corruption shot past his ally, a black runestone dancing in the air above his hand. He could see the

overwhelming odds, but a twist of fate was exactly what he needed. As he gestured they opened fire and over the din of gunshots the shaman yelled, “Hey Pope! I hope it’s not too forward to ask you for a favor, but I happen to have a horrible monstrosity that really, R’lyeh wants to meet you. R’yata, say hi!”

Corruption’s black runestone tumbled down into the darkness, the searing blackness drawing everyone’s eye—and their fire (not that mere bullets or spells could harm the stone) a prison for the titanic monster the shaman had just unleashed. The tumbling bit of polished rock vanished from sight into the hole the pair of operators had emerged from, followed by a blood-curdling roar. A hundred-foot long tentacle, and a second, and then a massive arm at least as long punched up through the ground, sending paving stones and soldiers flying everywhere.

“Oh man, the church of Cthulhu is going to be so pissed when they find out the Pope killed their pet.” Corruption’s glee was almost palpable as he and Override vanished into the sky, watching artillery open fire onto the titanic monstrosity emerging from the Vatican’s vault.

“Well, don’t get too comfortable.” Override’s voice carried through Corruption’s earpiece as the three other stolen armors pulled into formation behind him, born aloft on spectral wings faster than any of the Vatican soldiers who might be trying to follow, “I’m counting at least two missiles on our tail. Again.”

CHAPTER 12: DANCING WITH UNDEAD

TIMESTAMP: PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC;
THURSDAY OCTOBER 29TH, 9:42 AM, 2099

“This smells like all of Neo Angeles took a dump and flushed the puss out of every hospital at the same time,” Override said, looking down at the sewage beneath him in disgust. Fortunately the brackish liquid was several feet from the elf’s actual body, suspended as it was in one of the three remaining 3645-AS-EL Sanctus Apparatum battlesuits.

“Stop complaining,” Lucky Mack grunted, sloshing forward only a few paces behind LANrefn1’s aerial drone, Pain. He moved his arm to gesture back past Corruption towards the tiefling netjacker at the tail end of the sortie, “at least you’re not on foot like her.” His exaggerated reach from the armor’s huge limbs knocked a brick loose as he turned to face forward again, making the flying robot swerve out of the way and nearly into the ceiling.

“Hey!” the netjacker yelled out, “the hell are you doing?! Watch the merchandise! Those are my boys, and if you ding them up you’re going to have a case of laser-face.” The tiefling—currently disguised as a youthful half-orc of indeterminate gender—was walking along the ceiling, clinging to the stonework with one of her innate, infernal powers. “Besides, it looks like those things would slow me down. And probably give me a rash.” More importantly, she thought to herself, the less of a target she was the better.

Corruption nodded in agreement, reluctantly adding, “and it was either we came back with three battlesuits or no battlesuits; as much as I hate to say it—Override made the right decision, scuttling one of them.” Before the elf could interject the shaman continued, “Can you all feel it yet? The soul energy nearby is drawing toward something above, a sort of black hole in the aether. It has to be our target.”

“Our target?” Override said incredulously, referencing an old paper map and a small magical sextant, “you mean Vlad III Dracula, the First Vampire, the undead nightmare on ancho? That target?” He pointed up, the huge hand of his battlesuit doing the same. “I don’t feel anything out of place with my chi or whatever, but this is telling me he’s definitely above us.”

Lucky Mack reached down to his belt, unhooking a tiny device and flicking it on. A three-dimensional image of the Wallachian Embassy and the complex beneath it sprang into view in shades of semi-translucent white light, and after belching loudly for everyone’s attention before doling out the plan, he pointed to a small blue light near the bottom of the holographic blueprint. “This is roughly where we are right now. As you can see,” he continued, tracing it along the route of a fat purple hemisphere above them with his left hand and another overlapping green hemisphere partially running into it with his right, “there’s a field that negates magic here, and one that negates tech just behind it, here. Once we’re past the overlap, it’s pretty much smooth sailing up into the building itself. That’s the toughest part of this before the finale—we make it past here, we’re definitely getting paid.”

“Oh well that sounds simple enough,” LANrefn1 joked from behind, ordering Pain back to her and deactivating Panic as it hopped into a pocket on her overcoat. “Just a hop and a skip and then we’re platinum? A quick face off against an unholy medieval horror and everything will be copacetic?”

Ignoring her, Lucky Mack began to pull more items from his belt. “Look, it’s only a few hundred feet where we’re exposed and moving under our own power—and I’ve got a plan.” Tossing a vial to each of them, he held up the one he’d kept for himself. “These are ghost nanites. Drink them and a few seconds later, you’ll be walking through walls like a spirit from beyond. For a few minutes, anyway.” Grabbing at a different compartment on his armor, he produced another set of flasks; these were filled with translucent dust, like finely ground particles of glass. “Those are tech, these are not. Dump it over yourself and you’ll disappear from even magical sight, but only for a few moments, so after we use these we need to move fast. The tech repulsing field is after the magic disruption field; remember that it’s ghost nanites,

then the disappearing dust. Don't get em confused. Once we're in the basement of the building and out of the catacombs, it won't take long to slip inside and up to the central bedroom where my intel says Vlad will be."

Override's hands went up into the air, scraping metal off the wet brickwork of the sewer tunnel's ceiling. "I know that from me it seems strange to hear, but I still think this is one of the craziest plans I've ever been a part of."

LANrefn1 nodded in agreement, joined in by Corruption. "Just two months ago, no less than four dozen mages and priests tried to take him out in Rome. Managed to teleport him directly into the center of the Coliseum amid a ridiculous onslaught of magic. A few are still unaccounted for, but it was a slaughter and Vlad walked out of it alone."

"He's right," the tiefling said, "I saw the footage." She shook her head side to side, her expression turning painful. "It was gruesome stuff."

Unphased, Lucky Mack unslung the positronic shifter array—the "PSA" built by LANrefn1 and Rhime— from his back, powering it on and off expectantly and saying, "that's why we came equipped. Look at these battlesuits; if anyone was going to make armor that can protect us from the First Vampire, it's the Vatican."

"Uhm, we're not all in holy battlesuits," LANrefn1 reminded him. "Just saying."

With an exasperated sigh the half-orc popped open a compartment on his wrist, grabbing a small platinum token from inside and flipping it towards her through the air. "You get cut down and that'll bring you back up, at which point you should run like hell." He grinned at her, scratching at one of his tusks with the armor's large metallic fingers. "And hey, not being in a gaudy suit of holy armor will make you less of a target." The netjacker shot him a disdainful look and briefly wondered if he could read her mind but just nodded, pocketing the enchanted bauble; she didn't think Lucky Mack could read much more than a food truck menu, nevermind the recesses of her advanced brain. "It's critical we keep in mind that we're not actually here to kill Vlad. We can try if want to—and we are almost definitely going to have to if we want to survive—but the contract explicitly stated that he needs to bathe in the PSA's energy beam for a total of three seconds.

Way easier than trying to stake him or make him eat garlic or whatever else it is you do to kill vampires.”

Their shaman laughed grimly, removing his fedora and casting a simple spell to clean the muck from it. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m not leaving until Vlad is dust. And you,” he said, pointing to Override, “you’re not getting any help from me later if you don’t stick around to make that happen.”

“I’m willing to go that far,” Lucky Mack agreed, nodding. In his mind the half-orc thought to himself that he was going to survive anyway, so if everyone else died it didn’t make too much of a difference—and all the extra bytecoins would go a long way to healing the grievous emotional wounds left by their tragic deaths.

Stepping down from the ceiling and onto the foreboding stairwell leading up into Wallachia’s Embassy in Prague, LANrefn1 could only shrug as she checked to make sure her combat pistol was fully loaded. Out loud she said, “I promise not to run until I really feel there’s no other option,” but in her mind the tiefling thought to herself that she wasn’t willing to give anyone a reason for her not to get paid.

“Well then, there it is,” Override replied, downing the vial of ghost nanites and floating up through the ceiling. The rest of the team followed suit without delay, gliding through stone and earth and staying in contact through their comlinks. At each intervening tunnel or passage the elf would call a hold, poking his head up from the floor to make sure no patrols were marching by before the party continued its ascent. In a matter of minutes the group reached the magic disruption field, leaving them access only to their innate powers and the hydraulics of the divine battlesuits. With her superior speed LANrefn1 took the lead, scouting for any signs of the undead their intel claimed wandered these corridors.

Still able to move swiftly while their holy power armor was working, the team of operators quickly made it to the overlap before the enchanted battlesuits stopped being assets and became liabilities, even if only for a short distance. This section of the catacombs was a wide, open space, a passage a hundred feet across and four times as long where Corruption, Lucky Mack, and Override were locked into a drudging march

made entirely under their own physical power,

weighed down by hundreds of pounds of equipment that slowed progress to a crawl. Sprinting ahead LANrefn1 could hear the rasping of several creatures and, peeking around the corner, saw a pack of two dozen vampire spawn steadily headed in the operators' direction. Retreating back quietly before falling into a dead run, by the time the lightning-quick netjacker rejoined and warned her allies the undead had spotted them, letting out primal screams of challenge that were filled with bloodlust.

Moving like sloths, Override knew they'd be cut down by the pack of undead in short order if they weren't careful. "Corruption, Mack—circle the wagons and group with me now! LANrefn1, get out your chain and go to town while we get fedora mage here out of his suit!" The tiefling didn't need to be prompted and was already rushing forward to meet the vampire spawn head on, lashing out with her chain at its greatest length to take up as much of the passageway as she possibly could. A few of the gangly creatures made their way past her however and with supreme effort the half-orc swung his armor into them with his arms wide, tackling three and taking them to the ground in a frenzy of claws and fangs.

As their netjacker slammed the spiked end of her chain through the skull of a third one of the monstrous things, a dozen leapt over her backside to square off against Override. Screaming out in pain he quickly dislocated both his arms to rip them out of the battlesuit, crying out again as he slammed into its chassis to set one of his shoulders back in place. Reaching across to his coat he started flinging daggers at the approaching undead, backing away towards Corruption as the shaman (much more carefully and less painfully) extricated himself—swearing when the thief realized that his ally wasn't even halfway out. Cussing with a speed and versatility that even a demon would think twice about, the elf hit the mechanical override on his augmetic forearm before setting the failsafe and throwing it toward the oncoming vampire spawn. One of them leapt into the air and sunk its teeth into the artificial limb just as the chemicals within reacted in an explosion that engulfed the small group of foes in fire, incinerating almost all of them to dust.

Meanwhile LANrefn1 had whittled the count of her enemies to only a handful and one of the undead

had enough sense to yell for retreat, prompting the rest to withdraw the way they came to return with reinforcements. Though she gave chase the netjacker was back in only a few moments, warning that a proper horde was on its way to meet them. By then Corruption was freed and, walking past the overlap, began to cast a powerful spell as the first of the renewed vampire spawn came into sight. Drawing from within, the shaman brought to the fore primal magics that rushed at his enemies like a neon orange tidal wave, slamming into and through them with a blinding flash of light. As the energy pushed through the crowded passageway the undead it bathed burned from within before falling prone and unmoving, their husks eaten away until only dust remained. As their tortured chorus of unholy screams reached the operators, Override let loose a long whistle while helping Lucky Mack back onto his feet. Dragging himself beyond the overlap, the elf swiped at something in his returning augmented reality display and his speakers piped out in Corruption's voice, "Override made the right decision."

Glaring at him, the shaman said, "really? You recorded that? By the Dark Ones, you are the most annoying elf I have ever met." With his battlesuit fully active the thief simply made a perfect curtsy, bowing as he did so with one and a half arms clasped behind his back (though since he was hyperjacked into the power armor, his ghost limb offered no impediment). Dragging the empty chassis out of the overlap and getting Corruption back inside, the operators sprinted past the anti-magic field before covering themselves in the disappearing dust and getting a few extra spells from Corruption so they were as quiet as circumstances would allow. Hugging the walls, the team stealthed their way past more reinforcements before reaching the modern construction of the Wallachian Embassy and girding themselves for the reality of what they were about to do.

Moving quickly the team ascended to the third floor of the palatial estate without incident, deploying concentrically around the hallways surrounding Vlad's master bedroom. Override dropped small marbles behind him as he jogged around to the far side of the perimeter, blanketing the area with enough of the enchanted devices to block any noise of what was to come from spilling back into the building

and alerting security. By the time he reached his designated spot the invisibility of the disappearing dust had worn off but that hardly mattered—intel suggested that Vlad would've seen right through its magic anyway. Corruption, and Lucky Mack were each placed similarly and LANrefn1 waited outside the doorway to the First Vampire's room, cracking into the local network and preparing shutoffs for any failsafes that might give them away before the PSA could do its work. After a few seconds of hacking she whispered over the commlink that the coast was clear, prompting the three battlesuited operators to slam into and through the walls, charging in unison into Vlad III Dracula's private chambers.

The lord of all vampires was sitting in the candlelight at a large, lavish oak table inscribed with reliefs carved by a master artisan. Spread across its surface were the twitching remains of what was once a handsome young Indian man, his throat slit open and fully exposed, much of it rent and torn asunder. Calmly standing and dabbing a napkin on the bloody corners of his mouth, he looked at the assembled operators and chuckled, "Oh my—dessert has delivered itself tonight."

No call to action was required and they each opened up combat with their best shots, giving the powerful undead no quarter. Override's modified battlesuit sprouted sword-sized molecularly sharpened glass daggers infused with holy water and the elf flung six of them at Vlad while dodging away from the doorway. The vampire lord only laughed, batting four from the air and looking pitifully at the wounds left by the other two, smiling as they healed over almost instantly. Lucky Mack relied on Gerturde instead, spraying a hail of enchanted silver bullets into the vampire's hide and grinning at the large rash of skin they exposed as Corruption called on the aether to summon forth a bright ball of sunlight that illuminated the room; in response to their combined assault, the master undead hissed.

This affront would not go unpunished, the First Vampire thought to himself. Just as Vlad was determining which of the impertinent assassins needed to die first, a small robotic puppet made to look like a small demon dashed past one of the holes created by the power armored operators, tossing a pair of tiny cylindrical canisters at his feet. Suddenly the things exploded in flashes even brighter than the ball of

daylight their shaman had summoned—that mage would certainly be the first one he'd suck the life out of—and some sticky, divine substance covered him, searing into his skin. Whatever that metallic creature was, he would be destroying it second.

Laughing mockingly in challenge he sprinted at the blue-haired elf, snapping his fingers and summoning the deadly two-handed maul Zgubić Kruszec (a magical weapon forged by the Metalowy Spolka dwarves of Poland) from its place in his enchanted glove. He brought the hammer down on the battlesuit with thunderous force, each of the dozen blows sending a resonating wave of palpable sound across the chamber, shattering its glassware and windows. To his surprise the thief met him straight on, a wild and crazy look in his eyes as his battlesuit's hands locked onto Vlad's wrists.

Lucky Mack threw Gertrude behind him (letting her magnetic upgrade latch it onto the back of his battlesuit) and unslung the Positronic Shifter Array, powering it on and aiming at the wrestling duo before squeezing the trigger. For just over a second it bathed the two in a nimbus of blue and white light before Override screamed, "the f#(% are you doing?! That's excruciating!" and Vlad cackled in glee, clearly unphased by the device. Locking his gaze with the maddened elf the First Vampire attempted to assert his will to dominate but found the wily operator's resistance too strong, and before he could redouble his efforts, a blast of electricity arced from the shaman and through the air to knock him aside.

Vlad rolled to his feet and leapt at the fedora wearing spellcaster, bounding off of him with all the force he could muster and sending the power armored operator flying uncontrollably out of the window and into the night air of Prague. Almost immediately shouting could be heard from the grounds below and a siren began to wail—the fray was going to get bigger very, very soon. Keen to finish the job Lucky Mack took a beam on the vampire lord and fired again for nearly a second before a globe of darkness appeared between them. An instant later Vlad leapt from out of the blackness, knocking the positronic shifter array from out of the half-orc's grip before punching his darkly-taloned hands directly through Lucky Mack's throat, killing him instantly.

divinely infused glass daggers and started throwing them in a flurry that forced Vlad into a run, leaving most to shatter uselessly against the wall behind the evasive undead. Outside Corruption picked himself up off of the street and took to the air on the battlesuit's thrusters, starting the incantation to conjure an otherworldly monster to occupy the attention of the sec-ops and Wallachian military spilling out of the building. A bloodmage stepped from out of the shadows, her hands working in a pattern the shaman recognized as a counter-spell. Panicking he attempted to fly out of range of her but there was no need—a bystander walking by the Wallachian Embassy pulled out a Peretta SMG and sprayed lead into her, allowing him to finish the spell without interruption. Suddenly a huge purple and black portal expanded in the air, depositing an oozing mass of flesh and arms that he directed to attack the embassy guards and soldiers on the greens before floating back towards Vlad's chamber. More passersby were joining the assault, many of them firing gas-propelled repeating crossbows loaded with wooden stakes; must be the Children of the Dawn, Corruption thought, though it was certainly a good omen that they launched an attack on the same site at an identical time.

Dashing into the room only long enough to grab the device she and Rhime had so painstakingly built, LANrefn1 shouted over the din of combat, seeing the murderous rage growing in Vlad's eyes. "Buy me some time to get this fixed!" Sprinting back to cover and assessing the damage done to her creation, she added over the commlink, "and take note that if we live through this, in the future I'm not going to build you things if you're going to break them."

"Oh, little tainted one," the First Vampire cackled, his tone dripping with the prideful distaste of a man accustomed to winning, "don't trouble yourself on my part! This is the most entertainment I've had since last visiting the Coliseum in Rome. There's no need to rush yourself at all on my account and worry not: I won't forget about you or your amusing little drone." While none of the operators could read it and all were certain that death was only seconds away, Vlad's focus and control had started to ebb under the constant onslaught.

The spirit of Tatar Binary—still fighting against his control even after months of enslavement—manifested

beside the tiefling, startling her. “Quickly, open the reservoir,” she said, gesturing with a spectral arm to the glass globe on the top of the positronic shifter array, “do it before Vlad realizes I’ve slipped from his control.” Surprised but not stupid, LANrefn1 undid the top of the cap and opened it, allowing the assassin’s ghost to impart a portion of herself directly into the contraption. Tatar Binary made a rude gesture in the direction of the First Vampire as she disappeared from the tiefling’s sight, and immediately the device began to knit itself back together. Peeking back into the wrecked remains of what was once a palatial bedroom, she could see that Corruption and Override were back to back fighting in melee with Vlad, the master undead gradually slashing their battlesuits down with blows from his maul and savage strikes of his claws, so fast that he seemed to be in two places at once.

As Lucky Mack’s consciousness returned, his first thought was that things weren’t going great. Looking at the way Vlad was taking apart his mage and thief, he realized there wasn’t a second to spare and with an extremely strong desire to get paid, he rolled himself onto his belly, winking at Override. The elf caught the signal beneath the First Vampire’s notice and intentionally let down his guard, falling to one knee—an opening the master undead couldn’t resist. Vlad grabbed the crazy rogue by the throat, lifting up the power armor with his body, tensed and ready to strike as the half-orc whispered, “I f#%&ing hate throat wounds you albino Bela Lugosi-wanna be piece of shit,” and hit his battlesuit’s thrusters on full blast.

With his arms outstretched Lucky Mack just barely managed to catch Vlad with his left glove as the vampire tried to dodge backwards. Closing the servos and ordering the power armor to permanently lock, the half-orc and undead lord crashed through four walls before hitting a stone and steel foundation that left both winded, if only for a moment. Fortunately LANrefn1 only needed an instant—she dashed with impossible speed to the impromptu tunnel and unleashed a second and a half beam from the Positronic Shifter Array, lighting Vlad up like a dynamo. “That’s three seconds!,” she yelled, “we’re done! Bug out!”

Not wasting any time Corruption simply cast a spell to extricate himself from his armor and with how

shredded Override's battlesuit was, it only took the elf a few seconds to wrench free. A gesture from the shaman displaced Lucky Mack to his side, but not before the half-orc removed an entire belt of grenades and dropped them onto the ground outside of Vlad's reach, pins in hand. "Move it!" he yelled, running to the windows Corruption was kicked out of only a few minutes earlier.

Backing away slowly, LANrefn1 shook her head left and right, "I'm not letting him out of my sight!"

"Your call but the bandolier is C4!" Mack screamed, jumping toward the street as Vlad began to cackle and the first of the grenades cooked off. Corruption's phantasms moved to protect him and Override made it into the air before the explosion hit, but both would have died from shrapnel if LANrefn1 hadn't sprinted at hyper speed out of the side of the building, an ally in each arm. Before the operators could hit the ground to eat Wallachian lead, Corruption cast a powerful conjuration spell that teleported all of the team to a safehouse in Nuremberg. Far across Europe, they all breathed a heavy, well-deserved sigh of relief.

Then the real explosions hit, nearly leveling the Wallachian Embassy to the ground. With the heavy damage dealt to them during the fight, the divine battlesuits quickly overloaded from the initial blast, their power cores exploding with a force far greater than any of the grenades, battering, bludgeoning, and finally incinerating the First Vampire. As his body relented to the waves of plasma from the destroyed power armors, Vlad's dark laughter spread far beyond the chaotic battle being waged in the courtyard, echoing throughout Prague as the night sky turned utterly black, blotting out the stars until the sun rose the next day.

EPILOGUE: SOME VERY OLD BUSINESS

TIMESTAMP: UNKNOWN, WALLACHIA; SUNDAY
NOVEMBER 1ST, 12:01 AM, 2099

Deep underground, in one of the most highly secured locations in the world, a dark mist seeped into an ornate mahogany coffin. From inside came the sound of squelching flesh and cracking bone as a body slowly rebuilt itself. When its interior finally grew quiet the lid of the sarcophagus swung open, the naked form of Vlad III Dracula lounging inside. He chuckled to himself as he snapped his fingers; it had been the most enjoyable week he'd had in years.

At the sound of the snap, half a dozen awaiting vampires rushed into the room. In their arms were an assortment of necessities: new clothes, new gear, shaving supplies. He picked from their selection and leisurely got dressed, saying he would have a shave in a moment. The First Vampire glanced at himself in a nearby looking glass—not a traditional mirror of course, but a screen and camera setup meant to act as one—and straightened the lapels of his suit. All in all he didn't look half bad for someone who had been so recently blown into a fine mist.

Vlad started up the stairs of the crypt and into the small but well-appointed office above where his personal barber awaited. While he had long since updated to a more modern style of facial hair, the impressive moustaches that he had grown at the time of his transformation reformed every time the rest of his body did. As he leaned back in the chair, he called for an assistant to get ahold of Clara Manole, the CEO of DuskTone.

"Yes, Ms. Manole," he said as the snip-snip of the barber's scissors continued busily behind him, "I completely agree. We must express our sympathies to the people of Prague. We will, of course, contribute to the restoration effort.

Clearly this was a vicious attack against our country meant to dissuade us from our position as the world leader in Animated rights. We must denounce such small-minded bigotry wherever it arises.”

“A magnanimous tone, then, my prince?” she asked over the quiet clatter of typing keys.

“Yes—yet somber as well. We lost some on our own side, of course. But overall a brave face, I think. Domestically we should use this as a chance to advocate unity, but we mustn’t be too soft. Two attacks in a week? Even if I survived the both of them, there’s no need to give anyone ideas. Have a transcript sent to my assistant.” After a polite goodbye he ended the call and spoke to another aide. “Start the proceedings of helping the Czechs with the cleanup.” The vampire nodded then scuttled away. As the barber brushed away excess hair and began to prepare the lather Vlad leaned back in his chair, allowing himself the relaxation of the shave.

The Prince of Wallachia returned to the capital that very night and was behind the protective glass before even the first traces of pink began to color the sky. His Knight Marshal, Vornic, waited nervously before the door to his office. “My prince,” he said, bowing low and keeping his eyes to the floor.

“My friend,” Vlad answered, pulling the other vampire’s chin up. “What is the good news from Prague?” For there would be good news, he was certain of it. A grateful smile broke across Vornic’s pale, scarred face.

“We have recovered one of the surveillance videos from the embassy, my prince,” Vornic replied, wringing his hands and grinning wide, “and have already begun the identification of the mortals who attacked you.”

“And my weapons there?” Vlad asked, “I was fond of those housed in my gauntlet, you know.”

“We would not dare to investigate your belongings, my prince, but the gauntlet and all of the enchanted items you held have been recovered. Those that were not magical in nature...” the Knight Marshal trailed off, but Vlad waved it away.

“Destroyed, I’m sure. The explosion was most impressive, I must admit. You’ve done excellent work, Vornic, but now,” he said, narrowing his eyes and looking out the western window, “we must make plans. First an assassin

in my own building, and then thugs in sacred power armor. Clearly the Vatican had a part in this.” His eyes, usually a dark brown when he was at rest, had gone entirely black, from pupil to iris. “It will not go unanswered.”

Vornic’s smile disappeared and he edged away slightly—no one knew the prince’s rages as well as the head of the Sange—but the darkness in the First Vampire’s eyes cleared slightly, leaving only the irises devoid of any color. “Go. There must be a meeting of the Council of Eldest Blood tomorrow night. All must be in attendance.” The Knight Marshal nodded. “All, do you understand? Any not in attendance will answer to me personally.” Swallowing hard, Vornic bowed and briskly turned, almost fleeing down the hallway to do his master’s bidding.

Vlad retired to his office, soon finding himself in front of a screen alongside one of his more technologically-inclined aides. To the side lay a list of names: Michael Cramthy (alias Corruption), Mykhail Mylar (alias Override), Tilly Braxas (alias LANrefn1), and Mack Hijodeputa (alias Lucky Mack). Below each was what the Sange had been able to gather over the past few hours, involving everything from unpaid traffic violations to living relatives and last known residences. Files on them were being compiled for entry into the ever-growing log of the First Vampire’s enemies.

“The usual steps. Put each of them on the country’s no-fly list, and the Sange’s list as well. As satisfying as experiencing each of their deaths in turn would be, I suspect my schedule will be quite full in the coming months. Bring them alive if practical, but their heads will suffice otherwise.” The aide made a note of this, then bowed and exited the room, returning a brief moment later with a set-up crew armed with audio equipment. When it came to live broadcasts, Vlad preferred that the recording studio be brought to him.

A script had been prepared by his underlings specialized in public relations and he kept it out as a reference but ultimately opted for an off the cuff style speech; he was their prince, yes, but Vlad wanted his fellow Wallachians to know that ultimately he was one of them. After one last glance at his papers he leaned forward slightly and began to speak.

162 A solid day’s (and night’s) work complete, the First

Vampire returned to his private residence. The council meeting was due to start in a few hours, and already several of the oldest and most powerful vampires in the world had begun to gather. Vlad had not deigned to speak to any of them yet, preferring to let them worry first. While treason was a possibility he did not seriously consider it—he merely wished to keep them on their toes.

Nothing quite settled his mind like a tour of his private trophy collection. It was the most extensive collection of non-magical weaponry in the world, boasting an impressive array of magical and technological pieces as well. The former were for nostalgia and aesthetic more than anything, but the latter were specifically from enemies of both the Wallachian state and its prince (not that there was often much of a difference). Each of these pieces had its own placard, listing the name of the weapon (if known) and its owner, as well as the time and location of its retrieval. Sometimes it was the embalmed hands of the wielder that held the weapon, and sometimes the hands were the weapons themselves.

Twin scimitars, Gün and Kamer, once owned by Hamva ben Kadri, taken from him outside of the capitol building in Bucharest. A pair of hands belonging to one Chiba Rai AKA Raijin, covered with sparkling rings and acquired in the Wallachian embassy in Tokyo. The lists went on, with a few spaces left empty here and there, the placards bearing only a name or two—like the one for Aurora and her bow, Prima Lux. He'd had them ordered for his latest group of assassins, the blank spaces on the wall awaiting them next to a jar of ashes labeled 'Tatar Binary, the Coliseum, Rome.' It had been a pity to lose control of her spectre, but there were always new heroes sent to take on the First Vampire. He doubted he'd be without amusement for long.

Passing by the wall of named weapons he paused to take a Turkish yatagan sword from its place. Running his finger over the sharp blade, he chuckled. To think these had once worried him, proved a danger to his fragile, mortal form. But now—

But now there was a brief pain in his thumb, a trickle of what looked more like tar than blood dripping down to plop solidly to the floor.

“What the devil?”

Footsteps sounded from the doorway and he wheeled around, feeling trepidation as he realized he was not alone. A woman stood there, a large trident held easily in one hand. Her face and hands had a smear of dark blood around them but she looked familiar; dark hair, dark eyes, deeply tanned skin. He knew her.

Suddenly Vlad was back in the night, soaked by rain. The fear of failure prickled at his stomach, the cut burning on his hand. Reflexively he looked down. The mark had been the only scar to stick with him, through both his transformation and subsequent destructions—and she was the reason it was there. He looked up at her, fear in his eyes for the first time in over six centuries.

“Now,” she said, the trident suddenly replaced by a hugely ornate scroll that proceeded to fall open and unfurl at her feet, “do you have time to discuss some very old business?”

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