

# SHADOWRUN HONG KONG



🔌 **MEL ODOM** 🔌

BASED ON THE GAME BY HAREBRAINED SCHEMES

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## PROLOGUE RAYMOND BLACK

**The Redmond Barrens  
Seattle  
United Canadian and American States  
2044**

I'll never forget the night I met Raymond Black, mostly because I'd believed Duncan was going to die and leave me all alone. Raymond Black changed that. He changed a lot of things.

Me and Duncan, we'd been alone for a long time. I was a couple years older than him, so I could remember back farther than he could, but every time I did, all I could recall were the foster homes I got bounced out of regularly.

The longest I'd ever stayed in one was with the Croydon family for two years. They taught me how to pick pockets, hotwire a car, fight with a blade, and pick a lock. When I turned thirteen, I used those skills to get away from them and escape into the shadows.

A few months after that, I found Duncan Wu living on dumpster food in an alley. He hadn't run away from his foster home to find something better. He'd run for his life. His foster parents had set up a deal to sell him and the three other kids to a sex slave ring. He was the only one who'd gotten away. Part of me wanted to leave him there, but I couldn't because I knew from the shape he was in, starving

and covered in sores, he wouldn't make it on his own. So I'd taken him with me, fed him, sheltered him, and gotten him as healthy as we could be under the circumstances.

For two years, we ran the streets. I stole and robbed enough to keep us going. Sometimes I ran with one of the gangs when the prizes were big enough, but not too big. You gotta stay small in the shadows unless you have the muscle, cyber, or magic to stand up against people who would take whatever you had from you.

Mostly I was on my own because I didn't trust anybody. I kept Duncan fed and safe and out of harm's way. He didn't like what I had to do to keep us going. He's got this do-gooder streak that just doesn't work in the shadows. So I didn't tell him everything I did for us to survive. Looking back, I guess I was protecting him all the way around. Even what little innocence he held onto.

We lived rough, moving from squat to squat, all off the grid and in places where older gangers would have taken what little we had and beaten us to a pulp. Or just killed us outright for poaching on their turf.

But me and Duncan did okay for two years. I learned more about moving and grifting in the shadows, and he stayed safe. The area we lived in, it was more likely he'd end up bleeding out from a knife or cut down in a crossfire between gangs.

Instead, he got sick. That's something you can't see coming. Disease is invisible, just reaches out and grabs you whenever it wants. It grabbed Duncan, knocked him flat, and left him drained and burning up with fever for a week.

I knew he was gonna die, and part of me was gonna die with him. What'd be left of me wasn't worth keeping, and I knew that. Still, I've never been able to just lie down and quit.

I dosed us under a bridge near the Snoqualmie River, back in land so rough and toxic not even the gangers fought over it. Duncan had made us a lean-to out of flattened containers he'd taken from trash sites. He'd patched them together with plastic bags he melted into place. It was rainproof, mostly. I'd smeared it with mud so it wouldn't look like something anyone would want. After all the work Duncan had put into the structure, he'd hated that. But he understood. We weren't strong enough to hold a Styrofoam shelter that looked good.

That night, Duncan stared up at me with wet, red-rimmed eyes, and I was certain he wouldn't live to see daybreak. I was just wishing he'd live till morning. He always seemed happier during the day, even though the weak sunlight showed all the scars in the Barrens from the gangs and the Trojan-Satop power plant

meltdown.

Me, I lived for the nights. That was when the shadows covered all the ugly, and neon lit up the places where the grifting was good. We were different, Duncan and me, and I wondered if it would have always been that way, even if we hadn't been orphaned.

I'd scrounged up cast-off bedding and coats to keep him warm, but the chills rolled through him like seismic tremors. He was little back then, hadn't come into his growth yet. Not like he was later.

"I don't feel good," he croaked. His thick black hair lay plastered to his head, and his skin looked pale as pizza soydough at a Stuffer Shack.

"You don't look good either." I smiled, trying to make him think everything was gonna be okay. "And you smell even worse." My voice almost quit on me then, cracking and sounding jagged.

"Are you sick too?" Duncan shifted under the covers and squinted at me.

There he was, dying, but still worrying about me. I wanted to grab him and shake some sense into him. But maybe I was just mad because he was gonna leave me. I tried to hang onto being mad at him, telling myself it would be better if he did die, because then I only had to look out for myself. He was just a mouth to feed.

And that was when I realized I was starting to think like all those foster parents must have been thinking. I didn't feel guilty, but I was shocked.

I shook my head at him and made my voice work the way I wanted it to. "I'm fine."

"I'm still cold." Duncan pulled his pile of dirty bedding and ragged coats up more, almost covering his head.

I couldn't build a fire because that would draw human predators, so I tucked him in a little tighter and told him he was gonna be okay. He believed me. The Croydons had taught me how to lie too, and I was good at it.

Some days, I almost fooled myself.

I got him some more water when he asked for it, and saw we only had a couple bottles left. I hoped they'd last till morning. I had some water purification tabs I'd lifted from a military surplus store, but nobody wanted to drink from the river if they could help it.

After Duncan drank his fill, which wasn't much, he went to sleep. I sat there in the shadows, staring at nothing, thinking I'd probably said the last words to him I'd ever say. I made myself stay beside him, even though I wanted to run as fast

and as far away from him and this place as I could.

I have to admit, I almost got weak enough to call Lone Star and ask for help. I didn't because I wasn't convinced they could—or even *would*—save him. Duncan was just gonna be another statistic in the Barrens. One that probably wouldn't even be noticed by most people.

And if he lived, he was only thirteen. He'd have to survive another five years in foster care.

I didn't think he could do it. Mostly, I didn't want him to. I was gonna take care of him. Even if it meant burying him in the morning.

So I sat there and made myself really small, just listening to him breathe, hearing the gurgle in his lungs that didn't sound good at all.

The thunder of a straining engine grew closer. Cars passed by over the bridge west of us, but most never came this way. These were practically on top of us. I sat there listening to them get nearer, then I heard sharp blasts over the motor noise that I knew were gunshots.

Crawling to the entrance, I drew my combat knife from its sheath on my right thigh and looked out, hoping whatever was going on would pass us by. Duncan stirred only a little, but the fever had him now.

Then tires screeched, metal crumpled, and lights danced crazily in the treetops on the west side of river. A motor growled in a sudden frenzy just before something slammed through the stone ramparts of the old bridge. Broken concrete rained down from above and a battered Ford Americar shot over the side, dropping four meters to the sloped riverbank and landing—somehow—right side up, hard enough to blow out all four tires.

The driver fought the wheel, managing to dodge the big trees while plowing over several small ones. A ruby taillight gleamed in the darkness as it skidded to a stop, leaving deep ruts in the rain-soaked ground.

Stunned, I sat there for a moment, thinking maybe some guy had got himself a skinful of booze or inhaled too much Cram and wrecked his car. But only for a moment. When you live like I did, you learned to seize any opportunity you came across.

I ran to the car, watching through the rear window to make sure the driver wasn't moving. I knew he was still in the car because his arm hung through the

window. It just lay there.

I resented the guy immediately. If he had a DocWagon account, a rescue team would be after him soon, probably already on their way. I'd have to move Duncan, carry him most likely, instead of letting him die in peace here.

My blade in hand, I crept up to the window, planning to take whatever I could grab, then get Duncan and jet out of there. Instead, a floodlight flashed through the night from the bridge and lit up the car.

Pressing myself against the crumpled side, clinging to the shadows because that was second nature to me even then, I looked back at the bridge and saw the second vehicle there.

The Honda Spirit was a three-wheeled two-seater powered by an electric engine, which explained why I didn't hear it. Its front wheel was smashed, and both headlights were shattered. A man crawled out of the wreckage and staggered to the driver's side with a big flashlight in hand. He shook the driver but got no response, and when he took his hand back I could see blood staining it.

He turned his attention toward the Americar and light from the Spirit's interior revealed the black pistol in his hand. Taking aim, he followed the bridge wall, and stepped off onto the ground where it ended.

I twisted and started to take off, but an arm roped around my neck and held me trapped. I tried to slash it with my knife, but my captor caught my wrist with the same hand. He was quick.

Cold metal pressed into the side of my neck and I knew immediately what it was. I was shaking, I have to admit. It felt like my stomach was going to turn inside out. I'd been in fights, been cut up a few times, but I'd never had a pistol pressed into my neck before.

I froze, waiting for the bullet, thinking I was going to die before Duncan did. "Turn around," the driver whispered in my ear.

I did, slowly, aware that the man who had climbed down from the bridge was coming closer.

In the glow from the car's instrument panel, I saw the driver. He was Asian, probably in his late thirties or early forties. It's hard to tell with old people. His hair was short and dark, neatly kept, and he was freshly shaved, even at this late hour. He wore coveralls like a mechanic or a service industry wageslave.

His almond eyes widened at me, like he was surprised. He also looked like he was a bit dazed. I didn't smell any alcohol or chems on him.

He jerked on his seatbelt, but it wouldn't release. "Cut it, now."

Trembling, sure I was gonna get shot, I slashed the seatbelt and freed him just as the guy from the bridge started shooting through the back window. Instinctively, I dove for the shadows of the trees.

The old man spun out of the car, no longer fumbling or dazed, and wheeled around, using the vehicle as cover. He fired twice, and blood misted from the other man's head. The man fell and lay still.

The old man ran to the other guy and put one more bullet through his head. Then he knelt and went through the man's pockets.

"Boy," he called in a stern voice. "Come here."

I ignored him, thinking I'd take my chances with the shadows and the woods.

He cursed in Cantonese. I didn't speak the language, but I recognized some of the words. Then he walked to the lean-to under the bridge and stood over Duncan, his pistol aimed down.

"Don't!" I yelled. It was one thing for Duncan to die of sickness, but it was another for him to be shot. I couldn't bear that.

The old man held his pistol on Duncan a moment longer, then sighed and lowered his weapon. "Come here."

I hesitated only a moment. I figured the chances were good that the old man was going to kill me and Duncan both, but I couldn't just let that happen. I clenched my knife and slowly walked over to him. He might shoot me in the head too, but I wasn't going down without a fight.

"What is your name?" the old man asked.

I told him.

"And who is this?"

"Duncan." I paused, telling myself I wasn't going to be scared, that I wasn't going to beg for my life. But I would beg him not to shoot. "He's sick. I think maybe he's dying."

The old man stood there for a moment, his narrowed gaze flicking from Duncan to me. Then he holstered the pistol on his hip and bent down to pull the coats and bedding off Duncan. "Don't just stand there. Help me."

I thought about stabbing him, wondering if I could kill him. Then I realized that he was trying to help Duncan, not hurt him. I sheathed my knife and helped pulled the coverings away.

Duncan was covered in sweat and his eyes were rolling white. He was as limp as Old Fong's noodles.

Selecting the least ragged coat, the old man wrapped Duncan in it and picked

him up. I knew he didn't weigh much. We both barely qualified as skin and bones. Just didn't get enough to eat. Ever.

"Come." Carrying Duncan in his arms, the old man walked toward the bridge,

I followed, wondering what I was doing and how much trouble I was in.

DocWagon and CrashCart hadn't shown up, so I guessed none of them had medical coverage. I thought that was strange for the two dead men, because they were dressed in expensive clothing.

The old man glanced down at me as we started walking down the road.

"Don't worry, boy. Your friend will be fine. I know someone who can help him."

He paused, as if considering what he was about to say next. "You saved my life tonight. Now I will save yours and your friend's. I pay my debts. My name is Raymond Black."

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **MODEL PRISONER**

**Cross Applied Technologies Correctional Center**  
**Montreal**  
**Republic of Quebec**  
**August 2056**

On my last day of lockdown, Warden Gustave "Big Gus" Cézanne called me out of my cellblock and gave me the long walk himself. Even for a troll, he was huge, with horns that would have done justice to the hood of a 1950s Cadillac, and he was proud of them. Freshly shined and spit-polished, those horns lay back along his head and curled back over his shoulders. There wasn't much room along his upper lip between his broad, flat nose and his large mouth, but he covered it with a Fu Manchu mustache parted on both sides by the tusks growing up from his lower jaw.

As always, he wore a gray suit with impact resistant underweave. He didn't



take chances with any prisoner, not even with the four armed guards that marched with us in two by two close protective formation.

Big Gus stood almost three meters tall, and dwarfed me in height and bulk. He draped a thickly-muscled arm across my shoulders, making me sag forward a bit. It was the first time he'd ever touched me, and I managed to keep from shrugging him off. He liked to play lord of the manor.

"Eight years, chummer," Big Gus mused. "You've been a model prisoner. Gonna miss you."

I knew for a fact that not every released prisoner got this kind of treatment. While I was in on lockdown, I'd made the best use of my time. Prison is a school for shadowrunners, and I'd learned from the best among my peers. I'd worked out every chance I got, learned new ways to hack security systems, and trained in a few martial arts I hadn't known when I'd gone down. I was in better shape now. Stronger. Faster. More disciplined.

While I was stacking time, I'd done favors for organized crime bosses inside and outside lockup so I could keep enough credits on the books to eat healthy instead of getting stuck with the soy and krill swill they served in the cafeteria. I watched over different prisoners I was asked to provide protection for, and broke noses, fingers, and ribs of people who didn't listen.

I'd been one of the warden's boys as well, earning a few extra privileges because I worked hard during provided work shifts. We made cheap circuit boards used in CATCo's entertainment and multimedia brands. Cross Applied Technologies made cost-effective use of its captive labor force every chance it got. After a while, Big Gus had made me a team leader, which made my bodyguard and enforcer work even easier.

"Though it pains me to say it," I said, "I'm not gonna miss this place."

He laughed because he was good-natured about things. "Do yourself a favor. Make sure you don't miss Montreal anytime soon, either. Or anything CATCo does. You get two strikes with us. Get caught on your third, they take you someplace quiet and park a bullet behind your ear."

I knew that. All the corps made prison sentences work for them. They locked people down, held a captive labor force to pawn low-level grunt work off on, and got a kickback from the government as well as tax breaks for housing the "dregs of society." If taking and keeping prisoners wasn't such a wiz deal, no shadowrunner would ever be taken alive by the corps.

As it was, sec teams didn't stress themselves over killing shadowrunners.

On the other hand, corps needed shadowrunners like me. We were the off-the-books labor force they used for strikes against other corps. Intricate chess games were played daily between the big corps. A shadowrunner was a deniable asset who could headhunt and extract talented employees, change a profit and loss statement, and even impact the stock market under the right conditions. I knew that because I'd been part of those runs on occasion.

In a few weeks, I might hear from a Mr. Johnson, also a deniable asset, who needed some work done. And CATCo might well be the entity that made that deal happen. The corps never forgot who you were—especially if you could still be useful to them.

“You did good work while you were here,” Big Gus said as we reached the final gate.

He offered his huge, rough hand, and I shook it, not because I wanted to or because it was polite, but because I knew as soon as I did, he'd have that gate raised.

I shook. The gate rose. And I stepped out into the blinding sunlight a free man.

I took a deep breath and considered my prospects. Thanks to the work I'd done inside (a pittance from CATCo and some substantial cred from the bodyguard jobs), I wasn't hitting the streets with nothing in my pocket. A pocket of the cheap business suit CATCo gave all of its released prisoners.

A Shark with blacked-out bulletproof windows waited at the curb. The car belonged to Picabia Retrievals, a bounty hunting outfit specializing in black bag operations around the world. They were a small but affluent operation. I'd watched over one of their guys inside lockdown. A job offer had been made for when I got out. I'd said I'd consider it, to be polite, but I wasn't a team player.

Especially not after getting sold out to CATCo on my last run.

However, I also wasn't going to walk twenty kilometers to the sprawl or wait at the bus stop three kilometers away for a long, sweaty ride with people who would know me because of the cheap suit and the proximity to the prison.

I walked toward the car and the liveried driver got out to open the door. It was a touch of class, and I appreciated it.

I sat in the back of the car in air-conditioned comfort and looked at the prison with a different perspective. The building was huge, twenty stories tall, and honeycombed with cells. Razor wire surrounded the rooftop that held the exercise yard. High above me, Big Gus stood behind bulletproof transplas and watched me

with a pondering look. I figured he was wondering how long it would be before I was back. Or locked down somewhere else.

That wasn't going to happen. I wasn't going to be locked down again. Ever. I'd die first.

"Feels good to be out, hey?"

I turned and looked at the guy in the rear seat as the driver got us underway. Bryan Watteau was a good-looking guy, and knew it. Blond, buff, and bio-engineered. He wore a suit that had been made for him.

"It does," I said, to fill in the blanks.

"Have you thought about the job offer?"

"I have. I want to think about it some more."

Watteau nodded, but his smile turned a little artificial. He'd been sent there to close the deal. I wasn't cooperating. "Of course. Would you like to talk about it over lunch?"

"Dinner," I said. "I've got things I need to tend to."

The smile grew a little tighter. "Dinner is acceptable. We've made arrangements at a hotel in Montreal that I think you'll be happy with. Mr. Picabia is picking up the tab."

I nodded and sat back in the seat, enjoying the luxury, but not much liking the chains Watteau had come bearing as gifts.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **"THE PAST IS JUST A STORY"**

After eight years spent in lockdown, most people would have a lot to catch up on.

I didn't.

Ten years ago, I'd stepped away from my last family to run the shadows. I hadn't been able to fit into the life Raymond Black had guided me toward and Duncan had enjoyed. The old man was too rigid, too law-abiding to suit me.

Except for the execution of the man who had run him off the road the night

I met him, I'd never known the old man to do anything other than run a noodle shop and a small repair business for collectible gear-driven devices. He had shelves of clocks and automatons that he'd bought, repaired, and repainted exactly as they had been hundreds of years ago. He made more credits selling bowls of noodles.

Losing Duncan had hurt, but he wasn't the small kid I'd tried to save anymore. He was grown. And he was an ork.

Turned out the fever I thought was going to kill him was just Goblinization presenting. Unexplained Genetic Expression started in 2011 and reintroduced the world to metahumanity in the form of elves, dwarfs, trolls, and orks in newborns.

Goblinization hit people of all ages, but a lot of the time it came around puberty. Duncan had been thirteen. When he'd started getting bigger than me really fast, he thought that was pretty wiz. The tusks took some getting used to, but he adapted. He'd always adapted better than I had.

Probably still did.

I didn't know. Even before I'd gotten locked down, I'd cut ties with Duncan and the old man. They had expectations of me. I just wanted to run, party, and see the rest of the world. If the old man had had his way, I would have never left Seattle.

So when I got to the hotel room, which was large and spacious and stocked with every comfort I could want, including a cutting-edge trid and a view of Quebec's neon-splashed downtown, I didn't hook up to a jackpoint and call family or scroll through bulletin boards for information. I had a fixer I got jobs from, someone who could put me with the people I needed to be with. He was waiting on me to come looking. He'd hook me up.

I liked the hustle and the danger of the shadows. I liked living on the edge, clinging by my toenails.

I'd gotten locked up because of a mistake I'd made in picking the wrong person to run those shadows with. When she'd gotten caught, she'd screamed to everybody who'd listen who her partner was. Even then, I'd almost gotten away. I had a ticket to a suborbital in my hand when they'd taken me down.

I was SINless before I went into lockdown. Part of the intake for prison was assigning a System Identification Number to any inmate who didn't have one. So

I had a name that wasn't my own, but it was still an identity that could be tracked. Not even Duncan or Raymond Black knew my present name.

Eventually I'd have to lose that SIN, but getting rid of it would cost more credits than I had access to at present. That was another reason I didn't want the bounty hunter job. Those guys had to be licensed. Heavy-duty SIN, and even harder to scrape off when you needed to vanish.

Alone in the world for the first time in years, I took a shower by myself and slept in a bed people could have farmed on.

I woke in the quiet darkness of the room, and for a few moments forgot I wasn't in lockdown. I lay still and listened for the breathing of my cellie. When I realized no one was in the room with me, I figured out that the quietness of the room was probably what had woken me up. In lockup, noise constantly filled every inch of space.

I checked the time and found there were still three hours to go before dinner with Watteau.

Unable to go back to sleep, I got up, made a cup of oolong tea in the pricey kettle that came with the room, and hooked up my commlink. It was a cheap MetaLink model without all the bells and whistles, a use-and-lose device that clipped over my ear. I'd been meaning to get an implant, but hadn't found anyone in the shadows who I trusted and could afford. All those credits I'd dreamed of raking in had never happened.

Using the room's deck, I hit up some of the bulletin boards where my fixer posted. It didn't take me long to catch up with some of the runners I "knew." You don't ever really know another runner. Most of the time you got a street name, and maybe some sense of what the runner was all about. But you didn't get personal with each other.

That was my mistake with Buttons. We'd gotten personal, but I never knew her real name, and she never knew mine. But she'd known enough about me to give me up.

The first message was a straight up job offer from a fixer named Cooper. He used to be a rigger back in the day, before he'd blown out of the sprawl after his nephew got killed by another runner crew. One of the guys back in the cellblock must have given him my info.

*>Hey, I'm reaching out to find out if you're up for a run. I know you just got out, but I've got something I think you'd be perfect for. I've got part of a crew together already. A hermetic mage who calls himself Chaos and loves to take on the megacorps. And a street sam named Brix. He's human, so he presents a low profile. If you're interested, the run will be led by an elf named Isabella. She used to be head of security for a megacorp, so she'll have the inside track on this. I'll vouch for her.*

The job sounded interesting, so I saved the contact info.

It didn't take long to cycle through the chaff, and there was little I really wanted to know or get involved with. I liked keeping to myself. That was one of the things about me that Duncan and the old man had never gotten used to.

The old man told me I'd suffered too much damage to ever trust anyone again. Maybe he was right. But I'd surprised us both by staying as long as I had.

He'd known I was going to leave at some point, though. And he'd prepared for it by setting up a private comm account we could both access. In case I ever wanted to get in touch with him and be circumspect about it. Which meant whatever slotted up mess I'd gotten myself into wasn't supposed to be dragged back to Duncan.

I'd agreed. Over the years before I'd been locked down, I'd accessed it maybe half a dozen times. There'd only been one message from the old man. He'd wished me well and told me that, if I ever needed it, I always had a home.

I hated hearing that message. But I was glad it was there.

After eight years of silence, I wondered if the account would still be there, if the message would still be the same. I guessed part of me just wanted to know the old man was still alive. If he wasn't, if the noodle place was still in business, I figured Duncan was managing it. Or maybe it had been sold, and the new owner had kept the old name. Noodle places get a lot of customer loyalty.

I sat there in the darkness for a while, watching the trid showing a soccer game I didn't care about but enjoying the three-dimensional presentation in the room all the same. It was a lot better than the re-education productions shown in lockdown.

Then I accessed the site.

*"You have one message,"* the electronic voice told me. The recording was recent, too, dated only a couple days ago. There was no vid, just the aud

component, but I could hear the years in the old man's voice.

*"Hi. It's Raymond."*

I sat quiet and still, because I'd never heard him sound so hopeless. He'd always driven Duncan and me, never accepting anything less than our best.

*"I hope I have the right number."*

I took a breath, wondering how he wouldn't have the number, since he was the one who'd set up the account.

*"Look, I know we haven't spoken in a while, but I need your help."*

I stopped breathing for just a moment. For as long as I'd known him, the old man had never asked for help from me or anyone else. Where was Duncan? Had something happened to him? I worried instantly, then a suspicious part of me—that part that's worked to keep me alive—wondered if the old man was calling me because he needed something Duncan wouldn't do.

I also wondered why there was only the one call. If the old man had been truly desperate, he would have called again.

Unless he hadn't been able to.

*"Remember the day I took you and Duncan in from the street? I told you the past is just a story. That if you could just accept that, your past loses all power over you."* He paused. *"I was wrong."*

Admitting he was wrong was something else I'd never heard the old man do. A chill ghosted through my body. I couldn't help wondering what the old man had gotten himself into, and whether he'd dragged Duncan into it as well.

*"I'm on my way to Hong Kong now to face something I should have faced a long time ago."*

The old man had never mentioned Hong Kong to me. I didn't think he'd ever told Duncan anything like that either. But I knew he had some kind of past. I never forgot those two men who'd been trying to kill him. Even after I'd looked into it, I never discovered anything. He was a cipher, but I knew something had been waiting out there. The things you do in the shadows? They never go away.

*"I need you with me. I know we're not blood, and we didn't leave things in a good place, but you and Duncan are the only real family I have."*

My gut unclenched. *You and Duncan are...* Duncan was still alive. I hung onto that more tightly than I thought I would.

*"Please...if our past means anything to you...meet me in Hong Kong right away."*

The old man's pleading cracked the hard shell I'd put on during lockdown.

I'd promised myself nothing would ever touch me again. I resented him in that moment more than I ever had. Having to rely on him when I was younger had made me feel weak. That was part of the reason I'd left home; I couldn't afford to be weak.

But now, hearing the fear and frailness in his voice, I felt vulnerable again, like I'd felt while protecting Duncan, when it had been just the two of us.

*"I'm almost out of time..."* His final words drifted away.

I waited for him to continue, but that was the end of the message. Not even a goodbye. I played it over again, but there was nothing new, and his words weighed on me like boat anchors.

There was a link at the end of the message. I pulled it up and discovered that the old man had wired nuyen to an account I'd had access to under the SIN I'd carried when I'd lived with him. That identity was still valid. When I checked the amount, I discovered there was enough in it to buy suborbital passage with credits left over. I guess the old man figured I'd come out of lockdown busted and flat broke.

Then I wondered why he'd left the message two days ago. My release date was a matter of public record.

Had the old man not known?

Or had something already happened to him?

I sat with that thought for a while. The old man wasn't invincible. Nobody was. I'd never even thought I was.

I tried calling the comm the old man had used to reach me, but it was disconnected. So was the comm at the house and the noodle shop.

For a minute, I thought about trying to call Duncan, but I didn't know what he'd done with his life. In the end, I decided that if he wasn't involved in whatever the old man had gotten locked up in, that he didn't need to know. To me, Duncan was still that kid I found in the alley, and the disciplined teenager who worked in the noodle shop. I couldn't imagine anything that would have prepared him for whatever the old man was facing.

I figured I was on my own, and that was fine. That was how I liked things.

I left the hotel room and took the back way out of the building. Watteau never knew I'd left till I was in the wind.



# CHAPTER 3

## CARE PACKAGE

**Victoria Harbour**

**Hong Kong Free Enterprise Zone**

**August 2056**

I'd heard about Hong Kong. You can't live in Seattle or probably anywhere along the Pacific Rim and not run into constant reminders of the corporate-governed statelet. South East Asia left its mark on most sprawls in all culture: food, music, cyberware, magic, and other things.

I used most of the old man's credits on a suborbital ticket and landed at Chep Lap Kok. The airport was full of people in a hurry, all of them lacquered by neon lights from the various businesses where hawkers cajoled everyone that passed by. Since I didn't have any luggage, I got out of the airport as quickly as I could, and aimed myself at a bus station.

After being in prison, with cells all around me and on top of and below me, I'd thought there could be nowhere worse on the planet when it came to overpopulation and harsh circumstances. I was wrong. The sprawl was a mass of people packed as tight as maggots on a corpse. And many of them smelled about as bad.

A squall had risen up over the ocean and sailed inland. I'd heard about monsoon season before, even seen it in simsense games, but being in it was different. Angry black clouds drenched the street in heavy curtains of acid rain that floated refuse and threatened to lap over the curbs. I stepped across a dead rat racing with the new tide and was already soaked to the bone.

The double-decker buses were bisected in red and yellow, with the name of the line in English and Pinyin and bar code. I managed to jam myself into a narrow seat and waited restlessly to get underway.

Even though the suborbital had rocketed around the world in only a matter of hours, all of those hours had been spent worrying about the old man. And I worried about Duncan, too. If he knew the old man was in trouble, he'd be there.

Worrying about someone other than myself was strange. Even while running the shadows, risking my neck on my skills, seeing a whole other world, in the

back of my mind I'd known the old man and Duncan were safe. I'd hung onto that thought in lockdown, too.

Finally, the last passenger boarded and we took off, barely making headway through the mass exodus of humanity leaving the terminal for a short time. We rolled through the neon-lit streets, past bars and joygirls and -boys standing under protective awnings. Nobody looked festive.

After a bus ride to Victoria Harbour, I bought a water taxi ticket and took a seat inside. Water dripped from the other passengers and their umbrellas, collecting with the pools of rainwater that sluiced across the open deck.

The ride across rough waters caused the taxi to pitch and yaw wildly. At the stern, the young, green-faced pilot clung to the controls, and I wasn't sure if he was seasick or coming down from mind-altering drugs.

Long minutes later, the taxi thudded into the tire-bumpers along the pier so hard that some of the passengers spilled onto the deck.

An old woman in expensive clothing landed near me and cursed loudly. Three sec guys in black suits hustled to her as I helped her up.

"Stand back," the oldest guard ordered in Cantonese.

It took a moment for the language to come back to me. The old man had used it in the house, and I'd picked up more during my days in the shadows.

"Hey," I responded in English while backing away and holding my hands out in front of me. "I was only trying to help."

I turned and bumped into one of the guards behind me. He was so concerned over helping his superior that he didn't notice me lift the Savalette Guardian from his hip holster and shove it in my waistband.

I kept moving, slipping into the throng during the rain that pattered against the taxi and the concrete pilings. The taxi's fiberglass hull squealed as it rubbed against the roped tires, but the pilot kept the craft mostly steady.

The weight of the pistol felt reassuring. I didn't think getting weapons would be difficult in Hong Kong. Nothing really was. But I had to have connections. And those were in short supply at the moment. Trust was the hardest commodity to find in the shadows.

The Guardian held twelve rounds and could be fired on single-shot or burst mode. This one was heavily chromed, a rent-a-cop showpiece, but still a

serviceable weapon. I just preferred something more old school, less showy and not so high-maintenance.

Shielding my face against the downpour—and also covering my features in case the sec guard noticed his missing pistol and might remember what I looked like—I climbed the concrete stairs to the pier. A helicopter roared by overhead, temporarily drowning out the engine noise stuttering from the vessels chugging through the black harbor chop.

Standing there for a moment, I looked around and took in the sights. The pier was pure working class, no frills. I wondered what the woman and her guards were doing there, and did the math easy: nothing good. Not this late at night, not in this place.

The wind whipped around me, plucking at my duster and filling my nose with the raw stink of the ocean, sewage, diesel exhaust, spicy street food, and chem traces from industries ringing the port. Space was limited in Hong Kong, and every square meter was used to make a profit. The odor was enough to make my stomach lurch, but I kept everything down.

I started walking forward, wondering where to go next. The old man hadn't left me any clues except for the city I now stood in.

A man called out my current SIN name, and I turned toward him, my hand slipping beneath my jacket for the butt of my new pistol.

A young guy wearing the water taxi's colors carried a scuffed leather duffel to me. "Sorry for the inconvenience, sir." He spoke in English. "We were supposed to deliver this to you on boarding, but the weather has been harsh."

Before I took the duffel, I glanced at the handwriting on the ID tag tied to the grip. That was my SIN name, but below it someone had written the name I'd carried when living with Duncan and the old man.

I took the bag and slipped him a few nuyen as a tip, but not enough to be remembered. He thanked me and hurried back to the water taxi.

I glanced around, checking to see if anyone had developed any special interest in me, but everyone—including the old woman and her entourage—busily scampered to get out of the rain. All of them were soaked and couldn't get any wetter, but they were in denial.

I took the ID tag out of its plastic case, let the rain soak the paper, then smeared the wet ink so that it became illegible. I moved on, keeping an eye on the sec guards ahead of me, waiting for the moment the guy noticed I'd liberated his piece. He never did.

Spotting a work site on the left side of the pier, I sank into the shadows and examined the duffel. I couldn't find any booby traps or tracking electronics, and I was just sensitive enough to magic to know when I was in the presence of something truly dangerous.

None of which guaranteed that I hadn't picked up something from the duffel. Still, curiosity is a powerful thing, and no one I knew had both of my SIN names. I believed the duffel could only have come from the old man.

I worked the zipper and found a full suit of new black ballistic-proof weave body armor just my size inside. I stood in the shadows under the new construction going up and got dressed. A note fluttered out from the bottom of the bag:

*BETTER TO BE SAFE THAN SORRY.*

—D.

The “D” puzzled me. The old man had never referred to himself as “Dad,” not even during the message he'd left me on the comm. But maybe he'd used that to mislead anyone else who might have gotten their hands on the duffel.

Either that, or the “D” stood for Duncan, and I wasn't ready to go there yet. Duncan was in no way prepared for anything Raymond was involved in. Not with the old man sounding the way he had on the call. Whatever he'd gotten tied up in, I wasn't sure I wanted any part of it. And I knew if it was too much to tackle by myself, I'd leave him in it. I was cold enough to do that. Duncan wasn't.

I told myself Duncan wasn't there because I wanted to keep my scouting mission as simple as possible. Get in, get a look, and if things looked too bad, get out again.

Dressed in the body armor, feeling more like my old self than I had in years, I covered it all with the jacket. I'd intentionally bought the garment large to cover armor. I just hadn't known I'd be putting my hands on a suit so soon.

I tossed the duffel and my old clothes in a nearby trash dumpster and walked back to the pier.

Back on the pier, everyone gone now, hustling away from the rain and toward whatever waited for them in Hong Kong, I stuck to the shadows. Then I noticed two people walking toward the end of the pier. That bothered me instantly. The water taxi wouldn't be back for at least an hour or so.

No one would wait in the rain that long for a ride.

I shifted to the low-light vision I'd upgraded to before I'd gotten imprisoned.

I wasn't a big believer in cyber augmentation, but there were some bits that weren't too invasive and were way too useful to ignore. They were just expensive.

Even with the enhanced vision, all I could tell about the pair was that one was an ork and the other was an elf. He was big and bulky, probably street muscle, and she was curvy. What she was beyond that remained to be seen.

I took a fresh grip on the Guardian and kept walking.

Just as I was about to pass, the ork looked at me. Then he called out my name. The one only the old man and Duncan had known.

## CHAPTER 4 THE PARTNERS

The ork faced me with his hand resting on the big pistol he carried. Even though sheathed in a long coat and body armor, his thick muscles were still obvious. His lean features looked challenging and unforgiving—and familiar. Wraparound sunglasses covered his eyes, the lenses chem-treated so the rain slid away immediately.

His partner held her pistol at her side. She wore sunglasses too, but I knew she was looking at me with cop's eyes. I couldn't mistake that much instant disapproval.

"I don't know anyone by that name," I said automatically. The name was common enough that my response was instantly a lie to anyone who had half a brain.

"I know you." Despite the ork's tough guy attitude, he smiled a little. He also looked worried. "We've been watching for you."

My first impulse was to walk on. I would have, too, except in that moment I recognized him.

*Duncan.*

He'd gotten even bigger since I'd last seen him. He'd been fifteen eight years ago, already coming into his full growth, but he was easily a head taller now.

He'd obviously been working out too, and whatever regimen he was following evidently agreed with him. He was taller and heavier than I was, and moved with a smooth glide that told me he was probably cybered, too.

"Duncan." I said his name softly, but it reached him.

"Well, don't you look like shit."

I spread my hands and shrugged. In addition to the water taxi ride, the unfamiliar stench that surrounded me, and the hours spent without sleep the last day or so, the surprise of seeing Duncan there—of knowing he was unknown to me and probably still in danger—made my stomach lurch. I barely kept it down.

"Green's not really your color," Duncan said. "Doesn't go with that nice new armor you have."

"I guess I have you to thank for it."

"Yeah. From the way Raymond sounded, I figured we'd need to armor up."

"How'd you know I was coming?" I didn't want this reunion. Not like this. Not walking in blind. Not in front of Duncan's partner, whoever she was.

"I didn't. Not for sure. It's been eight years." He smiled, but still kept his distance, and his hand on the pistol. "Raymond said he was reaching out to you."

"Where is the old man?" I wasn't ready to be around family. Too many questions would be asked about where I'd been. The old man probably knew, but he probably wouldn't have told Duncan anything about it. Like me, he'd tried to protect Duncan from the world.

Duncan shook his head. "That's what we're in Hong Kong to find out. We arrived a couple hours ago."

I looked at the woman. "'We?'"

"My partner and me," Duncan said. "Look, I don't feel like standing around out here in the open. Too many skels out walking the streets, even on a night like this. We gotta find Raymond."

"Find Raymond?" I shook my head, then looked around. "I thought he'd be here."

"He never showed up." Duncan frowned. "I don't know if he was planning on it." He focused on me. "I don't know what he told you."

"Not much. Just that he was in Hong Kong working on some old business."

"I don't suppose he told you what business that was?"

"Did he tell you?"

Duncan spat a curse. "No." He kept up the tough guy attitude, but I knew him. Used to know him, anyway. I felt certain he was hurting. The old man had

never been a guy who played games. He'd never hidden anything from Duncan and me.

Except for everything he'd done before that night he took us in.

That wasn't exactly true, though. The old man had lived in Seattle for a while. He had a history there. But it only went back twenty-five years. The old man had had friends, but not many, and none who knew him well. We had no idea where he'd been before that. I hadn't cared during the time I lived there. I was only looking for food and shelter, and a way out when I was ready.

Looking back now, maybe I should have been more suspicious. But I'd been focused on me once Duncan had been taken off my hands.

"When's the last time you saw him?" I asked.

"A few weeks ago. Before I got his message telling us to meet him here. I'd been working a lot, so I hadn't been by the house in a while." Maybe no one else would have heard it, but I heard the guilt in Duncan's words.

"How was he?"

Duncan bit his lower lip between his tusks, and that reminded me of the kid I'd spent two years trying to keep alive on the streets. "He's not the same. Raymond hasn't been himself in a long time."

"How so?"

"He's been restless. Staying in his study, inside his own head a lot. And he barely sleeps anymore." Duncan took in a big breath and let it out. "I've been worried about him, but I haven't figured out what to do about it."

Part of me wanted to comfort him, but I knew I couldn't do that because he was too aware that he didn't know me anymore. His hand still stayed close by his pistol.

Even though all I saw were those red lenses, his eyes pierced me as he focused on me. "And I didn't have a brother to turn to. Hell—wasn't too sure you were even still alive, until Raymond managed to track down your number."

For a moment, the tense silence hung between us, then the woman broke it. Her voice was soft but controlled, and no-nonsense, too. She was used to being in charge. "We should get going, Duncan. Head back to the meeting point in case your dad shows up."

At her words, Duncan squared up in military precision. "Copy that, Sarge."

The response surprised me, and I spoke before I knew I was going to.

"Sarge?"

The woman bristled like I'd challenged her, but kept herself in check.

“Carter. Seattle Lone Star. I’m Duncan’s partner.” She smiled a little, but it was cold, a mask to set lesser minds at ease. She was pretty. Dark hair framed her elegant face, and tattoos showed against the pale skin on her forehead and neck. “And superior officer. I let him carry my coffee for me sometimes...write my parking tickets...that kinda thing.”

Looking closer now, I could see the body armor they wore was Lone Star issue. The private security firm had a rep as one of the toughest in the biz.

“I figured I could use some backup,” Duncan said. “Didn’t know what Ray’d gotten himself into, and I wasn’t sure you were gonna show up.”

There was no way to miss the accusation in his voice, and I couldn’t help but respond a little heatedly. “Well, surprise. Here I am.”

For a moment, the quiet returned, and all I could hear was the rain pecking away at the pier like a thousand sparrows.

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t so sure, you know?” Duncan’s face relaxed a little. “Hey look, I’m glad you’re here. Seriously. But I’m gonna need some time to get used to having you around again. Been a while since I heard from you, know what I mean?”

I knew what he meant. He didn’t like it that the old man had a way to get in touch with me and he didn’t. I knew he felt like I’d betrayed him. Hell, I felt like I’d betrayed him, too. But he couldn’t have survived in the life I chose for myself.

Him signing on with Lone Star proved that. Duncan preferred the straight and narrow, and the old man had helped keep him there.

When I’d first left the old man’s house, when I’d walked away from Duncan, I hadn’t adjusted well. It took me a while to get to sleep at nights because I was always thinking about them, wondering if the kid was doing okay. Being in lockdown had made those nights even harder. I’d left, sure, but I didn’t know if I’d ever really pulled away. But I’d definitely tried.

“Yeah,” I told him. “We’ll talk about it later, okay?”

I could tell Duncan wanted to talk about it now. That was how he’d always been; always wanting to deal with problems, questions, and mysteries immediately. Not put them off.

I couldn’t help wondering how that attitude was working for him at Lone Star. Still, he was here now with a pretty elf sergeant, and they were both way out of their jurisdiction. He had to have something working for him.

“Yeah,” he replied. “Okay.” Definitely not happy. “Let’s just find Raymond. He was supposed to meet us in the plaza on the other side of this pier.”



“The sooner we find him, the sooner you all can have a big happy family reunion over dinner.” Carter smiled. “And the sooner I can find a place to get a drink around here.”

Duncan took his hand away from his pistol and smiled as well. “Damn right.” He walked toward the other end of the pier.

Carter followed and I brought up the rear.

In the distance, downtown Hong Kong was a forest of neon-lit towers. Helicopters and drones flickered through the dark night around them like glowing bugs drawn to the lights.

The old man used to say that Hong Kong was like a serpent that rose from the sea, that the scales were equal parts old and new, equally corp greed and government corruption, that no one could find the head or the tail in all the twisted coils that ran through the streets.

I saw it then, the skyscrapers reaching for the dark, lightning-lit heavens, and the small houses tucked into the shadows that filled the streets, the houseboats and fishing boats where generations of families were born and lived and died.

Yet somehow, in the middle of all this, Duncan and I were expected to find out what trouble the old man was in.

Before it found us.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **SMUGGLERS**

A short distance farther on, a massive alloy sec gate blocked our path. Mesh fences topped with sec cameras and razor wire created a corridor that ringed us on both sides, except for paths to the new construction, and those went nowhere.

Duncan walked to the gates and shoved. Nothing happened. “Huh. Well that was open earlier.” He looked around. “Looks pretty solid.”

“Shouldn’t there be someone here to let us out, or something?” I asked.

Swiveling his head, Duncan swept the pier with his gaze. “Yeah, smells

funny, don't it?"

"Who knows?" Carter said. "It's Hong Kong. Not exactly sure how things work around here."

I studied the gates, then looked to the left, where the sec shack sat. The darkened windows immediately warned me something was wrong. I caught Duncan's eye and nodded at the guard post. "The lights are off."

Duncan grimaced. "Could be a power outage."

"Yeah." I didn't put much belief in my response.

Duncan still knew me well enough to read between the lines. His hand drifted down for his pistol. Mine was already in hand.

"Maybe we should wander over that way and see what's going on." Duncan stepped forward, but Carter caught him by the arm.

"C'mon, rookie," she said. "We can cut through the construction site. We don't need to be involved in anything that happened over there. Too many questions will be asked."

Duncan smiled at her, and I got the vibe that maybe there was an enhanced partnership going on here.

"I hate it when you call me that," he said, but there wasn't any rancor in his words like there had been with me.

Carter took the lead, and we walked back to a security checkpoint we'd passed. The boxy computer interface sat a few meters from the smaller gate blocking access to the construction site beyond the barrier.

The various retina and print scanners immediately proved beyond my capabilities. Electronics had never been my thing. I depended on stealth and speed and muscle when social engineering failed, and when it came to it, I could break heads with the best of them.

"We can climb over," I suggested.

Carter shook her head and pointed at beads set atop the fence. "Those are sec cams. Start climbing, and they start recording." She looked at the computer interface. "Gimme a sec, and lemme see what I can do."

Grabbing the housing with both hands, she yanked it off with a screech that ricocheted inside my skull. I closed my eyes for a second, till the echoes faded away.

After a minute, she looked up at Duncan. "Looks like there's another way off the docks on the other side of this gate. I think I can bypass the lock."

Duncan nodded. "Get it done." He took up a defensive position in front of

the gate.

I backed him up, but I turned so I could watch over the lady cop, too. Too many things might have been lurking in the shadows. I couldn't help thinking it was a great ambush point. I'd always been slightly paranoid. That trait had saved me dozens of times.

Using a small knife, Carter stripped some of the wires and touched them together. Sparks flared. Then, with a rattle of wire mesh and a rasp of steel on concrete, the gates parted.

“Got it.” Carter folded her knife and put it away as she stood. “Let's go.”

I took lead, like I always had when Duncan and I had made our way along the streets.

Light shone down in a spotty pattern, tearing away some of the darkness in a few areas inside the new dock. I halted a few meters inside and swept the area with my low-light vision, noting piles of cargo and machinery. The storage area on our left and the high wall on our right framed two water pits used for loading submersibles. The area between the two wet loading areas formed a perfect killbox.

Not entirely satisfied by the apparent fact we were alone, I moved forward warily.

Movement caught my eye and I spotted a gang of guys lifting a crate from a low-slung matte black speedboat that I was willing to bet was covered in anti-radar protection. The vessel was made for fast deliveries and escaping detection.

The boat pilot powered up his craft and sped away. Caught off guard, the guys handling the crate dropped their prize into the water and it sank immediately. They turned their attention to me and Duncan and his lady friend.

Dressed in armor and holding weapons, the smugglers burst out of the shadows to our left. A torrent of Cantonese reached my ears and I struggled to make sense of it. The language hadn't been spoken much in lockdown, not with the guys I'd hung with.

Pistol ready, I took cover and started to tell Carter and Duncan to do the same, but they were already in motion, moving like a well-oiled machine.

Duncan called to them, speaking flawless Cantonese. I understood him a lot better. The old man had made us learn the language, and he never spoke anything else around the home. He hadn't talked much about his past, but he'd clung to parts of it all the same.

“You guys doing some late night fishing?” Duncan didn't back off, didn't

make apologies or tried to defuse the situation. He went right at it, letting them know we were ready to handle whatever they dished out.

He hadn't been that confrontational when I'd known him. I figured it must have been the Lone Star training. A bald Asian ork with cyberware over his left eyebrow and Chinese tattoos grinned at us from behind a stack of crates. "Oh, yeah. We're fishing for assholes."

Duncan used the laser sight on the AK-97 assault rifle he'd pulled from under his long coat to light up the pistol in the man's hands. "You're gonna need some better bait. All you're gonna catch with that is trouble."

The smuggler ducked and scuttled to a new location. Duncan had given up a free shot.

I glared at him and spoke low enough that only he could hear me. "Seriously? Did they teach you that in rent-a-cop school?"

He just grinned at me, and turned his attention back to the smugglers. He'd changed. He was starting to sound like I had back in those days. Way too confident.

Reaching under his jacket, Duncan pulled out his Lone Star badge and flashed it. "Lone Star. Put the guns down."

"Never seen a badge like that before," the smuggler leader yelled back.

I could understand the Cantonese better now. Maybe the adrenaline spiking my system was helping with that.

"Either it's fake, or you're some kind of security guard," the smuggler yelled back. "Either way, this ends the same."

"I think he's done talking," Carter growled. Her hands shimmered and I felt the tickle of magic across the back of my neck. Apparently guns weren't Carter's preferred weapons.

I fired two quick rounds into the smuggler leader, hitting with both. One thudded against the body armor, but the other threw a spray of blood from his left shoulder, staggering him for a moment.

Carter threw her hands forward and two shimmering masses about the size of pumpkins sped toward the leader. One of them smashed into another of the four smugglers and rocked him back from cover.

A third smuggler broke from hiding and rushed Duncan with a katana in his hands. Duncan tattooed the guy with rounds, but the smuggler never broke stride, and I knew he was cybered up.

Then I lost sight of Duncan because the smuggler leader blistered the pile

of metal pipes I'd taken cover behind with gunfire. Ricochets screamed in every direction, but none of the rounds touched me.

A ball of shimmering energy slammed into me just as the back of my neck prickled and I knew one of the smugglers was a mage. I tracked him and took deliberate aim. Duncan blocked the sword attack with his rifle, then managed to put two more rounds into his opponent.

I fired at the mage, hitting him, and saw that Carter had found him, too. Both of her mana bolts struck the man and knocked him back.

I moved forward and took up new cover behind a bigger crate, getting a better angle on the mage, and put two more rounds into him. The Guardian's recoil was almost nonexistent, and I appreciated the craftsmanship that had gone into the weapon as the mage dropped into a loose sprawl.

Duncan blocked the sword guy again, stepping into him and wrapping his big right arm around the smuggler's neck. Before the smuggler could bring his weapon into play, the big ork snapped his neck. The sharp *crack* of breaking bone pierced even the gunfire. Releasing the dead man, Duncan spun and dropped to new cover, already bringing his weapon up and laying down suppressive fire.

I took advantage of the distraction and sprinted along the water pits, closing the distance on the leader. He didn't know I was on him until it was too late. He tried to turn, but I put two rounds through his head from point blank range.

Duncan and Carter kept the last man pinned down as I hustled toward him beneath the cover of the security lamppost. He caught sight of me at the last second, and brought his shotgun up when I was still three meters away.

I launched myself into a baseball slide, hoping the rain and the armor wouldn't generate friction and stop me from reaching him before he killed me. It was like I'd dropped onto a sheet of ice. I slid toward him as double-aught buckshot cracked concrete just behind my head.

I drove my feet into his ankles, felt one break, and readied myself as he fell. I grabbed hold of his chest armor and swung myself astride him, pinning his arms, then put two rounds through his open mouth. He shivered and was gone almost as fast as the speedboat. Dead weight in my hands.

I got to my feet and checked the rounds I had left in the Guardian. There weren't many, but the dead man in front of me carried a Guardian along with his shotgun. I took his spare magazines, even the one in his pistol, but I left the weapon there because I had no idea what criminal history it might have. These hadn't been nice guys.

Duncan and Carter walked toward me in a tandem formation that told me they'd worked together a long time and been in bad situations before. They were loose and ready, and I couldn't help but feel a little pride at the way Duncan had handled himself. But part of me felt sad, too, that he would ever have stepped into this life.

"Think those guys were triad?" Carter asked.

"Not sure," Duncan said. "I don't recognize the tattoos."

I didn't either, but the tattoos shared too many commonalities not to mean something. I thought about everything I knew about Asian gangs, but the only ones I'd had contact with were transplants. Things were probably done differently here in Hong Kong.

I went through the smugglers' bodies and stripped them of nuyen and anything else I thought might be valuable. I didn't find much, but every little bit added to the war fund. Duncan folded his arms unhappily and Carter looked on with obvious disdain.

"We're in a foreign land," I pointed out as I went through the last guy's pockets. "The old man's missing, and we have no idea what we're up against. Or who. I don't know what resources you guys have in Hong Kong, but I'm standing here in what I have. So I'm gonna take whatever I find and hope it's enough."

Neither of them said anything, but neither of them tried to stop me.

"I spotted something back here." I led them to the lamppost, to the metal storage container I'd noticed on my way to attack the last of the smugglers. It looked about big enough to store a body or two, and rust speckled the exterior.

"You gonna open that?" Duncan asked.

"Yeah." I didn't make a habit of leaving things behind when I might be able to salvage something.

"It could be booby-trapped," Carter protested.

"That's why I'm gonna check first." I knelt in front of the container and gingerly felt around for wiring or any other surprises. Carter grabbed Duncan's arm and pulled him farther back. I ignored them.

After I found nothing, unable to walk away because of that innate curiosity that filled me, despite the fact that mostly it had brought me trouble over the years, I opened the container.

Nothing exploded, which was good.

The container held a lot of what I assumed was nautical gear, ropes and stuff, but it also had a vial tucked away in one corner. I reached in and took it out, then

held it up in the light to study. The transplas cylinder held a bilious yellow liquid that I recognized at once.

“That’s Tokko,” Carter said, approaching me after I hadn’t ended up scattered across the pier. I thought maybe she was disappointed. “A street drug made from Kamikaze. Users enhance fighting endurance with it.”

“I know,” I told her. Kamikaze was a combat stim. Addiction was physically detrimental and repeated abuse led to megalomania that usually got the heavy users killed because they thought they were gods. I’d learned about the drug from an ork street sam named Stardragon who’d worked in a triad-controlled gentlemen’s club downtown. She’d been a straight shooter, tough as they came.

I pocketed the vial.

“You’re taking that?” Carter asked.

“On the streets, it’s the same as a blank credstick. Somebody will pay for it.” I turned to the next set of gates behind us. “Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER 6 SHOOTOUT

The second gate stood slightly ajar, and showed dents and scratches from long abuse. I figured security might not be as tight here, but Carter still had to work her wiring skills to get us through.

A short corridor of neon-lit shops led us to another gate, this one already open. Evidently Hong Kong denizens liked compartmentalizing their lives, even if it meant they lived in small spaces.

As I watched Carter work, I talked to Duncan, hoping to ease some of the tension between us. “I thought she was a mage.”

“Speak Cantonese,” Duncan said in that language. He even sounded like the old man.

I frowned at him. “What’s with the lecture?”

“I could tell you couldn’t follow everything those smugglers were shouting.

"You're rusty, and that's dangerous." He returned my hard look. "Only Cantonese from now on. Just like when we lived at Raymond's house. Those endless drills are about to pay off."

I could tell Duncan didn't really think much beyond the surface of what he'd said. He was a guy who always took things at surface value. Me, I'd always tried to steal a look behind the curtain. Suddenly I wondered if the old man had had an ulterior motive for teaching us Cantonese other than to make us learn discipline.

I never took things at face value. Too many people wore too many faces.

"The pen of my aunt is sitting on the end table," I said in Cantonese.

"Satisfied?"

Duncan shook his head. "You gonna be a dick about this?"

"It's coming back. It won't be a problem."

"At least you can still handle yourself in a fight."

I tamped down the anger rising inside me. I was going to take things one step at a time, and arguing with Duncan wasn't profitable.

The gate lurched into motion with a harsh squeal. Duncan's hand drifted down to his pistol a second behind mine.

Standing up beside the checkpoint computer, Carter grinned at me, but it was a smartass effort, not friendly. "Got it."

I scoped out the shops we passed, but they were closed, and I didn't see anything I needed, so I kept traveling through the next gate, which was open.

Purple light from a vendor gate draped three men to my right. I stayed in the shadows and waved Duncan and Carter into hiding.

All three of the guys wore similar tats as the Asian smugglers we'd dealt with. Judging from the motorcycles around them, they could belong to a go-gang as well. Every country had biker gangs that dealt in drugs and weapons. I considered them and thought about my lack of armament. I wouldn't mind an upgrade, and I had nuyen in my pocket.

"Where's everyone else?" one of the gang members said. "Where's the damn shipment?"

"Haven't seen them yet," another guy said. "We just got here."

"Longwei's probably waiting for us," the first guy said, "so we can haul it out of the boat for him. That lazy bastard. Let's just hang out here—let him find us."

Okay, they were definitely part of the same dance troupe we'd just gone up against. So I figured a polite opportunity to conduct a business transaction wasn't



in the cards. I wanted to muscle up before we headed into whatever business kept the old man from meeting us, so I was ready to do this the hard way.

“Looks like we’re on a stroll through Smuggler Central,” Carter said.

Duncan nodded. “Those gangers don’t know we’re here. We could probably just slip past.”

“Or we could clip them,” Carter said. “They’re already looking for us. They just don’t know it yet. Might be better to take them out now—while we have the element of surprise on our side.”

I wasn’t going to do this the easy way, and I wasn’t going to pass up what could be a lucrative target. I didn’t mind preying on criminals. I’d done it plenty of times before.

I turned back to Duncan and Carter. “Cover me.” I didn’t give them time to argue, and I didn’t know if they would watch my six, but I had a goal in mind and I wasn’t going to back away from it. I held my pistol in hand and approached the gangers, but I angled for the prospective cover of two storage crates in front of the vendor stall.

Duncan squeezed into cover nearby and readied his rifle. Carter found protection a short distance away that provided her a full field of fire. We moved quiet and quick, and we were either that good, or the gangers were too juiced up on the mind blitz of their choice to notice.

Since Carter had already been in favor of taking the gangers down, I surveyed the three men in front of me. After only a brief inspection, I spotted the glowing tattoos one of the men wore. My neck prickled again, and I didn’t have to be hit with a stun baton to guess that he was a street mage.

I settled my sights on him and squeezed the trigger twice, sending a double-tap that dropped him in his tracks just as I saw the tattoos start to shimmer. I’d gotten lucky, and I knew it.

Duncan hesitated, his body jerked for just a moment, freezing where he was. Then the two surviving gangers turned to face us, filling their hands with weapons. He fired twice.

His target staggered with the impacts, but he didn’t go down. Blood streamed from the body armor as he tried to return fire, but Carter slammed him with a mana bolt and he sprawled into the street.

The third guy sprinted for cover before I could get a lock on him. He settled in behind one of the motorcycles and fired his rifle. Carter staggered back, but she didn’t seem to be injured.

Duncan and I maneuvered for shots and hit him, but the armor protected him. He drew back and hurled something toward us. My low-light vision picked up the spherical object and I yelled to Duncan. “Grenade!”

We took cover. The explosive detonated a few meters from us. Shrapnel and concrete chips from the street peppered us. My ears rang as I popped back up for another shot as the guy left his position behind one motorcycle and ran for the cover of another.

I bracketed him while he settled in and fired two quick rounds, knocking the ganger down for good. Ears still ringing, I changed out magazines in the Guardian and went forward with my senses alert. With how these guys had gone down, I figured they were finished, but I’d never trusted mages not to have a final trick up their sleeves.

Duncan and Carter followed me, all of us alert to anyone else that might have eyes on us. No one else seemed to be around, though. That fact bothered me some. Hong Kong was overpopulated. So where was everyone?

Maybe the storm had kept them in. Or maybe crime in the sprawl was just that bad. Either way, I wasn’t gonna discount our good fortune.

Duncan frowned at the dead man whose pocket I was rifling, and I knew he hadn’t liked the way things had gone down. “Your partner agreed with this.”

“Doesn’t make it any better,” he growled.

“These were bad men.”

He fixed me with those red lenses. “There are a lot of bad men around.” He turned and walked away.

I pushed away the hurt, surprised that words could still do that to me. But they’d been Duncan’s words, which meant they still counted for something. I went through the dead gangers’ pockets and checked their rides. One of the motorcycles had a first-aid kit in a small compartment, so I took it. They hadn’t had much of anything else.

I stood and looked at Duncan. “Which way is the plaza where we’re supposed to meet the old man?”

He pointed to a dark alley north of us, where a large crate stood blocking the way. “That way.”

“Let’s go.”

He took the lead this time, and I followed, with Carter bringing up the rear. We paused only a moment to shove the crate out of the way, then ducked into the alley. My senses thrummed, filled with the after-action adrenaline and

the knowledge that I was back in the shadows—the only place I’d ever truly belonged.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **WELCOME TO HONG KONG—NOW DIE!**

At the end of the alley, light poured in from a vendor stall to our right. Standing behind Duncan, I surveyed the area and didn’t spot anyone. The lack of local populace still bothered me. I tried to remember what the Asian people I’d known had said about the area, but I hadn’t known many who were that familiar with Hong Kong. Before boarding the suborbital, I’d reached out to a street sam I knew who dealt with the triads. Perrin Evans-Ehrich had squared away some of the info I had, updating me on current events and giving me a couple names he thought might help out, but it wasn’t all that much to go on.

A patched awning over a vending stall waved in the wind and rain, and other makeshift stalls stood around it. The area butted up against the seawall, and beyond it the ocean rolled endlessly under the onslaught of the monsoon season. The waves slapping against the concrete echoed around me.

“Let’s take a look around,” I said.

Duncan pushed out a breath. “That’s the opposite direction from the plaza where we’re supposed to meet Raymond.”

“With the way our luck is running, I’d rather know what’s behind us before we head into whatever’s got the old man tangled up.”

Surprising me, Carter said, “I agree.”

I led the sweep through the area and found it was deserted, which still left a hinky feeling in the pit of my stomach. Once I was satisfied, Duncan took the lead again and we walked toward the plaza. I wondered if the old man would meet us there. I wondered if the smugglers or go-gangers had buddies who would be looking for us.

Tonight was slotted. I hadn’t been in town more than an hour, and already

people would be looking for me.

After a few minutes, we reached a large street intersection. I stood beside Duncan and studied the lay of the land. Except for the helicopter sweeps above us and the rain, the sprawl was quiet. Way too quiet for my liking.

“This is where the old man is supposed to meet us?” I asked.

Duncan nodded. “Yeah. We came by before we walked out to the pier to meet you. Raymond wasn’t there then, but we were early. Maybe he’s there now.”

I stared into the darkness but couldn’t see anything. “Only one way to find out.” I loosened my pistol in its holster and checked the HK-97 I’d appropriated that now hung under my arm by its sling. Then I stepped out into the intersection and walked toward the plaza.

Before I got halfway across, I spotted the four people waiting for us. Judging by the size of one of them, I knew he was a troll, almost three meters tall and decked out in body armor. One of the others had to be a dwarf, because she looked tiny next to him.

As I approached, they spread out and stepped toward potential defensive positions behind parked cars and raised concrete garden beds with professional skill. We were walking into a potential battlefield.

No slouch at finding cover myself, I angled my approach to the raised parking wall in front of the group. They noticed, but didn’t do anything. They were waiting too, and they weren’t certain we weren’t who they were waiting for.

That was interesting.

This close in, I saw that the group consisted of the troll male, an elf male in combat armor who wore swords, the female dwarf carrying a deck, and an ork woman. As groups went, the mix told me they worked together, and that social circles hadn’t brought them together. They were armed to the teeth, and that was only the weapons I could see.

The big troll focused on me. “We’re strapped. Mind your manners.”

I didn’t say anything because I didn’t know what would set them off. I scanned the parking area, but there was no sign of the old man. Unless they’d already gotten him and stuffed him in one of the cars. I didn’t much care for that idea, and I was thinking way too dark to know as little as I did.

When Duncan squared his shoulders and smiled, I knew we might be in

trouble. Whatever happened to that calm boy I had known?

“Evening, folks,” he said. “You got permits for those bazookas?”

The big troll grinned. “Permits? Hmmm. Gimme a minute.” He patted his pockets and shrugged. “Nope. Guess not. I must’ve dropped mine into a dumpster—along with the last idiot who stepped up to us.”

I took a breath and gripped the Guardian. It was Duncan’s play, and I was going to back him. Carter stepped over to Duncan’s other side, making her intentions known as well.

Still Officer Friendly, Duncan smiled broader and nodded. “Is that right? Well then—”

He moved fast, faster than I expected. He almost caught me off guard. He spun his rifle up from under his coat in a practiced move, but the four people in front of us were just as fast.

In an eyeblink, everybody was staring down the barrels of everybody’s else’s guns. We were one bad finger cramp away from a bloodbath.

Fists shimmering with mana bolts she already had locked and loaded, Carter spoke in a quiet voice. “All right. Everyone just be cool.”

Somehow her calmness took the edge off. I took a breath, and I figured everyone else did, too.

The troll laughed. “A little late for that, isn’t it?”

I liked her style, and decided to back her play before things got really confusing. I holstered the Guardian and raised my hands, careful not to take them too far from my body.

“Nah,” I said. “It’s never too late to be cool.” I hoped I was right. If the people in front of us hadn’t acted so professional, and if they hadn’t looked like they were waiting on someone, it might have gone down differently.

For a tick, everything was frozen.

Then the troll tossed me a wink and turned back to Duncan. “Maybe we got off on the wrong foot just now. Something we can do for you, Officer?” The guy even had the nerve to grin.

Duncan clenched his jaw, and I knew he had a problem with the troll’s cavalier attitude. “I’m looking for an old man. Raymond Black. We were supposed to meet him here. You know him?”

The troll nodded and relaxed a little. “Mm-hmm.”

“Where is he?” Veins stood out along Duncan’s neck, and I knew he was barely keeping himself in check. He hadn’t come here to be played with.

“Easy, Duncan,” Carter said in a low whisper.

The troll kept his rifle pointed at my brother. “That’s right. Easy, Duncan.” He paused. “Your friend Raymond never showed. We’ve been waiting for the better part of an hour.”

The news didn’t shock me after the night we’ve had, but Duncan froze, vapor-locked.

“Think everyone can put their guns down?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” Duncan growled. “Not till I get some answers.”

The troll didn’t seem to take offense. His face stayed open, and he looked curious. “Like?”

“Like why a group of heavily-armed assholes is meeting a little old man in a construction site at midnight.”

Okay, it wasn’t the opening I would have gone with, but apparently that was the new Duncan. Straight ahead into things, no matter how bad it got.

The ork female stepped forward, putting herself to one side of the troll. A large black rat clung to her coat at her shoulder, its yellow eyes focused on me.

“We do odd jobs,” she said. “For money.”

I connected the dots instantly. These guys were like me, shadowrunners. And I wondered why the old man would hire a crew like them. What was he involved in?

Duncan didn’t back off the heat. He glowered at her. “What kind of jobs?”

“*Odd* jobs,” she said. She had a good smile, and she knew it. “This and that.”

I spoke up before Duncan could. “So...you were his tour guides, right?”

“Kinda, yeah,” the troll said. “The old man hired us to take you all on an excursion.”

Definitely shadowrunners. But that only meant we could trust them if we were putting nuyen in their pockets. I wondered if the old man had paid up front, because these people would be expensive.

That bothered Duncan even more. “Hired you?” He was putting it together now, and I knew that might not be a good thing. “You’re shadowrunners.” His tone let them know he wasn’t happy to find that out.

The troll nodded. “Um-hm.”

“This is bullshit!” Duncan roared. “Raymond would *never* hire shadowrunners. They’re criminals.”

Like me. I guessed then that Duncan’s decision to turn Lone Star might have been just as influenced by his knowledge of what I was as much as anything else.

The troll showed Duncan a crooked smile. “We prefer ‘mercenary operatives.’”

In a shy voice, the dwarf decker spoke up. “*Criminal mercenary operatives.*”

“So yeah,” the ork shaman said as she ran a hand along the rat’s fur, calming the rodent, “you were right. Your buddy Raymond *was* associating with a bunch of hardened criminals.”

She and the dwarf were making fun of the testosterone stinking up the air, but it was a dangerous game.

“Sorry to burst your bubble, Lone Star.” The troll smirked, and the tusks just sold the sarcasm even more. “Guess you didn’t know the old man as well as you thought, huh?”

“Let’s all stay focused.” Carter spoke in a calm tone, but she hadn’t turned off her spell yet. “No need for this to get ugly.” She turned to Duncan. “We need to find Raymond. These people can help us do that.”

“She’s right,” I said. “Let’s focus on Raymond.” I hoped that Duncan understood that killing these people wouldn’t help the cause. Not any more than us getting killed in the process.

“The old man wanted us to take him into Kowloon Walled City,” the ork shaman said. She waved a hand at us. “You, too.”

I sifted through my memories, but I didn’t recall a single instance of the old man talking about Kowloon or a walled city.

Another rat climbed out of the woman’s clothes and perched on her other shoulder. I ignored the itchy sensation of tiny claws climbing inside my pants legs. But I kept a closer watch on the ground. Just in case any more of her furry little friends happened to be lying in wait.

“Isn’t *this* Kowloon City?” I asked.

“Yeah, this is Kowloon.” The shaman stroked her new arrival. “But Kowloon *Walled* City is different. It’s a shithole. The worst slum in the eastern hemisphere. Trid clips and news stories can’t do it justice.”

I remembered the toxic dumps in the Barrens where Duncan and I had lived. I’d have to see this place to believe anything could be worse than that.

“We get it,” Duncan said. “It’s a real bad place. Now why would a little old man pay you to take him there?”

“Wouldn’t say.” The decker brushed back a long lock of curly hair that framed her small face. Her ebony skin shone under the purple highlights reflected from her scarf. “He mumbled a lot, too. Just kept rambling on and on about how

he *had* to get in.”

“Under ordinary circumstances,” the troll said, “I never would’ve accepted the gig. The Walled City is the last place I wanna go. But the old man rolled up a truckload of nuyen, and ya gotta eat, right?”

Duncan’s hold on his rifle relaxed a little more.

I wasn’t satisfied. “Why would Raymond want to enter the Walled City? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Didn’t make much sense to us either,” the troll replied. “But like I said, nuyen is nuyen.” He shrugged. “Okay, gang, I tell you what.” He looked at his team. “We’re gonna all put our guns down—”

Before the troll could finish whatever he was gonna say, a salvo of heavy caliber rounds crashed through the silence. One of the bullets smashed the troll’s head into bloody splinters. Another took out the elf. The decker and shaman dove for cover.

“Snipers!” the shaman yelled, but by that time I already knew that, and was dodging to the other side of the parking wall because I knew the rounds had come from behind us.

“Take cover now!” The decker slid behind one of the concrete planters and pulled out a bazooka.

“Carter!”

Duncan’s voice surprised me. When I looked back, he was standing over the elf’s crumpled body—a perfect stationary target.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **“PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS!”**

I raced toward Duncan and slammed into him, barely able to move him a few centimeters.

“Move!” I shouted. “She’s dead!”

One glance at her shattered skull and brain matter smeared on the concrete



told me that. I felt bad about her dying. I didn't know her, but I'd been warming up to her. Duncan had liked her. That had meant something.

Duncan stumbled a moment, then his reflexes kicked in and he headed for the protection behind the parking wall as another shot dug a crater in the parking area ahead of us. We huddled down behind the thick concrete. I hoped it would be enough to stop those bullets.

A chunk of the concrete wall at the top vaporized in white spray that was quickly drowned in the rain. The detonation of the shot rang out a moment later.

I risked a glance around the concrete barrier just as a muzzle flash sparked atop a building four blocks away, well beyond the reach of the Guardian and maybe the AK-97. The bullet struck the wall only centimeters from my face in the next instant. I dodged back as the *crack* of the shot rolled over us.

Duncan sat with his back to the barrier. I knew his thoughts were on Carter, and they'd get him killed if he didn't get focused.

"Duncan." I grabbed him and shook him, getting him to focus on me. For a second, I thought he was going to flatten me with one of his big fists. "Are you listening to me?"

"She's gone," he whispered.

"I know, and there's nothing you can do about that right now." I held his gaze with mine. "Whoever killed Carter is waiting out there to kill us, too. You know that, right?"

"Yeah."

"Right now we focus on saving ourselves." My breath rasped in my throat. "We focus on saving the old man. We do that, we'll find whoever killed Carter." His eyes narrowed. "Then we'll kill them."

I nodded, not knowing if that was possible, or if I'd stick around that long if things continued to go south. "We will," I told him.

He pulled it together then, bringing his rifle up. "Where's the sniper?"

"South, southeast. On the tallest building about four blocks away. We'll never reach him with what we have. So for now, we concentrate on getting out of here." I glanced down the street, away from the way we'd come in. I pointed. "We go that way."

"Okay."

I got up and ran to the side of a nearby car that gave me protection from the sniper. Two rounds splintered the brick wall to my right. Duncan was right on my heels.

Behind us, the ork shaman yelled at what I presumed was one of her dead friends. “Nightjar! Nightjar, c’mon, big man, talk to me!” She paused as another rifle round struck the downed troll. She wailed, then called out again. “Gutshot! No, no...”

Since the troll was clearly dead from a high-caliber round through the head, I had to assume that was the elf’s street name. It wasn’t fitting in death because he’d gone down from a headshot as well.

“Oh shit, Isobel,” she called out to the dwarf. “This isn’t good!”

I silently agreed with her as I kept watch to see how many snipers we were up against.

*“This is the police!”*

The blaring sound of the megaphone from farther up the street distracted me. I peered through the darkness and spotted flashing lights atop the official vehicles closing off the street. There was no way back, and going ahead looked almost impossible.

I guessed surrender wasn’t a viable option either. We’d been set up too well. Duncan cursed at the sight before us.

*“Lay down your weapons,”* the authoritative voice went on, *“put your hands behind your head, and come out where we can see you!”*

There wasn’t a chance in hell that I was gonna do that.

*“Duncan Wu!”* the man continued. And then he called my SIN name.

They knew *me*. They knew *us*. Whatever this was about, whoever had boxed us had done a wiz job of it.

*“Come out where we can see you! You have three seconds!”*

*“Stand down, damn it!”* Duncan yelled but remained in a crouch. “I’m law enforcement—Lone Star! *Lone Star!*”

A hail of gunfire raked the car where we’d taken cover. The windows shattered and rained down over us.

“Save your breath,” the dwarf called to us. “They won’t listen.”

Until the cops had called out Duncan’s and my names, I’d blamed the shadowrunner crew for all the legal heat. Now I and everyone else knew we’d popped up on someone’s radar.

“Use your eyes!” the ork shaman yelled. “These bastards aren’t here to make any arrests!”

A sniper round slapped into the wall only centimeters from her head. She ducked farther down into cover.

“We need a way out of here!” I yelled. This wasn’t my city. I didn’t know the shadows here.

“Everyone pipe down!” the shaman said. “Just gimme a minute!”

I could barely see her from where I was, but I watched her slip into a trance, bobbing back and forth for a moment. The three seconds ticked by, but the cops didn’t appear ready to close in. I held my ground and told myself Duncan and I were gonna get out of there in one piece.

Then the shaman stopped rocking and turned to us. “Okay, I’ve got a way out! It’s at the end of the street! Everyone come with me!”

I didn’t know if she’d been mind-speaking to her rodent friends or a trance was what it took for her to remember street routes under high-stress conditions, but I was drawing a blank on escape routes. So I nodded and made sure Duncan was with us.

“Everyone?” the dwarf protested. “We don’t need rent-a-cops, Gobbet! We’re the only ones—”

“They’ve got firepower, Is0bel!” Gobbet replied. “I’ve got us an exit, but we gotta get past the heat, and we can’t shoot our way out of this on our own! If anything, they can soak up a few rounds for us.”

Just when I’d started to like the shaman, she had to get practical on me. Fine. No love lost at either end.

She looked at me. “Just stick to cover—and keep close. There’s a door down the street that leads to a back alley. That’s our exit point.” Her voice hardened. “You fall behind, you get left behind.”

She started to head out, but gunfire from a cop crouched down behind a police motorcycle ahead of us drove her back to cover. Duncan and I concentrated fire on the cop. I’d wondered if firing on a brother officer would be a problem for Duncan, but evidently he’d figured out that we were on somebody’s hit list too.

While we kept the motorcycle cop pinned, Is0bel and Gobbet hot-footed it up behind the car where we were.

A cop on the other side of the street unlimbered a grenade launcher and popped a round that landed just behind us. All of us took damage from the shrapnel, scratches and cuts that wept blood, but at least weren’t pouring. Recovering from the blast, I spotted a policeman coming up along our back trail. I pointed him out to Duncan and swung my sights on the guy with the grenade launcher.

I squeezed off a couple rounds and put him down while Gobbet took out the

motorcycle cop with a single burst from her submachine gun. Duncan put both his shots into the cop behind us, then got hit by a heavy caliber round from the sniper, who clearly hadn't given up the field yet. Duncan's armor had held, but he staggered with the impact and dropped to his knees to recover. He glanced at me.

"I'm good," he croaked as he flexed his arm to work out the agony he had to be feeling. The heavy armor was bulletproof, but getting shot still felt like getting worked over with a sledgehammer.

Then I noticed the police drones hovering just behind the parked cars, and realized the sniper I'd seen probably wasn't tied to a rooftop and was more than likely a drone as well. They looked sleek and lethal, floating ball shapes as large as a man, outfitted with police lights, and equipped with heavy ordnance.

This just kept getting better.

"I can help with the drones!" Isabel yelled. "Cover me!"

While I blasted at the cops behind two police cars facing each other to block the street, the decker sprinted up to the police motorcycle fifty meters ahead of us. Turned sideways, the bike absorbed shots and kept her protected. If she'd been human-sized, she wouldn't have stood a chance.

She jacked her deck into the onboard computer. She worked only a few seconds, and the police drones' lights flickered as they immediately powered down.

Knowing they were in trouble, the cops behind the cars redoubled their efforts to keep us pinned down. I had no doubt that reinforcements were on the way.

Taking advantage of the suppressive fire Duncan was laying down, I sprinted closer to the police line. One of them turned and gestured, and I knew something bad was coming. That familiar prickle at the back of my neck ignited just before a shimmering shape with a hint of red manifested behind the cop. I tried to back off, but the cop gestured again and I was suddenly moving in slow motion, feeling like I was trapped in concrete.

The spirit darkened to the color of ash and threw a fireball at me. I barely avoided a direct hit, but I still got singed by some of the flames and the heat. Burning, unable to duck away, I choked down a scream and tried to bring up my rifle.

From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Gobbet sprinting across the street to a dumpster. She made a few wild passes as the fire spirit wound up for another fastball. I dodged again, and this time managed to get out of the way, but

the cop's service pistol round hammered between my shoulder blades. My body armor blocked the shot, but I still went down hard enough to knock the breath out of me as a second fireball streamed over my head.

I rolled, trying to find cover.

On the other side of the street, Gobbet's casting was answered by a pale blue entity made of water. At her gesture, the spirit tracked the one serving the cop, closing in for battle.

"Stay down!" Duncan roared as he raced toward me. The assault rifle chugged rounds as he fired at the cop. "Stay down!"

I beat at the flames clinging to my armor, afraid to breathe because I knew I'd smell my flesh cooking. Moving hurt. The fire hurt. But I couldn't just lie down and quit. That had never been my way.

One of Duncan's rounds clipped the policeman and put him down, but didn't kill him because then the fire spirit would have become untethered at that point. Then Duncan was next to me, beating out the flames on me with his bare hands. He called my name.

"I'm okay," I wheezed, but I knew I wasn't. Still, I got up when he pulled me to my feet.

Gobbet's spirit closed on the police. Hurting and disoriented, I watched the battle as shimmering forces collided. Flames winked out, and water hissed into clouds of steam. A moment later, the fire spirit collapsed into a sodden heap and faded away.

Duncan helped me run to the alley Gobbet led us toward. He paused only a moment to put a final round through the police conjurer's head, ending anything else he might have been preparing to unleash. Isobel trailed after us, doing the best she could with her short legs.

Another police line waited behind a barricade at the far end. Bullets split the air around us, occasionally thudding hard against our armor, but we reached the doorway Gobbet opened and entered a second after she disappeared inside.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONTINGENCIES

I was half out of it from the burns and the narco slap-patch Duncan placed on the side of my neck. I remember some of the twists and turns of the alleys and subbasements Gobbet led us through, but I have to admit that a lot of those memories are missing. I was in agony and junked up with narcotics at the same time.

Finally, somewhere in there, we stopped beside a water tank that smelled like sewage. I remember thinking that it was a hell of a place to die, and that I still didn't know why the old man had summoned us all to Hong Kong. Or where the stories about Kowloon Walled City fit in.

Nightmares drummed inside my skull, pulling out old memories and mixing them with the uncertainty of the now.

“Put him down,” Gobbet said.

Reluctantly, Duncan did as he was told.

The cold floor felt amazing to me, like I was on fire but lying on an ice floe at the same time. Moisture and mold clung to the rough stone walls. Dust and cobwebs filled the corner, and from the layer over the floor, I knew no one had been here in a long time.

With a look of concentration, Gobbet sat down cross-legged beside me. She sang and hummed and rocked in place. The rats danced on her shoulders and I spotted dozens of tiny eyes darting in the darkness. We weren't alone. We were among Gobbet's friends.

The thought struck me as inordinately funny, and I couldn't help laughing. But maybe that was the effect of the narcotics.

Duncan glanced at me with a worried scowl. “Is he gonna be all right?”

“He's going to be fine,” Gobbet said. “And once I'm finished with him, I'll take care of you.”

“Just make sure you take care of him.”

I tried to tell him I was fine, but I couldn't speak. Then Gobbet touched me and I was certain my whole body had become a pyre. I screamed and blacked out.

When I awoke sometime later, I felt a lot better. Moving slowly, expecting

the pain to hit me at any moment, I glanced around at the basement we'd ended up in. The water still stank, but I was no longer on fire.

A low-wattage lamp, hung with quick-adhesive in a corner, cast a dim glow over the room. Duncan and Isobel slept on the stone floor nearby.

I reached for my pistol, but a soft hand caught mine. I followed it up the arm that led to Gobbet.

"Feeling better?" she asked with a smile.

"Yeah." Then I noticed I had no burn wounds. "You healed me?"

"I did." She looked tired. "You were burned pretty badly."

"Thanks." That seemed small to offer in way of payment, but it was all I had.

"You're welcome, but don't think you're off the hook. I'm depending on you and your friend to help keep me and my friend alive." Gobbet's features twisted into a sour look. "Whatever that old man got us into, it cost Nightjar and Gutshot their lives. I don't want to die too. They were the only people I trusted other than Isobel, but now I gotta trust you. Do you understand?"

"Yeah. But I don't have any idea what this is about either."

"We're going to find out. Somebody has to pay for Nightjar and Gutshot. Somebody *will* pay." She smiled at me, but there wasn't any humor there. "For now, you need to sleep."

She touched my forehead with a fingertip, and the blackness welcomed me back.

When I woke up again, the others were already up and moving. I looked at Duncan's hands and saw they were fine, like he'd never burned them putting out flames on my body.

I got to my feet.

"About time, sleepyhead," Duncan said as he slung his rifle under his coat. "You don't get to laze away the day." Pain still shone in his eyes, but I didn't mention it.

I gathered my gear. "I suppose no one followed us."

"Not many people know these paths," Gobbet said. "Certainly no law enforcement."

I guessed she wasn't counting Duncan. Or maybe she doubted he'd ever find his way out of the maze without her. I certainly couldn't have.

“Anybody know our next move?” I asked.

The thin veneer of control holding Duncan together cracked and threatened to give way entirely. He stamped his boots through pools of water.

“This is bullshit!” he roared. “I’m done messing around in alleys and sewers! I’m done running from cops!” He slapped a hand against his big chest. “For fuck’s sake, I *am* a cop!”

“We noticed,” Gobbet said in an even voice.

“A Lone Star sergeant is dead back there, damn it!” His words came out so raw, it sounded like razor blades were stuck in his throat. “She was—”

Words failed him. I felt bad for him. I wanted to say something, but I didn’t have any words for something like that.

Duncan took a breath. When he spoke again, he was calmer, but I knew he was burning with rage. “I don’t know what the hell’s going on with the Hong Kong cops, but I’m calling in some Lone Star backup from home! I’m gonna get some of my *own* people down here! Then we’re gonna find Raymond and find out what the *hell’s* going on!”

“Whatever you say, big guy,” Gobbet said. “You have fun with that.” She looked over at Isobel. “If that’s your plan, Isobel and I are out of here.”

The dwarf nodded.

“Best of luck finding your friend,” Gobbet said.

I remember how she’d told me she and Isobel were going to be depending on us. I knew Duncan was hurting too, and he was reaching for the best tools he had available. But I definitely didn’t want to invite Lone Star into this either. Staying small was the best thing.

I’d win Duncan over, but I needed local intel too, and Gobbet and Isobel were the only two people we knew here.

“He’s not our friend,” I told her. “He’s our foster father.” With the way she felt about her lost comrades, I thought the family angle might play best.

“And he’s probably a dead man by now.” She rested her flat gaze on me. “Sorry, but it’s the truth.”

Given how everything had turned out for us, she was probably right. But I couldn’t let it go. That old man, cantankerous as he had been, had given me a second shot. I owed him for that, and I owed him for taking care of Duncan, too.

Duncan stalked away and pulled out his Lone Star comm.

“Hey, Duncan,” I said. “Maybe we can hold off on calling in the cavalry until we get some more intel.”



He continued ignoring me, then stopped and stared at the screen. “What the hell? I’m locked out of the network. My law enforcement status has been revoked.”

That wasn’t a real surprise to me. Whoever was dogging our tracks had a lot of power, and wasn’t shy about using it. Whoever it was worked fast, too.

He glanced up at me, looking shocked. “I don’t believe it. This says there’s an APB out on us. You and me both.”

I spoke slowly, so he would get it the first time. So Gobbet and Is0bel would get it, too. “Every cop in Hong Kong’ll be after us now.”

Duncan nodded. “You’re damn right they will.” His chest rose as he took in a deep breath. “Fucking hell.” He clenched his fist around his comm. “This just keeps getting worse.” Then he hurled it at the wall.

The device hit the stone and bounced back at his feet. The cracked case and sparking electronics told me it was done. Which was good, because I was surprised someone hadn’t used it to track us already. I didn’t know if I could convince him to get rid of it.

Gobbet raised her eyebrows and mouthed *okay* to herself. She glanced back up at me. “And on *that* note, I think it’s time for us to say goodbye.” She turned to her friend. “C’mon, Is0bel, let’s—”

The decker wasn’t listening, though. She walked to Duncan’s broken comm, raised her boot, and smashed it down on the device. She repeated it again and again, till circuit boards and wiring bled from the thing.

“Police issue,” she said, letting me know she and I were on the same wavelength now. “They can trace you through that.” She held her hand out to me. “Yours, too. It’s on the network.”

I handed my comm over. “Well, there go all my free upgrade points.”

After she’d smashed it, too, she reached inside her coat and brought out two more, holding them out to Duncan and me. “Burners. I suppose it’s the least we can do after your help back there.”

“Thanks.” I took one of them. “You people always keep a supply of burners in your pockets?”

“Runners need to be prepared for contingencies,” Gobbet said. “Isn’t that right, Is0bel?”

By that time, Is0bel had taken out her own comm and was busy typing. The bluish light from the screen made her look like a child even though I knew she wasn’t. Then horror pulled at her features.

“Gobbet! We gotta go!” The decker shoved her device into her friend’s face to show her the screen. “They’re after us, too!”

## CHAPTER 11

### “WE NEED TO GET YOUR SINS BURNED”

Four pictures showed up on the device. My face was in the upper left quadrant. The other three people in the basement were there, too. The images on the screen looked like they were having better times than we were.

The image of an Asian female newscaster filled the screen a heartbeat later. She spoke in a business tone that somehow conveyed a sultry undertone. “— and in breaking news, last night Hong Kong port authorities were involved in a firefight with members of a terrorist cell linked to the mainland city-state of Henan. The battle left three terrorists dead, along with an unconfirmed number of Hong Kong police officers.”

My image showed again for a brief moment, followed by one of Duncan in his younger days. Judging from the Mohawk and ganger tattoos, which had to have been temporary, the old man hadn’t had a complete cakewalk while raising him.

*“Our sources report that Seattle native Duncan Wu, along with his Hong Kong accomplices, is still at large. They are well-armed, and should be considered extremely dangerous.”*

Images of Gobbet and Isobel popped up next.

“Oh, shit,” Gobbet whispered in disbelief as the color drained from her face.

*“Kowloon officials,”* the reporter said when she was once more on the screen, *“report that the terrorist cell known as the White Star maintains ties to the state of Henan, and is purported to be receiving weapons and funding from anti-corporate groups in the UCAS city-state of Seattle.”*

It was a neat frame job. Duncan and I had roots in Seattle that couldn’t be disputed.

*“Port authorities are on high alert,” the reporter went on, “and the Hong Kong Police Force’s Special Duties Unit has been engaged to deal with the threat. We now go live to Chief Inspector Krait of the Special Duties Unit, who will be making a statement.”*

Her image was replaced by that of a hard-faced woman suited up in combat gear. Her black hair was pulled back, giving her face an even more angular appearance. Standing in a mob of reporters waving recording devices under her nose, she did not look happy.

*“We have yet to ascertain the motive for tonight’s attack,” she said.*

Right. Because *we* didn’t attack those cops.

*“But it was clearly a well-planned and coordinated effort.”* Krait’s eyes narrowed and she pushed one of the devices out of her face. She sounded smooth, practiced, and I wondered how long she’d been preparing this little speech. *“We have already issued an All Points Bulletin as well as a Kill or Capture order for the four remaining terrorists, and I have instructed the Special Duties Unit to make this manhunt a top priority.”*

Gobbet cursed beneath her breath.

*“If you should see one or more of these individuals,”* Krait said, looking straight into the camera, *“do not attempt to engage them. Instead, tap in the HKPF flash code at the bottom of the screen. If you are on an authorized network and take a picture, our system will automatically identify them in your datastream—”*

Unleashing a stream of profanity, Is0bel flicked off the feed. She clipped her comm to her belt while Gobbet tried to regain her equilibrium.

Sewage gurgled and pulsed through the pipes around us, and I couldn’t help but think it perfectly underscored our chances of getting out of our present predicament alive.

*“I thought we were fucked before,”* Duncan said, *“but now we are well and truly fucked.”*

I replied automatically. *“We’ll deal with it, Duncan. We always do.”*

He shook his head. *“Not this time. They’ve labeled us terrorists, and there’s an APB out on us. I’ve heard this kind of announcement before. I know what comes with it. It doesn’t matter if we have nothing to do with that whatever city-state. They’re gonna hunt us down. It’s open season.”*

Is0bel kicked the busted pieces of Duncan’s comm. *“And we’ll be hunted down right alongside you.”*

Gobbet looked at the three exits from the basement. It stood to reason we'd come in through one of them. She leaned toward one of the exits, then the other. "We gotta go deep. Hit the mainland for a while until we can figure this out. Find a hole to crawl into."

I was thinking the same thing, but there was no way we could live in a hole. Not with this much heat coming down on us.

Gobbet looked at Isobel while she pointed at us. "We've gotta get *them* off the grid, too. Way off."

Understanding lit Isobel's eyes and she glanced up at Duncan. "Hey, Lone Star. You've got a security license, right? That means you've got a SIN, too."

"Of course I've got a SIN," Duncan replied. "I wouldn't be able to get paid otherwise. Only criminals and lowlifes go SINless."

As observations went, it wasn't a great one to make with our present company.

"That means you can be traced." Isobel brought out her deck, unconsciously playing with the keyboard. "Both of you. You get spotted by a drone or a security camera, get ID'd by a retinal scanner, or try to use your credstick or passport, and the HKPF will know *just* where to find you."

On the defensive, Duncan crossed his big arms. "I know how a System Identification Number works, runner."

He was forgetting we needed friends. I glanced over at him meaningfully. "Leave her alone, Duncan. We're all in this together."

Gobbet shook her head angrily. "We're just as screwed as you are. Me and Isobel, we were just named as your accomplices. And we can't afford for you to get caught. You'll lead 'em to us, one way or another. DNA samples, things we've told you, astral residue, I don't know...cop stuff."

"We need to get your SINS burned," Isobel said. "Delete you from the record books. All of 'em."

Duncan raised his hands in alarm. "All of them? Whoa, wait a minute. You want us to just erase *our identities*?" He shook his head. "Beyond the fact that it's insane, will that even *work*? If we burn our SINS, go off the grid like that, won't they just redouble their efforts to find us?"

Isobel pursed her lips as if she was regarding a spiteful child. "Imagine playing hide-and-seek with a siren strapped to your head. Would you rather hide with the siren, or with the siren conspicuously absent?"

I spoke up before Duncan could. "Let's just get on with it. What do we have

to do?” I’d already had this done in Seattle, but I didn’t have the resources here to get rid of the SIN the prison had assigned me.

“We gotta ask for help,” Gobbet said. “There’s only one person we know who has the kind of pull it takes to burn a SIN and hide us from the cops.” She paused, and I got the feeling she didn’t even want to say the name out loud.

“Kindly Cheng.”

The name meant nothing to me.

“Who’s Kindly Cheng?” I asked. “Some sort of superdecker?”

“No.” Isobel shook her head. “Kindly’s no decker.”

“She’s what’s known as a Straw Sandal,” Gobbet said. “Kind of a middle manager for the Yellow Lotus syndicate.”

I took that in. According to Evans-Ehrich’s intel, a Straw Sandal was a messenger for the triad, on equal footing with Red Poles and White Paper Fans, the enforcers and bankers of the criminal society. We weren’t just talking about going off the grid. We were talking about getting involved with some heavy hitters in organized crime. I’d never gotten in that deep.

“They’re triad,” Gobbet continued. “Kindly Cheng controls all the illegal activity in our neighborhood—smuggling, bootlegging, counterfeiting.”

I assumed that we might have already encountered some of Cheng’s people out on the dock. I hoped that didn’t come back to bite us on the ass. At least we hadn’t left any witnesses.

“No way.” I said that to reassure Duncan that I wasn’t just going to fall in with the dark side, but I also wanted him to know that we didn’t have any other options. Our newfound companions could sell that. All I had to do was close the deal. “We’re already in deep enough. We don’t need to get in deeper with a crime syndicate.”

Duncan looked relieved, but I knew that was going to be short-lived.

“We don’t want to deal with Kindly Cheng any more than you do,” Gobbet said. Her rats moved restlessly, and I guessed they were feeding off her anxiety. “But I don’t see what choice we have. We need protection, and we need to get your SINS burned before we’re all red smears on the sidewalk.”

Duncan flinched at that—no doubt remembering how Carter had looked the last time he’d seen her.

“Taking favors from a woman like Kindly Cheng is a good way to get yourself into indentured servitude,” Isobel said. “You don’t want to owe favors to a woman like that.” She swallowed. “Ideally, you don’t want to deal with her at

all. That was Nightjar's job."

That caught my attention. "Nightjar's job? You mean you work with her?"

"What'd we just tell you?" Isobel rolled her eyes, reminding me again that she was only a little younger than I was. "She's got her fingers in everything, including brokering shadowruns for the corps. Kindly Cheng is our fixer."

"Just stay on her good side, and you'll have nothing to worry about," Gobbet said with a small, uncertain smile. "Now let's get this done before one of you trips the APB and brings hell down upon us."

She walked toward the far end of the room, Isobel right behind her.

Duncan didn't move.

I looked at him. "We don't have a choice, not if you want to find the old man. Not if you want to find whoever's responsible for Carter's death. Those are two good reasons not to hold back."

I left him with his decision, not certain which way it would go. But before I took three steps, his footsteps echoed in the enclosed space right along with mine.

## **CHAPTER 12**

### **THE MEMORY HOLE**

The growling rumble of the Mass Transit Railway echoed through the tunnels and underground chambers for a long time before Gobbet led us up through the final twists and turns that put us into a maintenance shaft with access to the tracks.

I didn't like the constant noise. That made it too easy to miss something in the oppressive darkness. I kept careful watch as we went, but it was hard to look forward and backward at the same time. Duncan had the same problem.

The women plunged through the deep shadows like they'd done it a hundred times before. Maybe they had.

I kept the Guardian in hand as I followed. The tunnels didn't bother me so much. There was only a hint of claustrophobia now and again. Seattle had

an Underground too, but that place was lively, filled with as much action as the sprawl's streets.

By the time we reached an open area beside the tracks, sweat covered me. Not all of it was from trotting through the tunnels. I breathed a little easier, but the air held chem stink and crackled with static discharges from the maglev circuitry running through the rails only a few meters away.

A short distance farther on, we clambered up to the boarding station and avoided the sec cams. It was late at night, and the few people waiting to catch the MTR didn't notice us because they were brain-fogged from not enough sleep, too many hours at work, juiced out on their favorite drugs or alcohol, or living another existence on BTL chips.

I never got the beetleheads. Better-Than-Life sensies constantly spinning through your head with never-was and never-will-be didn't keep you from getting beaten up, knifed, or shot. They just dulled awareness of the real world.

We stood on the boarding platform looking disheveled and worn. Charred holes from the fire left my armor showing in places, but I fit in fine with the crowd.

A placard on the wall announced this was *HEOI STATION*. Beyond it, a stairwell led up to the surface and out into the sprawl. The salt smell of the sea told me we were still near the waterfront. Vehicle groans and growls and foot traffic let me know the world still moved above us.

Gobbet stepped toward Duncan and me, and Isobel closed ranks with us as well. I got the definite feeling that an ultimatum was in the wind, and I didn't know where that would leave Duncan and me.

"This is the MTR station for Heoi," the rat shaman said. "Once you go up those stairs, you'll be in our neighborhood. Kindly Cheng runs her operation out of a mahjong parlor called Swift Winds."

Duncan took off his Lone Star issued glasses and pocketed them. "There's an APB out on us. How do you expect us to get to this Swift Winds place without taking a bullet?"

I wasn't too thrilled about the prospect of being on the streets either.

"Heoi is well known as a protected area." Confidence filled Gobbet's words, but I knew that was her view of the world, not ours. "Kindly Cheng sees to that. It's a shadow community—smugglers, hijackers, black marketers—you get the idea. Cops tend to give the place a wide berth."

I kept my pistol hidden under the folds of my duster, but I didn't put it away.

I suspected Duncan did the same. After everything we'd been through tonight, neither of us felt all that trusting—of anyone.

Isobel nodded. "Police cameras don't last long here. Between the smog and the cloud cover, we shouldn't have to worry about drone surveillance either. The HKPF won't find you. Not if you follow our lead."

That sounded good. So far.

"Now, here's how this is going to work," Gobbet said. "You can't get an audience with Cheng until we secure an invitation. So me and Isobel will go on ahead and pay our respects. Then we'll request that she see you. Politely." She emphasized the last.

"An invitation?" I asked. "How do we get that?"

Gobbet smirked, but only a little humor showed in the weak effort. "We'll kiss her ass till it shines."

Isobel sighed. "That's about the size of it."

"One more thing," Gobbet said. "Kindly Cheng is a dangerous woman. She may seem friendly, but don't let your guard drop. And whatever you do, do *not* disrespect her."

Duncan's chest swelled, and I knew he was about to get prickly. I nodded. "Got it."

A look of relief swept over Gobbet's face. "That's it. We'll go on ahead and smooth the way. Just give us a few minutes' head start. And don't talk to anyone."

"Why don't we just go with you?" I asked.

Irritation pulled at Isobel's mouth. "Because no one *knows* you here. And outsiders aren't welcome in Heoi."

"Plus," Gobbet said, looking at Duncan, "your friend here radiates *cop*. Cops are even less welcome than outsiders." She flicked her gaze back to me. "And you—you're not exactly ordinary either, are you?"

"I can blend in when I need to."

"If people see us strolling through town together with no prior explanation," Gobbet continued, "we might not make it to the mahjong parlor at all."

Reluctantly, I nodded. "I get it." The shadows operated with the same blend of paranoia and distrust everywhere.

"That's good." Gobbet took a breath. "You catch on real quick. We need your SINS burned as badly as you do. And we need to figure a way out of this shit. Or we're all dead."

Isobel turned away and muttered, "See you at the mahjong parlor." Without a



word, Gobbet followed.

Duncan and I watched them walk away. The idea of being left behind didn't make me happy. I didn't like the fact that we'd been dropped on foreign soil and had people on both sides of the law looking for us. There wasn't enough shadow to spread around to keep us hidden.

Duncan paced uncertainly, tracking mud across the tiled floor, and I knew the same thoughts were rocketing through his head.

A train arrived, and a synthesized male voice bade goodbye to departing passengers and greeted arriving ones. The exchange happened swiftly and subway riders moved like cattle. A couple minutes later, the magnetos fired up, and it shot away down the line.

Beside me, Duncan laughed. The sound started out small, but it quickly grew into a full belly laugh, and I knew he didn't have complete control over himself.

I looked at him and he looked at me. "We're still in this," I said. "We're still looking for the old man. We take what we have and improve on it. Same way we did back in the Barrens."

The laughter went away, and his breathing calmed. He folded his arms, once more looking formidable. Evidently the kid I'd protected had grown up, but he still had vulnerable spots.

Same as me. Recognizing your weaknesses, though, was the first step to turning them into strengths.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Duncan demanded. "What the hell are we *doing* here? How did we get *into* this?"

I wanted to tell him that this wasn't us, that the old man had sucked us into this. I didn't, however, because I knew that was the wrong course to take.

"I think I'm gonna lose it." Duncan took in a ragged breath.

"Bullshit," I said. "You're a rock." And I hoped he was. "You've seen harder times than this when you were a kid, and we had a lot less to work with."

"I'm trying to maintain." He blew out another breath, and the weak light around us dulled his eyes. "Seriously, I am. But—" His voice broke. "Carter is *dead*. They fucking *ended* her. I don't know what I'm going to do now."

I waited a tick, trying to figure out how to handle this, then I decided to rip open the wound so it wouldn't fester. "Sounds like she was more than just your partner."

"More than just a partner?" His face turned grim. "Of course she was—" He caught himself then, and I knew he didn't want to spill everything. "She was my

training officer, you idiot. My mentor.”

I knew I had become a target, but that was fine. Attacking me gave Duncan something else to think about other than the slotted up mess we were in. So I didn't back off. “It looked like you two were close.”

“Carter was my *partner*. She had my back.” He glared at me. “Do you get how important that is? What it means to lose that?” He snorted in disgust. “When you're on the streets facing down a food riot, you need to *know* someone's looking out for you. That you're standing next to someone you can depend on. That was Carter.”

So, yeah, I got what he was saying. Duncan wasn't pulling any punches either. I waited the storm out, letting him get it all off his chest.

“And she was like my compass. Or my anchor.” He shook his head. “Or some such shit.” He took another breath. “She kept me...I don't know. Sane.”

“Sounds like a good woman.”

“Don't patronize me.” He stepped away from me. For a few moments, I thought I'd lost him to the grief, to all the uncertainty of my disappearance these last eight years, and to the slotted situation the old man had dragged us into.

Then he turned and faced me again. “Screw it! Whatever she was, I'm throwing her down the memory hole.”

Memory hole. We'd started calling it that when we'd lived on the streets. All the drek that happened in the past? None of it mattered. If it couldn't feed us, couldn't protect us, couldn't be saved or turned around? It went down the memory hole. We'd put a lot of stuff down there.

“You know why?” Duncan demanded.

I knew why. That had become part of our mantra.

“Because it doesn't matter now.”

I almost said the words with him, but I didn't.

“Because we're going to burn our SINS.” He was still trying to wrap his head around that concept, and I knew it went against his grain to do that. “Jesus Christ, do you know what that *means*?”

I did, but waited for him to say it. Sometimes the worst words you hear have to be spoken by you, in your own way.

“The moment we do that, we're dead. To all the world, we're dead. We're wiped clean.” Duncan ticked it off on his fingers. “Raymond, the house we grew up in, my career...Carter. All gone. No home. No money. No identity. Nothing. We will be nobody.”

I spoke as calmly as I could. “I’m gonna find a way out of this. Just follow my lead like you did in the old days.”

That was a mistake. I stepped into it before I realized I was on dangerous ground. Maybe I was tired, or maybe there were some lingering narco effects or a juju hangover from whatever Gobbet had done to me.

Duncan stepped back toward me, his eyes blazing. “You want to bring up the old days? Are you *fucking* serious? You left the old days *years ago*.” His nostrils flared as he sucked in air. “You left *me behind*.”

The night I left the old man’s house, Duncan had caught me. He’d asked why I was leaving. I hadn’t had any other answer than I couldn’t stay. I didn’t trust the old man, *couldn’t* trust the old man. Not the way Duncan could. So, when he wouldn’t let me go, I’d run. He’d tried to keep up with me, but I was too fast.

I stood there now, feeling that old hurt all over again, and I knew that if I had it to do over, knowing what I knew now, I wasn’t sure I’d have the strength to do it again.

But I didn’t have it to do over. It was done.

It just wouldn’t go down the memory hole.

## CHAPTER 13

### STEP INTO MAHJONG PARLOR

“Now let’s hear it,” Duncan said. “Where the hell have you been all this time? Why didn’t you contact me? At least to tell me you were alive.”

I told him the truth. There was no reason to hold it back. My voice came out flat. “I wanted to, Duncan. But I was locked up tight. Corporate black site. No communication.”

“No shit?” The way he stared at me, I knew he was trying to tell if I was giving him the truth. Evidently he believed me. “Oh. Fuck. I...I had no idea.” He let out a long sigh, and I knew the storm raging inside him had passed. “Wow, I really don’t know how to process that one right now...” He worked his jaw for a

moment. “I don’t know. If we’re still alive tomorrow, we can talk more. All this shit is just too much.”

I silently agreed with him. I didn’t want to end up back inside a corporate lockdown. Or dead. But the old man was in trouble, and I knew Duncan wasn’t going to walk away from it. My brother wasn’t wired like that.

He stared at the street map hanging on the wall behind me. “We’re marooned on this island, hunted by the cops, my partner is dead, Raymond is missing, and we’re about to go see a crime lord about erasing our goddamn identities!”

Stated straight out like that, it was a drekload to manage for someone not used to running the shadows. For those of us who did, it was almost business as usual.

“And as a bonus,” Duncan went on, “our only allies are a pair of tiny criminals who would kill us if they could so they didn’t have to deal with any of this.”

Yep. Definitely business as usual.

Flicking his gaze from the map, Duncan focused on me. “Listen. Back in the Barrens. Whenever I was out of control, you just *handled* the situation. Remember?”

I did. Duncan’s time in foster care had left him scarred in ways I’d never wanted to imagine.

“With Carter gone,” he continued, “I’m just a raw nerve. I’m afraid I’m going to slip back...and people are gonna start getting hurt again.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “I got your back, Duncan.”

He nodded. “Well, don’t press it. I need time to get used to...you.”

“Sure. We’ll go slow as we can.” But with all the danger waiting out there for us, I knew the likelihood of that was slim.

“Now let’s go meet that triad woman,” he growled, “and get our damned SINS burned. I want to rip off the bandage as quick as I can.”

I studied the street map for another tick and located the Swift Winds Mahjong Parlor down in the dockyard. I tracked the streets back and figured out the route. I’d always been good with remembering things on the fly.

Then I led the way out of the subway.

Being out on the street wasn’t much better than being underground. When

we came up the steps from the maglev station, the same chem stink filled the air, mixed in with street vendor foods. Isobel had been telling it true about the smog and the overcast sky. Hong Kong was all about industrial production without the *hazards* of environmental protection.

Daytime Hong Kong probably wasn't much removed from nighttime Hong Kong. With the absence of direct sunlight, the streets looked murky, like dirty swamps. But there were more people around, and that made me feel relieved and threatened at the same time. Too many eyes were looking for us.

I kept moving, and Duncan followed a couple steps back and one to my right, just like we used to do it on the streets. Both of us had a clear field of fire, and I knew the direction to Kindly Cheng's mahjong parlor.

I turned up my coat collar against the wind skating in off the ocean just across the street and followed the directions on my GPS. The harbor smelled like a sewer interspersed with strong chems, and junks with ribbed sails floated alongside diesel-powered fishing boats and rowboats. Men and women worked on the vessels, but some of them sat on the decks or on benches. They smoked and they drank, and they waited for opportunity to come to them. I suspected a lot of them were bombed out of their gourds and unconscious with their eyes open. This area of the sprawl gave off that kind of vibe, and I'd seen it too many times not to recognize it for what it was.

A place called Club 88 occupied the corner across the intersection. A large troll bouncer worked the door and looked intimidating. It was the kind of place that did biz off the books, and biz even farther off the books. The place was a known criminal hangout, according to what Duncan had heard from a fellow traveler when he and Carter had arrived. The club had been cited for a number of infractions, criminal and civil, and was the scene of several violent crimes.

Despite all that, the joint remained open. That told me it was protected, networked into someone's operations. I marked it for possible investigation.

Then I picked up the trail to Kindly Cheng's again, following narrow walkways over the slowly swirling green-black water. The lapping ocean rumbled around me as waves pushed against pier poles and the moored watercraft.

Lights glowed against the fronts of warehouses and from the decks of houseboats where groups, some of them families, gathered and watched Duncan and me pass by. No one asked our business, and several of them reached under their clothing or into the shadows on their boats for what I was certain were weapons.

Hong Kong, at least this part of it, wasn't welcoming. In the distance behind them, I saw a large cargo freighter sitting in the darkness, with only a few lights marking its position.

Long moments later, we reached our destination. A large billboard advertising the Swift Winds Mahjong Parlor occupied the top of the small single-story structure built into side of a three-story building. Lanterns hung in what I recognized as strategic positions, so that the pools of light kept the night at bay. I was certain sec-cams were hidden there, too.

Another muscle-bound troll stood watch over the entrance. I ignored him and walked to the door. If he had a problem with that, I figured he'd let me know.

When I pulled the door open and smelled the strong spices and rice wine within, I had a brief moment of wary trepidation. I had only been out of lockdown for a few days. I didn't want to go back, and I didn't want to end up dead.

I especially didn't want to get Duncan killed. Raymond Black had already gone missing, and I had no idea what we were getting ourselves into.

Touching my weapons for luck, I walked through the door.

## **CHAPTER 14**

### **THOSE WITHOUT SIN**

Inside, the mahjong parlor sparkled, filled with oriental rugs and decorations that included inlaid tables, vases, potted plants, and elegant but subdued lighting that allowed the men playing with multicolored tiles to enjoy their tea and meals. The tiles clicked as the players quickly dropped them into place, and low murmurs of conversation continued as I stood there clicking my cybervision into optimum viewing mode.

Duncan flanked me immediately and stepped off to the right. We never stood too close together. That made it too easy for someone to pick both of us off at once. That was one of the first lessons we'd learned on the street.

His dislike for the place and the people around us felt like nettles against my

back. Like me, he figured most of the men at the tables were criminals and sec guards watching over the place.

Across the room, Gobbet and Isobel stood in front of a middle-aged Chinese woman dressed in a vintage, high-necked dress. A cigarette holder in her left hand held something that definitely wasn't a cigarette. Our new friends looked nervous, but not scared. I took that as a good sign.

The woman caught my gaze with her own and smiled, but her dark eyes held no mirth and no welcome. "Come in," she said in a sultry voice. "We have much to discuss."

I crossed the floor and stopped a meter in front of her, picking up the protective stance the man behind her and to her right automatically dropped into. I didn't want to test his reflexes or where he considered Kindly Cheng's personal space started, so I stood there and showed him empty hands.

Duncan took up a position to the side, so he could cover the sec man without risking me.

The clicking of the mahjong tiles halted behind me. The players' hands dropped beneath the tables, and I had no doubts all of them were now wrapped around weapons.

Up close, Kindly Cheng was a beautiful woman. She'd spared no expense on getting her image perfect, but her features remained as cold and distant as a hangman's. Her black hair was coiled up on her head, held in place by what were probably real whalebone combs.

"My little pair of fuckups here told me all about what happened on the docks." Kindly Cheng's voice was rough, deeper, and more smoky than I'd imagined. "How two of my best runners had their heads put out. How you need protection. And how you need to get your identities wiped before you get *your* heads put out, too."

I didn't say anything. There was nothing to say until the offer came. Or didn't.

She picked up a shot glass from a nearby table, dipped her pinkie into it, and licked the residue from her finger. She looked at me, then at Duncan, and I knew she was measuring both of us with the same innate skill of a butcher.

"You've potentially led the heat to my front door," she accused. "Placing me and everyone in my employ in danger." She raised an imperious eyebrow. "So wise. So very, very wise."

I didn't bite on her sarcasm. If I'd been her, I'd have been pissed, too.

Gobbet stared at the floor and spoke in a small voice. “We’re sorry, Auntie. We thought—”

“You mustn’t speak until you are spoken to, Gobbet, dear.” Kindly Cheng’s black eyes flashed. “And since you are one *short hair* away from being dumped in the river chained to Isobel’s corpse, I suggest you let your new friends here do the talking for a while.” She smiled. “Does that make sense to you, dear?”

“Yes, Auntie.”

“Very good. You learn so quickly.”

I debated for just an instant, wondering if Kindly Cheng was a woman who wanted to run the show herself without any kind of pushback, or if she respected someone who stood up for himself. I erred on the side of taking a stand.

“Gobbet kept a very cool head in a tense situation,” I pointed out. “She’s the one who led us out of the police ambush.”

Turning her head only a little, Gobbet shot me a look of disbelief from the corner of her eye, then returned her attention to the floor.

Taking a puff of her medicinal herb, Kindly Cheng gave me an appraising glance. “I count little Gobbet here among my most resourceful runners, but I admit it’s good to have...outside validation from time to time.”

A rat on Gobbet’s shoulder crept out from under her hair and stared at me. The rat shaman gave me a quick look too, but I couldn’t read anything there.

Kindly Cheng’s face hardened, and she shot me a scathing glare. “And now that you’ve shared that valuable little tidbit, perhaps you would be so kind as to keep your fucking mouth *shut* until you’re spoken to.” She smiled. “Can you do that for me?”

I nodded, but I stayed ready to pull iron at any moment. The woman had *psycho* written all over her, but she was also smart enough to succeed in a lethal criminal organization.

She smiled. “I do appreciate it, dear.” She turned and poured herself another drink. “Now, my darlings, I understand from little Rat-shit here that you came from Seattle to meet with my client, Mr. Black.”

That was a surprise, but I didn’t let it show. The Dragon Lady wasn’t the only one who could pull off a stone face.

Unfortunately, Duncan wasn’t so gifted. His jaw tightened in response, just a flicker that I hoped no one but me would notice.

“But before you could find him, the HKPF started splattering gray matter everywhere, and everything went to shit.”



I regarded her, wondering if our bad luck hadn't just been a product of her poor planning from the start. The old man was missing, and Duncan and I had been dropped in the deep shit before we could blink.

"And now you need your SIDs burned," she went on, "so you can disappear before you end up dead as well. Is that right?"

I chose to play it nice and polite. Threatening wouldn't work, and asking would only make me look weak. "Yes, ma'am."

"Very good. Why don't we start with you telling me who you are?"

I gave her the name I'd been locked down under. That ID had been expensive, but it had been toast the minute Cross Applied Technologies had taken me off the streets. My real name had disappeared a long time ago.

"Do you have a profession?" Kindly Cheng asked. She was thorough, and I liked that. "I mean, you do want me to erase your identities, don't you, dear? I'll need to know everything."

I gave it to her straight. "I do what needs doing."

"I know the type," she replied. "How did you become someone who does what needs doing?"

"Let's just say I'm self-taught and leave it at that." I wasn't going to give her everything. She was either going to help or she wasn't.

Duncan nodded. "Better leave it at that."

Anger twisted Kindly Cheng's face for just an instant as she whipped around to look at Duncan. Then she sized him up and turned to her sec man, giving him a slight nod.

"Looks like the gun show is in town." Kindly Cheng traced Duncan's bare, beefy biceps with her fingers. "What's your name, Gun Show?"

"Duncan Wu. I'm a cop. Lone Star." He said it with pride, and I felt a little bad for him because I knew he wasn't going to be saying that ever again.

"I hear there were some fresh corpses found on the dock tonight. Smugglers, I believe. Didn't sound like the Hong Kong police when I heard about it. Your doing, Duncan Wu?"

"I identified myself as Lone Star. They wouldn't stand down. They had weapons. It was self-defense."

Kindly Cheng smiled. "I don't care, sweetie. They weren't *my* people. But now I know you're a life taker, Mr. Gun Show. You and your friend here." She pushed around some of the mahjong tiles on the table beside her, sliding them smoothly across the polished wood. "But now I'm curious—why were you

meeting Raymond Black at the docks tonight?”

“He’s a friend,” I replied. “Said he needed our help.”

“Really?” Her eyes narrowed against the smoke trailing from her herb. “You have a lot of sixty-five year old friends who you’ll fly around the world to help?”

“He raised us,” Duncan said before I could reply, and I silently cursed him for being so honest. But that was Duncan. “Raymond Black is our foster father.”

“Interesting.” She frowned. “Sorry, kids, but he was looking like shit when I saw him—eyes half open, dark circles around them, dragging his feet—the whole bit.”

Pain darkened Duncan’s face.

“Your foster daddy was in a bad place.”

“Sounds like he wasn’t sleeping,” I said, though that sounded like the least of it. The old man had problems sleeping some nights back home, too. I used to watch him walk around nights, half-afraid for him, and half-afraid of him because having unsettled foster parents was rarely a good thing.

Kindly Cheng surprised me with her answer. “Could be. From what he said, it sounded like he was having nightmares. He would stop in the middle of a sentence and mutter something to himself. One time it was about the walls breathing or something. Another time it was about the teeth. Thousands of teeth.”

That sounded vaguely familiar. A fragment of a memory rose in my mind for just an instant, then it slipped away.

“I remember him drifting off at the end of our meeting,” she continued. “It looked like he was off somewhere else in his head. He said, ‘I left prosperity in there.’ Then Nightjar put his hand on Mr. Black’s shoulder. Asked him why he wanted to go into the Walled City so badly. That seemed to bring him back. When your old man opened his eyes, they were full of tears. Then he muttered something else I couldn’t make out.” She poured herself another drink and shrugged. “Your daddy got really irritating after a while.”

“What do you think it means?” I asked.

“I have no fucking clue.” She lit up another herb. “All right, let’s get to it.” Expelling smoke, she pointed at Duncan and me. “You two need your SInS burned, and you need them burned *fast*. Hong Kong dragnets are bad news. When they roll, they roll in force. Armored personnel carriers, heavy armor, heavy weapons, sorcerers—the whole thing. And they *aren’t* coming to arrest you.”

I wasn’t scared. At least, I wasn’t any more scared than I had been. There was nothing surprising in anything she was telling us.

“The good news is,” she said, “I can help you. With a wave of my hand, I can have your SINS disappear. But you need to understand, my darlings, is that what you’re asking is not a simple request. Burning a SIN isn’t just deleting a number—it’s wiping all reference to that number from all the world’s largest databases.”

Duncan worked his jaw.

“It’s masking your mugshot in their facial recognition database,” she went on, “so the first camera you walk past doesn’t bring them down on top of you like a ton of bricks. It’s covering our fucking tracks so that the *act* of burning your SIN doesn’t lead them right to us. It requires contacts in numerous corporations and the UCAS government.” She blew smoke through her nose. “It requires someone like *me*.”

I just looked at her and didn’t say a word. It was her show. I just hoped she was as good as she thought she was.

“Therefore, I need to make a choice,” she said. “Do I kill you and dispose of your bodies before the cops come looking for you, or do I help you burn your SINS?”

Duncan looked at me. I went back to my roots, back to the streets where I grew up and all the tradecraft I’d learned there. I stared right into that woman’s black eyes. “You may want to think about your rep as a fixer first. Two of your runners were taken down by the cops, and you have no idea why.”

Her smile was cold, and I knew my challenge was going to cost us—even though it was probably what saved our lives. “So clever. So, so clever.” She tapped her lacquered nails on the tabletop. “Yes, I have been placed in a delicate situation, haven’t I? Regardless, that’s the situation whether you’re alive or you’re sucking dirt.” She took in a breath and let it out. “You live. You’re clever, and I like that. I’ll put your SINS to the torch. *However*, I’ll need to call in several valuable favors within my network to do it. And those favors do not come cheap. You will owe me.”

I didn’t like that, but I knew we didn’t have a choice. I decided to play nice—for now. “Whatever you say, Auntie.”

“Don’t roll over so easily, my darling. People will think you’re an ass-kisser. It’s unbecoming.”

I smiled at her.

“I want you to deliver a message for me.” She looked me in the eye. “To a business associate in the Walled City. The Yellow Lotus has a strong presence

inside. Isobel can tell you all about it, can't you, dear? Isobel grew up in the Walled City."

Isobel spoke in a flat monotone. "They collect taxes for the corporations. Extort protection money from shopkeepers. Run drugs, guns, people." She paused. "They hurt people."

"We do those things," Kindly Cheng said. "But to be fair, we also operate the Walled City's black market. You might not be alive today if not for the lifeline we provide." Reaching out for a mahjong piece, she plucked it from the table and examined it. "There is a Red Pole—a sort of enforcer, yes?—on the inside. His name is Strangler Bao. Bao is a strong man, a good man, but he has forgotten his place. I need you to remind him."

I asked, "How are we supposed to do that?"

Reaching into a pocket, Kindly Cheng took out a memory stick and tossed it to me.

I caught it.

"This is a message for Bao," she said. "You will deliver it to him in my name, and then return to me. Remember that Bao's men are *my* men. By rights, they should be serving *me*. I would prefer it if you did this quietly, and without killing them. I have no use for dead soldiers."

I nodded.

Kindly Cheng turned to Gobbet and Isobel. "One of you will go with these two Westerners to the Walled City. Help them locate Bao and show them the ropes. The other will remain here with me. I have several degrading and menial tasks that need doing around the establishment. No matter who goes and who stays, you'll both pay for bringing an APB to my doorstep."

"Yes, Auntie," Gobbet replied.

"Yes, Auntie," Isobel said.

I glanced at them, thinking maybe they didn't realize why Kindly Cheng was really keeping one of them with her. Then I saw the fear in their eyes, and knew that both were aware of the lethal nature of the situation.

"Now," the triad woman said, "I'm gonna find out who ordered the hit on Nightjar and do some dentistry on him with power tools." She closed her eyes and smiled. "That boy was my favorite. He sang to me sometimes." She opened her eyes and sneered. "That other one I don't give a shit about. Gutshot was an asshole."

Her callousness didn't surprise me. You didn't get to be a triad boss by being

sentimental.

She waved us away with a hand. “That will be all, my darlings. Return to me when you’re done.”

I looked at Duncan, then picked Gobbet to go with us. Isobel looked disappointed at not going, or maybe she was just scared about getting left behind.

I wasn’t certain she would be there when we got back. Or even if we’d get back. We were still being hunted, after all.

## CHAPTER 15

### THE WALLED CITY

Outside the mahjong parlor, we emerged into the deep shadows and kept moving. Without a word, Gobbet took the lead. The rats clinging to her shoulders slid through her hair, picking up on the nervous energy fueling her. Rain still drenched the sprawl, falling in steady sheets that would soak us in seconds. The troll still stood guard over the parlor, and if the rain bothered him, he gave no sign of it.

I nodded at Duncan, signaling that he should keep watch. He nodded back, but he was obviously distracted by the recent changes in his life and the loss of his partner. Worrying about the old man was in there, too.

I slipped into stride with Gobbet, matching her with ease. My eyes roved constantly, taking in the boats out in the water only a stone’s throw away. People watched from them, and they watched from the alleys. Some marked us fearfully, but other gazes held predatory anticipation, needing only a sign of weakness to encourage them.

“Everything’s going to be all right,” I told Gobbet. “We’ll go do this thing and get back to your friend. Null sheen.”

Her eyes blazed at me, and for a moment that curious itch that always filled me whenever I was around astral energy vibrated through me. My hand dropped to my pistol, but I didn’t let her see that. I was determined to wait to see her next

move.

“You make it sound so easy,” she snarled.

“It’s a deal,” I stated. “Kindly Cheng strikes me as a businesswoman. She’s got a good thing going with you and your friend, and she just lost two of her top operators. She doesn’t want to lose two more for no reason.”

“*No reason?*” Gobbet shook her head and the rodents scurried to latch onto new purchase. “You were on the verge of disrespecting her. She would have killed you and him.” She nodded at Duncan. “Me, too. And Isobel.”

“I know where the lines are. I didn’t step over them.”

She blew out an angry breath and pointedly ignored me. Turning left at the next corner, she lengthened her stride. I let her go and settled back into a trailing pace because talking to her now wasn’t going to work.

But if Strangler Bao was as dangerous as Kindly Cheng intimated, Gobbet and I would be talking again.

Soon.

We continued past the MTR station, and ended up at a sec gate that closed off the street. Beyond the electrified wire mesh barrier, the dulled outlines of the Walled City sat hunkered in the shadows like a broken giant. Wreckage of buildings stood on uncertain foundations amid a vast tide of poverty and squalor slightly illuminated in spots by fires burning in metal trash bins. Even the air held a more sour, more desperate stink here.

Two cybered up triad gangers in armor guarded the gate. Both were young and carried scars from past skirmishes that had involved guns, knives, and fire. They’d earned their positions.

The shorter one, an elf with goggles pushed up onto his head, stared at me. His hands remained out of sight beneath his coat. One of them came out smooth and steady and tapped his earpiece.

“Auntie Cheng said you’d be coming. You can pass.”

Duncan grunted in response, but—like me—he never took things on face value. Maybe Kindly Cheng had reached out to these guys, and maybe she hadn’t.

While we’d been walking to our destination, I’d talked to Gobbet about the Walled City. It was slightly less than a third of a square kilometer housing more than forty thousand people in high-rise tenements that should have been called

deathtraps. The government didn't collect taxes, but it didn't provide services either. The inhabitants existed solely on what they could gather from nature, steal, or trade black market goods or flesh for.

The place looked even worse than the Barrens in Seattle.

Gobbet took the lead and passed through the armed gates. I followed close behind and a step to the right so I had room to work quickly if I needed to.

Moving quick, alert to the area around her, Gobbet threaded a path through the narrow, trash-choked alleys. Many were dead ends, or filled with small groups of dangerous people who eyed us with territorial wariness. The skill with which she avoided all of them was impressive, and showed that she was no stranger to these streets.

In a few minutes, she led us up onto a rooftop. Being up there afforded a better view of the sprawl, but I also felt trapped. Being on a rooftop limited options if you had to run or fight. Piles of rodent-filled rubbish stood in stacks against the next story, and as I met the feral gazes of the creatures, I wondered if Gobbet and her small clan had any friends there.

An undercurrent of noise hummed through the area. Yells and screams of people in pain mixed with angry tones and with those of others who were in the throes of ecstasy. Gunshots punctuated the crash of breaking glass.

Duncan wrinkled his nose at the odor, and I didn't blame him. I was mouth breathing to cut down on the stench.

"Raymond said prosperity is in the Walled City," Duncan said, "but I don't see it. Why the hell would he want to set one foot in this place?"

"You got me." Gobbet didn't seem as standoffish now. Passing through those gates into this place had evidently reprioritized her thinking. Grudges couldn't be held in the Walled City if she wanted to survive. "As I said, the Walled City is the worst slum in the eastern hemisphere. Maybe in the world."

One of the rats hidden within her clothing poked its head out and squeaked plaintively. She dropped a hand to its smooth head and stroked it with her fingertips.

"There's something wrong with this place." She lifted her gaze to the dark skyline. "It isn't just a slum, it feels...poisonous, somehow. On an astral level. It churns my stomach to even come near it."

Duncan growled in that way he had. "Okay, you were right. This isn't the Barrens. It feels...I don't know...thicker."

I'd been feeling the same way, but I hadn't been able to put my finger on the

word until he said it. This place did feel *thicker*. More dangerous.

“Which way?” Duncan asked.

“The Lotus Den. That’s what Bao calls his little corner of hell. I don’t know where it is off hand, but I have a way of finding things.” Two more rats shoved their heads out of Gobbet’s clothing and she petted them as well.

“They probably aren’t expecting anyone to come in force,” Duncan said. “We can kick the door in, drop the guards, hand over the message, and get the hell out.”

“Kindly doesn’t want them dead,” Gobbet reminded. “She wants them to remember where their loyalties lie. It’s tough to remember much of anything when you’ve got a bullet in your head.”

“This guy Bao isn’t going to be a pushover,” I said. “And he’s not going to be constrained by the same rules we are.” I intended to do whatever I had to in order to survive.

Gobbet must have read that on my face. I wasn’t trying to hide it. She gave a small nod. “I mean, we *could* kill them if you really wanted to. Technically, Bao is the only one who has to live. But I’d rather keep Auntie Cheng happy than piss her off again.”

“We may need Kindly Cheng,” I said, to clarify things for Duncan, “but she doesn’t own us. We make our own decisions.”

Some of the tension in Duncan’s face evaporated.

Gobbet smiled a little. “You’ve got an independent streak. I like that.”

“Damn right we do,” Duncan rumbled. “Now let’s get this done.”

Wrapping her cloak more tightly around her against the rain, Gobbet took the lead. This time when I stepped up beside her to provide cover, she didn’t object.

She ghosted across the rooftops, and across the fragile makeshift bridges that spanned the narrow alleys below us, and I felt the itch of astral energy so strong I wanted to sneeze. From the way the neighborhood vermin in the trash piles and lurking in the pools of water gathering on the rooftops squeaked at her, I gathered she was communicating with them somehow.

I’d seen street shamans work before, I’d never trusted them enough to ask about their biz, and we’d never be friendly enough for them to tell me anything. The astral crowd likes to keep their secrets.

But the rats gave up the Lotus Den.



## CHAPTER 16

### THE LOTUS DEN

Long minutes later, soaked to the bone but not cold due to the lukewarm rain, we reached a rooftop guarded by a small band of gangers. They eyed us suspiciously. A flickering, battery-powered emergency street lamp nearby glowed just brightly enough to lift their tattoos out of the shadows.

Recognizing the narcissistic body language of the guy I figured must be the leader, I walked over to him. Tight, 'roided muscle covered him, but he didn't have the loose stance of someone cybered up. He took a minute to finish whatever he was doing on his comm before glancing up at me.

"You're in the wrong neighborhood, tourist boy." His tone was menacing, just short of threatening. His gaze flicked past me to Gobbet and Duncan. "You and your little tourist friends."

"I'm a local, jackass," Gobbet said. "I work for Kindly Cheng. We all do. Show some respect."

"That so?" he challenged with an even sharper edge in his voice. "Then you already know you shouldn't be here. That old fossil don't run things 'round here no more." He dropped his hand to his bulging coat pocket. "Best get moving, little girl. Before we hurt you *real* bad." He grinned with yellowed teeth. "I'm not gonna tell you twice."

I took another step forward and his head swiveled to me. "We're here to deliver a message to Strangler Bao," I told him in a flat voice.

He paused and pulled at his short beard, like he was thinking, but I already knew how this was going to go. He was just putting on a show for his buddies.

"Hmmm...no, I don't think so." He shook his head with deliberate slowness. "We haven't been told to expect anyone."

"We're going in—through you or over you," I told him.

He smiled. "Now I'm gonna have to get my clothes bloody." He moved quicker than I expected, but falling back behind a low trash barrier and reaching for a pistol. His two companions also sought cover, and a third joined them from

the shadows of another building.

I dove over the barrier and tackled the guy I'd been talking to because he was closest. The ganger managed to pull his pistol as we hit the ground together, but I slammed a forearm into his face and bounced his head off the tarmac. While he was dazed, I reached over and plucked the pistol from his hand before he could fight for it. I brought the muzzle to a pointblank position against his forehead and almost pulled the trigger.

Then I remembered that Kindly Cheng wanted these slots alive if possible, that she had Isobel, and that she was my and Duncan's only lead to the old man.

I drew the pistol back and slammed the butt into his temple. Blood spurted from a small wound as he shivered. His eyes rolled white in his head and his body relaxed.

By the time I stood back up, Duncan caught a man with flying kick that was almost too fast to see because of his cybered reflexes. The ganger's jaw shattered with a loud *pop*, and he went down. The third ganger got a shot off, but it ricocheted from Duncan's armor and cut the air near my head. Duncan caught the guy by the wrist, stripped the gun from his hand, crimped the wrist in a come-along hold, and introduced his face to the nearby wall with a loud *crunch*.

The guy dropped like a bag of flour.

A shimmer in my peripheral vision caught my eye, and I turned toward it to see a fire spirit manifest near the remaining sec man. The thing stood three meters tall, all of it ugly and wrapped in red and yellow flames. It wound up and tossed a fireball at Duncan, who tried to dodge aside, but ended up getting hit on the side and down his right leg. He flew off balance and crashed behind a pile of crates.

I brought up my pistol and opened fire, thinking the shots wouldn't draw any more attention than any of the other sprawl noise around us. Three bullets slammed into the spirit's chest, causing it to jerk a little with each impact.

Unfazed by the attack, it wound up again and tossed another fireball at me. I dove to the ground as the flaming sphere passed overhead and struck the next rooftop. Fire and water warred in a pool on the tarmac, and I knew the rain was going to change the odds.

Hunkered low, Duncan ran behind the piles of crates that littered the rooftop and vectored in on the ganger shaman.

Gobbet gestured and mouthed words I couldn't hear over the steady hiss of the rain and the raging fire spirit. Blurry lines took shape in the rain, then coalesced into a large, rounded shape that looked vaguely human.

My skin itched all over.

At the rat shaman's direction, the air spirit lumbered toward the fire spirit. I couldn't see all the details because they moved too fast, and astral energy was hard to see by anyone who wasn't skilled in it. I didn't know which of them, if either, was getting the upper hand.

I pushed myself up and ran toward the ganger shaman, joining Duncan in the effort to put the threat down through the flesh and blood conduit keeping it manifested on the physical plane.

Duncan reached him first. Ducking below the man's outstretched pistol, he slid into the thug's feet, taking him down. As the ganger fell, Duncan caught the back of his head and slammed his opponent into the rooftop. Broken, bloody teeth scattered across the tarmac and the air emptied out of the man with a *whoosh* as he passed out.

The fire spirit immediately vanished back to wherever it had come from. Gobbet made her air spirit go away as well.

She pointed toward the unmarked door across the roof that the gangers had protected. "Strangler Bao is in there."

I nodded and looked at them. They were as ready as they could be. I reloaded and holstered my pistol, then headed for the entrance to the Yellow Lotus Den.

## **CHAPTER 17**

### **DON'T KILL THE MESSENGER**

I opened the door and peered into the gloomy hallway. Garbage lined the walls and the cluster of rooms in the center of the area. Hallways ran in both directions, framing the center rooms. That also meant an attack, whether planned or a reaction to our presence, could come from any quarter.

Duncan and Gobbet stepped in after me, and when the door shut, all the outside noise went away. We stood there for a moment, water from our drenched clothing puddling at our feet.

I was tired and sore from the long flight and everything that had gone on since I'd touched down in Hong Kong, but adrenaline kept me moving. Whatever we'd stepped into, wherever the old man was, he was in big trouble—and we might be his only way out of it.

I stepped forward and waved Duncan into position to my right. He moved soundlessly, weapon at the ready. We were going to leave Bao alive if possible, but we hadn't come here to die.

I glanced at the open door to my left and cautiously moved inside. I didn't want to leave unknown quantities behind us, and if there was anyone inside the room, he already knew we were in the building because of the noise made by the opening door.

I held my pistol level as I went through the doorway, flicking my gaze around quickly.

The room looked like a barracks, with bunkbeds and small dining tables sitting among the refuse. I ducked back out and let Duncan and Gobbet know we were clear. We followed the hallway to the right, stringing out so we weren't grouped together. I listened carefully, but we were the only ones making noise, and we made very little.

An open doorway in the corner ahead of us led to a simsense room. I glanced over the chairs and along the wall where the simsense vending machines sat. No one was in this room, either.

"I'm getting the feeling we're the only ones in here," Duncan whispered.

"People who think that usually die thinking that," I replied. "Those guards were stationed outside for a reason."

Back out in the hallway, we continued to the next corner, passing a bathroom that somehow managed to smell even worse than the rest of the building.

A locked door with a sec keypad blocked the way ahead. Smudgy fingerprints covered the unit. I examined the buttons, looking for clues, but the keypad didn't offer any insight.

I glanced back at Gobbet. She was quiet for a minute, not completely there with us, then she said, "There's another way."

"Then let's go."

She took the lead, and Duncan and I followed her out of the building. Doubling back the way we'd come bothered me, but I didn't say anything because Gobbet moved without hesitation.

We went past a street market area where a tattered awning stood watch

over a rug covered in old blood. Beyond that was another market space where homemade candles burned around a bloodstained man's shirt. Sickly sweet fragrances filled the spot, and I got that astral itch again.

I looked at Gobbet as she stared at the blood. "What is it?"

She knelt and touched the shirt. "This cloth has a lot of negative energy coming off it. I think there's a spirit bound to it. The rats sensed it and told me."

At the back of the area, several fetishes and animal horns and tusks hung from thin wire strands. I guessed that whoever had done business here was a shaman himself.

"How's this going to help us?" I asked.

"Well, it's a ghost...or a Spirit of Man that *thinks* it's a ghost. It's hard to be sure." Gobbet frowned as she ran her fingers over the cloth. "Whatever it is, it's upset. I can feel its anger and sorrow. I can coax it out, and we could talk with it. The rats believe it knows something we need to know."

"All right." I didn't like being around astral energy that intense. Things could slide out of control way too easily. "What's the downside?"

"It could attack us and rip out our souls."

Duncan cursed.

"The rats are telling me I should try to contact whoever this was." Gobbet stared at me, and I knew she was thinking about Isobel.

"Fragging rats don't have to worry about this, though, do they?" Duncan pointed out. "Maybe they're just looking for a meal."

Gobbet shot him a withering look. "The rats won't hurt me." She cut her glance back to me. "There's no way to know without trying."

I nodded, and hoped bullets would work if things went sideways.

"Sure thing." Gobbet sipped a breath and her brow furrowed. "Let me try to establish a connection. I haven't tried this myself before, but I was taught by a shaman named Yabah, who follows the Totem of Crab."

Shimmering waves rose from the bloodied shirt. As Gobbet stood and stepped back, the waves became more substantial, adding layers until a being stood before us. I wouldn't say it was human, though it was man-shaped, with bloody flesh hung in tatters and strips, like the poor bastard had been flayed alive.

Eyes the consistency and color of egg drop soup focused on me. Its voice was soft and hollow, barely enough to be heard over the drumming rain. "What... is...this? Where am I?"

Gobbet nodded to me. "I built the connection so he would respond to you."

As I stared at the thing, I didn't know if I felt more afraid of it or sorry for it. "Kowloon. The Walled City."

Some of the confusion smoothed from its ravaged face. "Still?" It lifted its hands and peered at them with those macabre eyes. "How?"

"What's the last thing you remember?"

"The...last thing." It gazed into the rain clouds swirling above as lighting flickered across the dark sky. "I was...pushed from my shop...hunted through alleys...I..." Its voice broke, and a tint of anger painted the grim visage. "Bao. Bao and his men. I wouldn't pay them...wouldn't accept their *protection*..." It shook its head. "Proud...I was too proud...they tore me apart...butchered me like a duck...they..."

As it spoke, rips opened in its flayed flesh and black ichor dripped to the floor, swirling for a moment, then vanishing with the rain sluicing across the tarmac. Its jaw unhinged and radiance dawned in its too-big mouth. A glowing mass vomited forth, splattering at its feet.

"Ectoplasm," Gobbet said. "It's nothing to worry about." She looked sad. "It's reliving its death."

I stood my ground with effort. "Maybe you can help us."

It studied me and looked truly lost. "Help?" It swallowed. "I can."

"You can get us past Bao's guards and into the Walled City so we can find him."

"I...had a friend. A smuggler of animals. He had a space...hidden...secret."

"Tell me about the secret space."

"An entrance...in the sublevels..." Its eyes closed in concentration. "...a chute...a door...red paint...and numbers. Five, four, six, five. Five, four, six, five."

I nodded, and watched as the thing faded and vanished back to wherever it had come from.

"A red door?" Duncan grimaced. "We're supposed to find a red door in this place? We're slotted. There's all kind of colors on all kinds of doors."

"He said his friend was an animal smuggler," Gobbet said with a smile. "I know where that place is."

## CHAPTER 18

### HELLHOUNDS GONNA GET YOU!

We headed west over more rooftops, and I couldn't believe how much misery was packed into such a small area. Seeing that thing Gobbet had raised hit me harder than I'd thought it would. The squalor and hopelessness weighed on me even without thinking about how the old man was lost somewhere in all of this.

We went down a flight of stairs and ended up on another level and I realized how difficult it would be to find your way around in the sprawl. Even if a person spent a lifetime prowling through all the levels and sublevels, he probably wouldn't ferret out all the secrets in the Walled City.

Yet somehow, we were supposed to find the old man.

Duncan didn't say anything, but I knew his thoughts echoed mine. There was no way they couldn't. But we kept going, kept following Gobbet because she seemed to know the way.

Finally, she stopped and pointed. "There's the animal vendor."

Hanging on a storefront next to a sidewalk noodle shop, a red sign glowed in the darkness, boasting of *EXOTIC* animals.

Gobbet led us over, and I kept my weapons ready and my senses alert. Empty crates sat along the boardwalk in front of the shop, just more abandoned refuse.

A series of iron bars secured the door, driven by motors hidden within the building's walls. No one was going to just break into this place, although the scarred surface of the keypad on the security lock indicated that several had tried.

I pulled my pistol and nodded to my companions, making sure they were ready to go. Then I keyed in the code we'd gotten from the spirit. Five, four, six, five.

Motors groaned and shivered inside the walls and the bars retracted into their recesses.

A burst of fetid animal odors rushed out of the shop in a rank cloud that held taints of sulfur. Two low-slung, four-footed shadows moved within and the hair on the back of my neck stood up. Evidently the shop owner didn't trust security just to the electronic systems.

"Grab cover!" I waved to Gobbet and Duncan, and headed for a pile of crates

in front of the door myself. Gobbet joined me while Duncan took up a flanking position.

The shadows loped to the door and I recognized them. Coal black with gleaming eyes, the hellhounds stood as tall as my waist. Thick layers of muscle covered these beasts, and they moved quickly and silently.

I opened fire, aiming at the lead beast's broad chest. Wounds opened up and blood spilled out, but the hellhound dodged away, not looking much worse for the wear.

"I don't have a shot," Duncan called out.

"Hold your position," I told him. "They'll come to us."

Beside me, Gobbet spoke words and gestured. Within the shop, a shimmer signaled the arrival of some kind of spirit that she'd summoned. As soon as the spirit took shape, it unleashed a ball of lightning that exploded over both hellhounds, staggering them.

Before I could open fire, one of the hellhounds rushed out of the shop and leaped over the barrier at Gobbet. I stood and raised an arm as I shouldered the shaman away. She stumbled and fell, rats scattering from her clothing.

I tried to bring my pistol to bear, but the hellhound clamped its jaws around my forearm and drove me back with its weight. Driven back and down, I went with the momentum, hoping the armor protecting my arm held, and twisted, coming up on top of the snarling animal. Levering the pistol under the creature's muzzle, I fired three rounds that blew craters in the hellhound's skull, making it shudder and die.

Shoving the dead body off, I scrambled to my feet as more shots cracked behind me. I whirled, bringing my pistol up, and watched the remaining hellhound leap at Duncan. Before it reached him, the air elemental Gobbet had summoned slammed it with a wall of air that blew it off course.

Duncan tracked the creature and purple tracer rounds from his rifle punched into the hellhound again and again. It stopped fighting and dropped over the walkway into the deep alley. The air elemental vanished.

Satisfied that we were all intact, I led the way into the shop. Like the spirit had said, there was a door at the back of the shop. I went through it and up the ladder that lay beyond.



## CHAPTER 19

### THE STRAW SANDAL SPEAKS

After negotiating the ladder, we stepped into a room that—once I'd flicked on my cybervision—looked familiar with its bunkbed and dining table. It smelled familiar, too. I peeked outside the door and discovered we were back in the first area we had checked behind the Yellow Lotus guards we'd knocked out. It hadn't seemed like we were heading back there, yet here we stood again. Kowloon Walled City was even more confusing than I'd realized.

“Déjà vu all over again,” Duncan grumbled.

“Look around,” Gobbet suggested. “Maybe there's something we can use.” She spoke softly and her rats scurried from beneath her clothing, quickly darting across the floor.

I tossed the room, but didn't hold out much hope. After a few minutes, one of Gobbet's scruffy little companions ran out from under the bunkbed with a sec card in its teeth.

She knelt and thumbed the unit to life. “There's a code here. Six, three, seven, eight.” She stood and offered the card to me. “Maybe it works on that sec door we found earlier.”

I took it. “Only one way to find out.”

Out in the hallway, I took a left and headed down to the sec door. I punched the number into the keypad. Servos whined and the door opened, revealing another room that looked a lot like the others we'd been through. A power cable snaked across the grimy floor.

“Who's out there?” a gruff voice demanded.

Leaving my weapon holstered, I entered the room with my hands up.

The room was twice the size of anything we'd seen so far. An old mattress lay on the floor. The occupant wasn't living in the lap of luxury, but he had a simsense rig, refrigerator, and microwave against the wall.

Strangler Bao looked like the image I'd downloaded from the 'Net. In his fifties, broad and solid with a leather mask covering his chin and wrapping his jawline to blend into the neck brace that ran halfway up his head, he stood in a

fighting stance. Fade lines had been cut into his short-cropped hair and a lot of scars tracked his fleshy face.

“I don’t know how you got in,” Bao growled, “but you’ve got my attention.”

“Good,” I said easily. “I have a message. From Kindly Cheng.”

His features relaxed, but only a little. “A message from Cheng? I can’t wait to hear you mangle it.” He chuckled. “You speak Cantonese so well.”

I ignored the sarcasm. There were three of us, and he wasn’t feeling vulnerable—not the best sign of how things were going.

“But before I hear it,” he went on, “I have a little message for her, too. You tell her that her operations are done in the Walled City. Strangler Bao has given himself a promotion. And tell her that if she sends any more errand boys with *another* message, Strangler Bao is going to send them back in a box. You think you can tell her that, errand boy? Should I write it down for you in English?”

I held out the datastick. “Just slot the stick, listen to the message, and I’ll be gone. Okay?”

“I don’t get to hear you butcher the message? I’m sad.” He took the datastick and slotted it into his trid on the nearby table. The player juiced for a moment and a three-dimensional image of Kindly Cheng standing in the middle of an opulent room covered in oriental rugs took shape.

“*Mr. Bao,*” the image said. “*As everyone knows, you are a man of swift action. I respect that. And because I respect that, I will get right to the point. I know where your money is coming from. I know you have friends working for Straw Sandals like myself.*”

“*These people have been siphoning funds from their organizations,*” Kindly Cheng went on in a damning voice. “*I know about the noodle shop that you launder the money through. I have tasted the broth and found it wanting.*” Her voice hardened. “*You have been stealing from the Yellow Lotus—glorifying yourself with revenue we have earned.*” She took a breath and narrowed her eyes. “*And I have the files to prove it.*”

Receipts and bank statements formed on the trid, flicking past in a rapid montage.

I guessed Bao was in way over his head, and from the way his face fell, he was just now figuring that out.

“*Now,*” Kindly Cheng said, “*in light of our recent—disagreement, you might be wondering why I am keeping this information to myself. Why haven’t I exposed you so you could be dragged from your Lotus Den by the balls and slowly roasted*”

*on a rotisserie spit.”*

Bao swallowed at that, and it took a lot of effort.

*“In truth, I respect your ambition,”* Kindly Cheng said. *“You have a lot to learn about candor—and loyalty—but I believe you still have value. I am still willing to work with you. However, in order for that to happen, we need to come to an understanding about the nature of our partnership.”*

The receipts and bank statements disappeared, and Kindly Cheng leaned forward till her face filled the screen. *“I own you, Bao. You and all your men. You are my fucking playthings—dolls to twist and pose as I see fit. I am in this position because I am far better at this than you, and it’s time that you learned it. Accept what I am telling you, and we can get back to business. Prosper together.”*

Sweat covered Bao’s forehead.

*“But, if you choose to continue your little rebellion, I will mail tiny pieces of you to your children, and take their picture as they open the package.”* Kindly Cheng leaned back and took out a fresh cigar. She lit it, inhaled, and held the smoke a long time. *“You have twenty-four hours to return to the fold. If you aren’t there licking my heels by then, the information will be released, and you will become food for fish.”* She paused. *“Your choice, Bao. Twenty-four hours.”*

Pale and trembling, Bao turned to us. “Get out.” He cursed. “And tell Mrs. Cheng to expect me at Swift Winds tomorrow.” He wiped his face with a big hand. “Tomorrow morning.”

I nodded. “I’ll let her know.”

We didn’t give him our backs, because none of us really trusted him, but we left.

Once back in the rain, some of the tension unwound from my shoulders, but not all of it. I couldn’t stop thinking about how powerful Kindly Cheng was. And how merciless. And how Duncan and I were risking a lot by working for her.

I just hoped she really could come through with information about the old man—and wasn’t just using us to take care of her own dirty work.

## CHAPTER 20

### “RAYMOND BLACK IS DEAD.”

Duncan strode beside me as we walked back to the mahjong parlor. He looked at me in the reflection of a passing shop window. I knew he had a lot on his mind. So did I.

“Well, that was something,” he said finally. “Never thought I’d be shuttling messages between criminals in a Hong Kong syndicate. I can’t imagine what Raymond would’ve wanted in the Walled City. This whole place just feels *wrong* to me. I can’t shake it.”

I tried to keep it light because Duncan had a tendency to overthink things. “Looking for more stray kids to take in?”

He grimaced. “After us, I don’t think he wanted any more.”

I knew he actually meant, “after me.”

“Seriously,” he went on after I got quiet, going to dark places myself, “why did Raymond want to come anywhere near here? It makes you feel like your life has no value. Like there’s just no point to *anything*.” He sighed and looked at Gobbet. “Great life you have here.”

She frowned at him, but chose to ignore his rudeness. “I can’t believe it. We actually delivered the old lady’s message without anyone dying.”

“I’ve had enough of triads.” Duncan shook his head. “Let’s get out of this pit.”

“I’m with you, Gun Show,” Gobbet said softly. “I don’t need to see this place ever again.”

“Gun Show? Seriously? That’s not gonna stick, is it?” In spite of everything we’d just been through and all the uncertainty ahead of us, Duncan smiled.

Back at Swift Winds, Isobel was still in one piece, so I took that as a good omen. The dwarf decker smiled in relief when she saw us walk through the door. She looked like she had to resist running over and giving us a hug.

As we walked over to join her and Kindly Cheng, the Straw Sandal’s lieutenant leaned in and whispered into her ear. She smiled a little as he pulled away and we stopped before her.

“I’ve heard from Bao,” she said. “He got my message—very clearly. And I

understand there were no casualties created during your little delivery run.”

“Nothing more than some hurt feelings,” I said. “And maybe a few broken bones.” I chose not to mention the hellhounds.

“I am pleased and surprised.”

“Gobbet did a great job of guiding us.” I wanted to shore up the ork shaman in Kindly Cheng’s eyes.

“Did she?” The old woman beamed at her protégé. “Good to know. The message is delivered and Strangler Bao is back in the fold, earning for me. As far as I am concerned, our transaction is complete. While you were gone, I set the wheels in motion to wipe your identities.” She pulled out a comm and flicked it with a lacquered fingernail that held the image of a tiny but ferocious dragon. “The order has been sent. Congratulations, you are now SINless. Shadow-people.”

Beside me, I felt some of the energy go out of Duncan. I looked at him. “We’ll figure a way out of this.”

“There’s only one way out of this,” he said. “And that’s *through* it. Whoever gave the kill order on Carter also forced us to give up our identities. And took Raymond.” He lifted his chin defiantly. “That’s all I can think about this. Finding who did this. Finding Ray.”

Kindly Cheng held up a hand. “While I was working to get your SINS burned, I also had my network look into Raymond Black’s disappearance.”

I wondered what her angle was. She wasn’t someone who idly did things. What had caught her interest?

“I’ve been thinking about what you told me earlier.” She leaned in toward us. “And I agree. I can’t just let this lie. Someone also killed my runners. It would be a sign of weakness to the Yellow Lotus and the others if I do nothing about that.” Checking her comm again, she tapped a couple times, and looked back up. “I have news to share, my darlings. The kind you won’t like. Raymond Black is dead.” She held out her comm.

The image on the screen showed an old picture of Raymond. I recognized it as his publicity shot of the time he was opening a youth shelter in the Redmond Barrens. The crawler beneath the image scrolled: *SEATTLE MAN KILLED AT VICTORIA HARBOR*.

I felt like someone had slammed a cyber-assisted punch into my gut.

The image faded away and a young female reporter’s face took shape there. She looked far too bright and sunny to report on murder.

“—another shooting involving the police department,” she said as Kindly Cheng brought the audio online. *“A Seattle community organizer and industrial engineer was apparently shot and killed while resisting arrest at Victoria Harbor last night. HKPF report that the UCAS man, Raymond Black, was behaving erratically and would not respond to police orders to surrender.”*

*“No additional information regarding Black or why he was traveling to Hong Kong is available. Police have stated that due to the proximity to last night’s shootout with the White Star, the investigation of this incident must remain confidential, and no other details are being revealed at this time.”*

I couldn’t speak as Kindly Cheng shut off the comm broadcast. I couldn’t look at Duncan. He’d come a long way and sacrificed so much...for what? Anger burned steadily in me, escalating. Maybe if I hadn’t just come from lockdown after eight years, I wouldn’t have been so quickly hell-bent on making someone pay for this.

“You were right, Auntie,” I said in a cold voice I almost didn’t recognize. “That was news I didn’t like.”

“This just keeps getting worse,” Duncan said, and I knew then that he realized he could never go back. Not after being rendered SINless. “Raymond’s dead.” He staggered, and for a moment I thought he was going to go down.

Isobel started to reach out for him, but drew her hand back before making contact.

“Sorry for your loss,” Gobbet said. “I never had a father, so I don’t know what it’s like to lose one...but...sorry.”

I pushed aside all emotions but the rage fueling me. It had been my constant companion throughout lockdown. I wouldn’t have made it if my anger hadn’t kept me strong, and if I hadn’t learned when to turn it on and when to turn it off.

“Raymond dies the same night we get ambushed?” I shook my head. “That’s no coincidence.”

“No fucking way,” Duncan agreed.

Kindly Cheng tapped her comm again. “I’m afraid that’s not all, my darlings. This is security footage from Victoria Harbour from last night. You’ll find it contains...a contradiction.” She held it out.

Silent gray sec cam footage from a small tea room played on the screen. I recognized the old man standing in the midst of the table. Armed men and women dressed in black stood around him, holding guns aimed at him. The old man ignored them, gazing down at something he held in one hand. My stomach

tightened as I guessed what I was about to watch.

A guy in an expensive suit and flanked by two armed sec men stepped toward the old man. As the angle shifted slightly, I saw a white plastic mask covering the sharp-dressed man's face. From the way the two people with the old man moved, I guessed they were guarding him.

Muzzle flashes filled the screen. One of the old man's guards went down, his submachine gun spitting death. One of the stray rounds hit the sec cam and the image grayed out.

"Those weren't cops," Duncan growled. "And Raymond wasn't *resisting arrest*."

"What's with that guy's face?" Gobbet scratched one of her rats under its chin. "Is that a mask?"

"It doesn't look like a mask," Isobel said. "It looks like some sort of semi-rigid plastic implant. Real craftsmanship. Quite the fashion accessory."

I hadn't ever heard of something like that. Of course, things had changed a lot while I'd been away.

"It's also the kind of fashion accessory that stands out in a crowd," Duncan said. "This guy's either a fool or an arrogant son-of-a-bitch. Either way, I'm gonna find him."

"I believe you," Kindly Cheng said.

He looked at me, reminding me of all the times he'd done that before. "So what now?"

And I'd always been the one who was supposed to have the answers.

I took a breath and considered, but there weren't many options. "We find out who this Plastic-Faced Man is. Then we get some answers."

"With what resources?" Kindly Cheng asked. "I'm afraid there are some hard facts you have to face." She paused. "You are alone in this country. No network. No money. No identity. I can protect you from the police, but how would you go about discovering what happened to Raymond Black without me? How would you survive? This is a topic that needs serious consideration."

I didn't have any answers for her, and she knew it. So I waited for the other shoe to drop.

Unexpectedly, she smiled. "You've had a long night, my sweets. Very long. And frankly you all look like shit. Rest now. I promise you all safety in my town for the night. We'll talk about the Plastic-Faced Man and what to do about him tomorrow."

She turned to Gobbet and Isobel. “Ladies, go find our new friends a place to bed down in that rat’s-nest squat-boat you call home. We’ll talk after you’ve slept. Figure out our next steps together.”

“Yes, Auntie,” Gobbet replied, and Isobel echoed her.

“Rat’s-nest squat-boat?” I asked, too curious to simply let it lie.

“We call it the *Bolthole*,” Gobbet said with a small smile.

That made me even more curious.

## CHAPTER 21

### THE *BOLTHOLE*

The *Bolthole* turned out to be a massive rust bucket trawler floating in the harbor. One look at her, and I wasn’t so sure she wasn’t going to sink before morning, which was only a few hours away. Empty crates and barrels littered her deck, and it had probably been decades since she’d hauled any cargo. Still, Hong Kong was an island, and the people in the sprawl lived on anything that could remain above water.

By whatever miracle.

I climbed up the ladder on the side, crossed the deck, and entered the hatch Gobbet pointed out to me. Rats descended from her clothing and scampered around with other rats that lived here as well. I didn’t know how she kept them all fed. I was certain that the day she died, no matter where she was, she was going to end up as a rat buffet.

Belowdecks, I was surprised by how relatively clean and efficient everything was compared to the ship’s exterior. Hardwood floors showed age and use and scarring, but they were also clean and tidy. A large, rounded sofa filled one corner of the space next to a small but complete galley. At the other end of the couch, a computer system sat on a desk against the bulkhead.

“You two can bunk here for a while,” Gobbet said. You’ve each got a head to take care of your necessities. Try to knock before you enter someone else’s room,



okay?”

“I know the drill,” Duncan said. Then he turned to me. “Stinks of fish, just like that place on Leary Avenue we squatted at when we were kids. The one with the Aztlán family and their dog.”

“You hated that dog,” I reminded him.

“He kept rooting out my food stash. No matter where I hid it, he’d find it and scarf down a week’s worth of grub.” Duncan grew quiet for a moment, and I knew we didn’t have many good memories that didn’t bring the bad back with them. “Still, it was sad what happened to him. And that family. No one should go out that way.” He straightened and his spine cracked. “I think I’ve been up for something like thirty-six hours straight. And this has been one shit-stain of a day. Time to end it.”

“Anything you need before I leave you to it?” Gobbet asked.

“How’d you get your hands on this place?” I asked.

“How do people like us get our hands on anything? We *found* it.”

“You found it empty?” Duncan frowned as he looked around. “Somebody abandoned a prime piece of real estate like this?”

Gobbet shrugged. “Close enough. It was full of BTL junkies when we found it. They were completely wigged out on some multiplayer game...I’m not sure if they *ever* jacked out. They were completely emaciated, stewing in their own piles of shit. Their eyes had sunk into their skulls. Pretty gruesome stuff.”

“They racked up a killer score, though,” Isobel said.

“True,” Gobbet said. “They had the moves. Should’ve hung an IV while they were playing, though. Turns out, nutrition is important.”

“So what happened?” I asked. “Did they die?”

“Nightjar ran ’em out. Not sure what happened to them after that. Anyway, it’s ours now. Auntie Cheng says so.”

“All but the engine room, you mean,” Isobel added.

“Right.” Gobbet nodded. “Everything but that. Auntie rented it out from under us.”

“That must have pissed you off,” Duncan said.

“Whatever.” Gobbet shrugged again. “We weren’t using it. As long as our downstairs neighbor keeps to himself, he can have the lower level. Especially if it keeps Auntie Cheng happy. He enters and leaves through that hatch over there, but you won’t see him much.” She pointed to a closed hatch against the bulkhead.

“So who’s your neighbor?”

“A rigger from Eastern Europe. Quiet. Keeps to himself. Has a drone he treats like a kid.” Gobbet shook her head. “You won’t have any problems with him. Now, if there’s nothing else, I’m going to bed.”

“Think I’m going to grab some sack time too,” I said.

Once I got squared away in my berth, a small but comfortable area, I waited until the ship grew quiet and everyone was probably asleep. Then I got up to give the vessel a once-over. I don’t like sleeping any place where I don’t know the lay of the land.

I’d showered earlier, taking advantage of the amenities, so I dressed again and took my pistol in hand as I returned to the main room. I scouted out Gobbet and Isobel’s rooms forward, and I studied the hatch leading down to the rigger who Gobbet said lived in the engine room. But I didn’t go down there. Night wasn’t the best time to invade someone’s home, especially when you didn’t know him.

I retreated to my berth, put the pistol under my pillow, closed my eyes, and dreamed.

In the dream, I ran through a patchwork vision of the Walled City that tilted crazily and bled from every surface. I didn’t know what I was running from or toward.

The thing that stood out most was the menacing figure with the big helmet that featured a pair of horns linked by a semi-circle. I tried to see his face, to find out if he was the Plastic-Faced Man, but I never got close enough to him to know.

Then I woke up, breathing hard and covered in sweat, while Duncan shook my shoulder.

“C’mon, get up,” he said. “We gotta go talk to Kindly. The others have already left.” He looked more rested, but the anxiety still shadowed his features.

“That was one rough night.” I clambered out of bed and felt the cold hardwood floors against my bare feet.

“I’ve been trying to wake you for a while now. You were thrashing around in your sleep.”

“Glad you did.” I pulled the pistol from behind the pillow and shoved it into my hip holster. “I was having one hell of a nightmare.”

“Yeah. I didn’t sleep well either.” He shook his head. “I had a bad dream last night, too.”

I was interested because I’d never experienced anything like what I’d dreamed last night. I was glad it wasn’t just me. “Really? What was it about?”

He shrugged. “I never remember my dreams that well. It was probably motion sickness. Not used to sleeping on a boat. I woke up a little while ago and hit the head. Then I came back and woke you.”

“You doing okay?”

“I’ll survive.” His fingers gently prodded his skull and he winced in pain. “But, man, nothing’s gone right since we stepped foot in this country.” He looked at me. “I’ll tell you something, though—and this is after a full night’s sleep—I don’t think Raymond’s dead.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked. I knew, though. It was that innocent part of Duncan that he’d refused to let go of, that part that believed Raymond would always be there for him.

“Think about it. That statement from the cops on the newscast could be fake. Ours was. And that surveillance footage? We never *saw* Raymond get shot. The camera was hit by stray gunfire.” Duncan looked at me. “Raymond’s alive. I know it.”

I grinned at him and hoped I wasn’t making a mistake by encouraging him. “You make a good case, Officer Wu.”

He smiled back. “Shoulda been a detective instead of a head-buster, right?” He shook his head. “God, I feel like I’m twelve years old again—*squatting* on a trawler. My partner’s gone. Raymond’s gone. Hell, *I’m* gone—I don’t even have a *name* anymore. And I can’t even go to sleep and hide from it all without having a nightmare.” He ground his teeth, his tusks shifting from side to side. “What else is gonna be taken from me?”

I put a hand on his broad shoulder and squeezed. “I’m here, Duncan, and I’m not going anywhere.”

He stood there for a moment, then checked his watch. “Gobbet and Isobel left a while ago. We should get going too. See what that triad lady has to say.”

I nodded and gathered up the rest of my gear. Whatever Kindly Cheng said, I was sure we’d be risking our necks by just listening.

## CHAPTER 22

### THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

Even though it was morning, the mahjong parlor remained about as busy as it had been the night before. Maybe the clientele were all regulars, or maybe all the regulars were sec men in Kindly Cheng's employ.

Things were different, though. Today no one was playing. Instead, all of them stared at a bound man kneeling on a plastic dropcloth before the Straw Sandal. He was panicked and in pain. Middle-aged, he wore a good suit—at least, it had been a good suit before getting covered in blood I assumed was his. His brown hair might have been well-styled once, but now it was lank and messy.

Duncan and I joined Gobbet and Isabel at the back of the room and stared at the man. I raised my eyebrows at Gobbet, but she shook her head. I waited.

Kindly Cheng gestured to the kneeling man with one long, immaculate fingernail. He wobbled toward her, off balance from the shackles and from his injuries. Acetylene torches blazed blue fire on the table beside Kindly Cheng, and a familiar-looking man with a scarred face stood on her other side.

She looked up at me and smiled. "How did you sleep, my little ones?"

I poured on the saccharine. "Like a baby, Auntie. I'm still in the afterglow of our tour of the Walled City."

"Afterglow? Really?" A surprised smile turned up her lips. "Then you should be delighted to say hello to your old friend, Strangler Bao. He's here because of you."

At her side, Bao nodded but said nothing.

I decided to wait for her to let me know what part—if any—I was supposed to play in whatever she had going on.

Bao didn't move, didn't shift, but I caught his eye as he glanced at me.

"Well then," Kindly Cheng said, "now that the niceties are over, let's get on to the nasties." She pointed an accusing finger at the man on the plastic tarp. "Shitbird here is a plainclothes cop. He snuck into the area last night while you

were sleeping, hoping to find you and kill you before his competition got to you first.”

*Plainclothes cop? Competition?* I suddenly felt like I was back in solitary in lockdown. I had no control over anything that was happening to me. What was this conspiracy all about? What had the old man gotten Duncan and me into?

“My men found him outside the trawler,” Kindly Cheng continued. “They saw to it that your rest was undisturbed, and that your location remained a mystery.”

I nodded, and Bao returned it.

Kindly Cheng fixed her dark gaze on the man at her feet. “Now, shitbird, tell my friends here what you told me.”

“I...I don’t know anything,” the man said in a panicked voice. “I swear. We just got the orders last night.” He turned and tried to wobble toward me. “Somebody high up wants these two dead. The whole department is in on it. I don’t know anything else.”

“Someone high up?” Kindly Cheng bent over, hooking a lacquered fingernail under his chin and forcing him to look up at her. “How high?”

“All the way,” the guy answered. “All the way up. It’s someone on the Council.”

“Someone on the Executive Council wants *these two* dead?” She spat on him. “Fuck your ancestors to the eighteenth generation. Give me the truth.”

“It’s the truth, madam! I swear it! Whoever it was labeled them as terrorists—we’re to terminate them on sight with extreme prejudice.”

Someone wanted to make an example of us. That didn’t make sense with anything I knew.

Kindly Cheng caught a fistful of the man’s hair and yanked his head back. She searched his eyes with her own. “That’s all he’s got.” She released his hair and looked at me. “For whatever reason, someone on the Executive Council of the Free Enterprise Zone ordered the Hong Kong Police Force to kill you two nobodies from Seattle.” She paused, suspicion flickering in her eyes. “I find that fascinating. Don’t you?”

Her question was the most accusing I’d ever heard, and I had the definite impression that I might die in the next few seconds.

“I call that some messed up shit,” I said.

“Seattle isn’t like Hong Kong,” Gobbet said. “There, the megacorps control the government. Here, the corps *are* the government.”

“The Exec Council is chosen by the Corporate Board of Governors,” Isobel said. “They’re basically the legislative and executive branches of the Hong Kong government in one tiny package. Eight people call all the shots. Neat and efficient.”

Kindly Cheng stepped back and lit a new smoke. “For the wageslaves and the civilian sheep, the corporations are a pantheon of gods who wield ultimate power.” She nodded around the room. “But not for us.”

She tapped ash on the kneeling man’s head. “Who else knows about my guests’ visit to Heoi, shitbird?”

“No one, madam!” He nearly shouted, barely holding back his fear. “I hadn’t called it in yet—I wanted the kill for myself!”

Thank god for greedy police assassins.

“No one knows they’re here!” he went on. “I swear it!”

Kindly Cheng turned to Strangler Bao at her side. “Mr. Bao?”

Bao showed her a comm that had been hidden in his big hands. “He’s telling the truth. No outgoing calls on this.”

“Very good. Thank you, Bao.” Kindly Cheng returned her attention to the undercover cop. “And thank you for your honesty.”

He started a smile, never even had a chance to lose it before Bao drew a pistol and shot him through the head. His limp body crashed to the floor at Kindly Cheng’s feet.

## CHAPTER 23

### WELCOME TO THE SHADOWS

“What the hell was that?” I exploded. I’d never been part of a cold-blooded killing like this before. “That was a cop!”

“I know, my darling,” Kindly Cheng said. “Now he’s a *silent* cop.” She picked up a few mahjong tiles and shook them in her hand. “It is clear our friend Raymond Black was up to something involving the Walled City. Something

having to do with *prosperity*. And this Executive Council member wanted him dead for it. Now they want you dead for it, too. And this Plastic-Faced Man may show up on your door one day, too.”

She fixed me with her gaze, moved to Duncan, then back to me. “I have a proposal for you, my sweets. Work for me.”

I remained quiet for a moment, and Duncan waited for my lead.

“With Nightjar and Gutshot dead,” Kindly Cheng went on, “I find myself with two openings. Fill them. I have need for deniable assets here—players unaffiliated with the other triads who can take care of some of the more... unsavory business needs about town. You’ve proven yourself resourceful, and you have no connections here. That can be a positive in this line of work.”

“This line of work sounds dangerous,” I said.

“Damn right,” Duncan agreed.

“In exchange,” Kindly Cheng said, “I will keep you safe from pests like this one. You’ll have safe harbor here in my town, and a steady source of income. And while you dip your toe into the waters of corporate espionage, organized crime, and clandestine mercenary actions, I will employ my network to find the Plastic-Faced Man and gather information about Raymond Black. Where he’s been. Who he talked to. Who stood to gain from his death. What this *prosperity* could be.”

“What’s in it for you?” I knew she wasn’t doing this out of the goodness of her heart.

“Besides the money and the benefits of helping others in my community?” She smiled. “I need to learn who killed one of my clients, and then ordered the cops to execute my team of shadowrunners.” Her voice dropped into a lower register and filled with threat. “That is a brazen disregard of my power. Face dictates it must be confronted, or I stand to lose everything.”

“How would the arrangement work?” I asked.

“I find the right jobs for people with your...talents. You do what our clients cannot do for themselves. I take a finder’s fee and a small percentage of your earnings. You make a lot of nuyen very quickly.” Kindly Cheng shrugged. “It’s all very civilized.”

Except what she was talking about was dangerous and risky, and my and Duncan’s necks would always be on the chopping block.

“Work with me,” she enthused. “Allow me to help you make money. Let my network help you *and* find out what you’ve gotten yourselves into.” She folded her arms over her chest. “Without my help, you won’t last a day out there. You are

completely out of your depth, I'm afraid. You need a partner. Kindly Cheng will be your partner."

Duncan shook his head. "I gotta wrap my brain around this. Things are moving too fast. There's a lot to process."

I felt bad for him. He'd tried to leave the hustle and uncertainty behind him, first with the old man, then with Lone Star. My brother preferred a black and white arena where all the rules were known to everyone.

We were way past that. And he needed to realize that—the sooner, the better.

"Think about it, Duncan," I said. "This gives us freedom to find out what happened to Ray."

"I know. I get it. I just gotta reconcile this whole..." Duncan blew out a big breath. "Ah, fuck it. I'm not a cop anymore. That guy's dead, and down the memory hole he goes. I'm in." He stared at me. "What about you?"

"I think Ray's still alive, too," I answered. "Let's run the shadows and figure out what happened to him."

"Raymond's alive," Duncan repeated, sounding more certain than he had before. "So I'll run the shadows as long as Auntie Cheng here—" He nodded at the gangster. "—keeps her end of the bargain and helps us figure out what really happened to him. Then I'm gonna find my father."

Kindly Cheng nodded in satisfaction, and she might have even looked a little excited. "Then it's done. Heoi is now open to you. First order of business is getting street names for yourselves."

Duncan frowned. "Yeah, okay. I'll think of something."

Gobbet grinned. "I think we already got you covered, Gun Show." She turned to Isobel. "Fits, doesn't it?"

Isobel grinned back and nodded. "Indeed."

Duncan shook his head. "I *knew* that was gonna stick."

"It has stuck," Kindly Cheng said, finishing the baptism. "Gobbet, Isobel, we'll handle this the same way we did with...all your other paperwork."

I knew she'd thought of Nightjar. Pain flashed in her eyes for just a heartbeat, then winked out of existence.

"All the jobs I line up for you," she said as she looked at me, "will be sent to your computer on the squat-boat."

"Why me?" I asked.

"It's a simple process of elimination. Isobel isn't the leader type."

"You got that right," the dwarf decker said.



“As for Gobbet...” Kindly Cheng paused. “Let’s just say that she doesn’t have a head for business.”

The shaman shook her head, giving no sign of having taken offense. “Not my thing.”

“And then there’s Gun Show.” Kindly Cheng raised an eyebrow. “The jury’s still out on Mr. Gun Show.”

Duncan glowered at her. “Meaning?”

“Meaning there’s a lot going on in that head of yours right now, and I’m not sure that I can trust you.”

“Gun Show will be fine,” I said. “Trust me.”

The triad woman locked eyes with me and didn’t say anything.

“Don’t worry,” Duncan said beside me. “I’ll be cool.”

“Okay, then.” I took a breath. “Guess I’m running the show.”

Duncan grinned. “Gonna be weird calling you by your street name again. Haven’t done that since we were kids.”

“I guess this is our new crew.” Gobbet looked pleased. Rats peered out from under her clothing. “Welcome to the shadows.”

*Welcome to the shadows.* I thought about that for a moment.

Nobody knew how many people were buried out there in the shadows.

## CHAPTER 24

### RACTER

We returned to the trawler and everybody turned in to catch up on sleep. Except me. I noticed the hatch in the main room was open, and guessed that our downstairs “neighbor” had left it open. I decided to let him know he now had new neighbors before a lethal mistake was made.

Especially since one of the HKPF had already found us.

At the bottom of the steps, the garish red lights pulled a lanky figure out of the darkness. Dressed in a black trench coat, he stood with his back to me and

didn't bother to turn around.

Synthetic oil and grease stink overlaid everything. Metal and composite surfaces gleamed, showing recent attention and care. Several new machines stood around the area, all of them manufacturing devices, and not many of them I recognized.

“Ah, I was wondering when I would meet the new neighbor,” the man said in a deep voice with a thick Russian accent. Despite the harsh syllables, he sounded cultured and restrained. “Please stay where you are. I'll be with you in just a moment. And unless you fancy a trip to Chrome Alley, don't touch anything. There are all manner of tools in here that could take your hand clean off.”

I drew my arms in a little closer to my body. Chrome Alley was street slang for doctors who performed cyber enhancements for clients. Not all of those were legal establishments. “Thanks for the warning.”

“Don't mention it. I have no interest in seeing anyone hurt in my shop, especially not my upstairs neighbor.”

I peered over his shoulder at the screen he was working on. I couldn't make sense of any of the design work there. Whatever this guy was working on, he was light years ahead of me.

“Very good,” the guy said softly. “Yes, that's coming along nicely. Very nicely indeed.”

He turned to look at me. His thick, Slavic features looked gray in the red light, like he didn't see the sun much. Of course, most shadowrunners and techies didn't. Still he was about ten years older than me, and handsome. The cherry end of a cigarette glowed as he inhaled, then the obnoxious stench of Russian tobacco filled my nose.

“So sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr....”

I gave him my street name because it wouldn't mean anything to him. “It's no problem. Don't worry about it.”

“You're too kind,” he replied. “Now tell me, what can I do for—”

Quick movement to our side caught his attention. I watched as an armed drone scuttled out of the shadows under the work table. Once clear, it reared back on its back legs like a tarantula.

The man nodded to the drone and looked—for a moment—like an affectionate father. “Please, don't mind the drone. He can be...territorial. But so long as you remain civil, he will not bite.”

I held up my hands, showing the drone they were empty.

“My name is Racter.” The man extended his hand. “My mechanical counterpart here is called Koschei.”

I shook his hand, which was rough and warm. A working man’s calluses covered his palm. “A pleasure.”

“I am very pleased to meet you, my friend. In a community such as Heoi, it’s important to be on good terms with one’s neighbors.”

“Agreed. Speaking of which, I’d like to ask you some questions, if you have the time.”

He rolled a sleeve back to reveal a metallic bracer around his forearm. A technical display flared to life and winked out. “Very well. This morning’s casting should still be cooling for a few minutes yet. That’s time enough to talk.”

Busy man, this Racter guy.

“You’ve got some interesting machinery in here,” I said. “Not the kind that you typically see outside of corporate settings.”

“The same could be said of many in Heoi, I’m sure. This *is* a smuggler’s den, is it not? Our entire economy is based on people having things they shouldn’t. Is there a particular device that interests you, out of curiosity...”

“I’m mostly interested in that drone you have there.” I’d known riggers back in Seattle, and they were always a breed apart. Yang Zizhuang was a runner, but he only operated with drones he built himself. He’d lost a crew, and didn’t want to go through that again.

“Koschei? Ah, but my friend, you are wrong...you will never find his like in any corporate factory or lab. He is mine. My own creation, from the top of his sensor array to the tips of his claws. I designed him, fabricated his components, and built him by hand.”

“Impressive,” I told him.

Racter shrugged. “No more so than anyone else who follows his passions and perfects his craft.”

“Koschei is an interesting name for a drone.”

“Yes, I suppose that it is. Not many riggers would name their most prized possession after a villain in a fairy tale. A nod to my heritage, I suppose.”

I’d read a lot while in lockdown. Somewhere in there I had read about Koschei. He’d been a wizard, supposedly immortal as long as he kept his soul separate from his body and hidden in a needle, inside an egg, inside a duck, inside a hare, under a tree on an island. Or maybe somebody had told me the story. I couldn’t remember. It was a name that had evidently stuck in my head and

Racter's.

“Your drone is as deathless as Koschei was supposed to be?”

His eyebrows raised in surprise, and he smiled. “You are familiar with the story?”

I nodded.

“Wonderful. In a manner of speaking, I suppose he is. I have redundant pieces of his architecture, and his core programming is stored on a disc in a secret location. Should he ever suffer critical damage, I can easily bring him back.” He paused. “I had a plan, once, to automate the self-repair process. I must confess, it was really quite ingenious. But alas, my research was lost. One day I will reclaim it, and Koschei will become as deathless as the stories claim. But it will not be today.”

“Are you Russian? I thought I recognized the accent.”

He nodded. “You have a good ear. I'm impressed. Yes, I grew up in Nizhny, Novgorod...went to school there, started my career there in the industrial sector. A fairly common story, I'm sure.”

I was pretty certain there was nothing *fairly common* about Racter.

“But I have also traveled a great deal,” he went on, “and in so doing, I have absorbed a number of other languages and dialects.”

“If you were born and raised in Russia, what brings you to Hong Kong now?”

“The same thing that attracts many to the Free Enterprise Zone.” Racter spread his long-fingered hands. “Opportunity. You, yourself, are a recent transplant, are you not? Your Cantonese is heavily accented in the style of many UCAS expats. That isn't a criticism, mind you...just a statement of fact.”

“Yeah, I'm new here. Not by choice.”

“Then I am sorry for you. But not overly sorry. There are a great number of places in this world that would be far worse to end up in. If you have to be marooned somewhere, you're lucky to be in Hong Kong. Trust me on that, my friend. I have traveled broadly enough to know.”

“When you said ‘this morning's casting,’ what did you mean?”

“Exactly what I said.” Excitement flared in his eyes. “A casting that I made of a new locomotive assembly for Koschei. A biomimetic design, as you can see. This one is inspired by the walking legs of a decapod crustacean. The mangrove crab, to be specific.”

“You're designing drone parts in here?”

“And fabricating them, yes.”

“Wouldn’t it be simpler to outsource the fabrication?”

“Simpler? Yes. But not better. Here, I have control over the entire process, from start to finish. And I have the skills to make good use of that control. Drone architecture was once my profession, you see. Now that I have freed myself from the shackles of corporate servitude, I see little reason to rely on outsiders for anything.”

I agreed with the sentiment. I didn’t like relying on others either. Which was one of the reasons I’d wanted to get away from the old man. And that little bit of suspicion I had that never went away niggled at me.

“You said you used to work for a corp. Whose payroll were you on?”

Sadness pulled at his face. “That is something of a sore subject. My departure was involuntary, you see. I did not part ways with my employer under the best of terms. I will tell you that I worked for Grishin-Aviakor, but you’ll forgive me if I don’t want to go into detail.”

I’d heard of them, but only tangentially. Grishin-Aviakor developed transport vehicles—land, sea, and air—and robotic combat systems. That was interesting.

I waved around the room. “All of this has gotta be expensive. Where do you get the money to support your work?”

“Freelance.” He smiled. “At the risk of sounding immodest, I’ve commodified myself rather well. There are always corporations in need of design consultations. You’d be surprised at how lucrative such work can be. And there is always...other work I can turn to in a pinch.”

“Care to tell me what kind?” I said, though I was pretty sure what that work was.

His eyes narrowed and, at his side, the drone shifted restively. “A rather personal question, wouldn’t you say?”

“Maybe, but then we’re having a personal conversation.” His little hobby cost a lot of nuyen. He surely knew what my and Duncan’s appearance on the *Bolthole* meant.

“Indeed we are. But even in personal conversations, certain topics can be off limits. Truth be told, I don’t feel especially comfortable discussing my side work with relative strangers. Suffice it to say that my freelance activities often fall on the illicit end of the spectrum.”

“Tell you what,” I said, “I’m just going to guess. You’re a shadowrunner, aren’t you?”

“I dislike the term, but, yes, I run the shadows. What gave me away?”

“Nothing in particular,” I lied. “I just get that feeling.”

“Interesting. Well your intuition is correct, as I said. Now I’m going to use mine: you’re a shadowrunner as well, but you’re new to the profession. Am I correct?”

He didn’t know me. He only thought he knew me. Or maybe those years in lockdown had taken a step or two away from my game. I shrugged, deciding that letting him think he knew me allowed me a surprise or two in case I needed it.

“Yes, on all counts.”

Racter smiled and ran a hand over his pet murder-bot. “I earn my living in the shadows. I suspect everyone on this boat does. If we were suited for a more pedestrian line of work, we wouldn’t be in Heoi in the first place. At the risk of sounding immodest, Koschei’s aptitude for butchery is quite impressive. He earns me all that I need and more.”

“Seems like everyone on this boat runs the shadows. Why not pool our resources and work together?”

Pursing his lips, Racter thought for a moment. “A compelling offer. I’m doing quite well on my own, but I must admit there are certain jobs for which I am unsuited. Magic eludes me, and I am not a decker. My strength comes from material objects in the real world—solid things with mass and heft, things that I can build and operate. Sadly, a great number of clients are only interested in teams that display a mastery over the intangible. This group of yours, do you have people who can cover those bases? If so, then perhaps we can help each other out.”

“Yep. We’ve also got a former security expert. I guess that’s the best way to describe Gun Show.”

He smiled. “In that case, I accept your offer on a provisional basis. We’ll do a few runs together and see how we get on. If our association bears fruit, it will continue. If not, I’ll bid you farewell and go back to working alone. How does that sound?”

I could work with that. The drone impressed the hell out of me, and I was willing to bet Racter could be impressive all on his own. I offered my hand.

“Welcome aboard.”

“Very good. Excellent. When you receive a suitable job, you know where to find me. My skills and resources are at your disposal.”

I headed back upstairs. I didn’t bother to tell him that I’d be calling on those

soon. I had the feeling Kindly Cheng wasn't going to let us lie around long. Not when we could be earning nuyen to line her pockets.

## CHAPTER 26

### “THEY MIGHT SHOOT AT YOU”

The run came through quicker than expected. I'd been right about Kindly Cheng's greed.

Back upstairs, I took a seat in front of the deck and discovered there were already six unread messages. The first was from the Straw Sandal.

*>On behalf of your friends at the Heoi Chamber of Commerce and the Swift Winds Mahjong Parlor, I welcome you to the community of Heoi and to our new business venture.*

*I have already lined up three jobs for you. The details of each are contained in a separate computer message. Remember to check your messages often, as I will update you with new opportunities as they occur.*

*—Auntie C.*

*>I've set up your computer to automatically collect and collate news reports, information, and media that might be of interest to you. Some of the keywords I've got it trolling for are “Raymond,” “Duncan,” and “Walled City,” et cetera.*

*I've also patched in a permanent linkup to the Hong Kong shard of the Shadowlands BBS. It's a great place to connect with other runners, sell paydata, get news from the street, and so on. Don't be shy about taking a look.*

*—Is0bel*

I had to admit, the decker was quick. I smiled and kept searching through the mail.

*>I have been instructed to inform you of the various suppliers in Heoi. Auntie Cheng has cultivated a commercial district of well-stocked and trustworthy vendors. Whoever you choose to do business with, you will be in good hands.*

A list of places followed, some of them I had already seen on the streets, and it was signed: *Best of luck in the shadows. As new meat, you are likely to need it.*  
—*Strangler Bao.*

I moved on to what I assumed was the first of Kindly Cheng's three run messages.

*>I've got a problem, and you're going to help me solve it. I do a lot of business with the Whampoans. If you're not familiar with the term, I'll forgive you. You are an outsider, after all.*

*The Whampoans are a tribe of techno-fetishists and deckers who have taken up residence in the Whampoa Garden area of Hong Kong. They make and trade high-tech goods to people from all over the world. A lot of nuyen passes through their pasty little fingers, and I make a lot of money brokering deals between them and the smugglers here in Heoi.*

*I've hit a snag, though. The Whampoan Elders—their council of leaders—are being eliminated by a serial killer. They've asked me to dispatch someone to get to the bottom of it and stop the killings—and they're not taking their goods through my turf until I do.*

*So you're going to be my proxy, dear. I don't care how you do it, but I need those murders stopped.*

*The Whampoans have a delegate here in Heoi by the name of Maximum Law. Speak with him if you wish to know more about Whampoa. He's got a big mouth, but he knows very little of importance. Don't expect much from that half-empty bottle of vinegar.*

*Get your ass down to Whampoa Garden and talk to the Elders. Lie, cheat, and steal if you have to—so long as they're convinced that there won't be any more murders. I want my cut back, and I want it soon.*

I didn't bother looking at the other missions. I figured they were all going to be hard and likely to get us killed. I sent a reply letting the old woman know we'd be taking the run.

The reply was almost instantaneous, which told me Kindly Cheng had been



waiting for me to respond.

*>Good. I'll tell the Elders you're coming. They don't like outsiders, and they might shoot at you if I don't warn them that you'll be arriving.*

Well, that would be helpful. Not getting shot by the people we were there to help. I went to get the team.

## **CHAPTER 27**

### **MEET AND GREET**

We took the maglev to Whampoa Garden pretty much in silence. All of us were nervous. Duncan was probably the most relaxed. He'd chased killers for Lone Star.

But this killer had already struck again. The screamsheets were full of the last murder, flashing the news on all the public vendors. Pedestrians were in scarce supply, and I figured that was the reason. The news was thin. Duncan and I both pored over the few details, but local police had no clues, just the body of another Elder.

It was late when we reached our destination. Rain fell steadily, and I tasted toxicity when it ran across my lips. An ozone stench clung to everything, and I knew it had to come from all the neon signs lining the streets. Every vendor there must have spent a fortune on power to keep the lights on to advertise their wares.

Even the cart vendors had powered advertisements. Remembering that I hadn't eaten in hours, I wondered if the food tasted like ozone.

Isobel looked around and wrinkled her nose. "Is there a word for feeling nostalgic for a place you want to leave again? I don't miss this place, but I miss the feelings I had when I lived here."

"*Saudade*, maybe?" I suggested. It was a Portuguese word that reflected their temperament about longing for their home country.

“No.” Isobel shook her head. “That’s not it. It’s close, but…” She trailed off, and I knew she’d stepped back to those memories. “This place seemed like heaven after the Walled City. Like the whole world had unfurled in front of me, and anywhere I turned there was the promise of a good life. Turned out this place was as crappy as everywhere else. Everyone was still in it for themselves.”

“That’s a great life lesson, Isobel.” Gobbet dropped a hand on her friend’s shoulder.

Isobel flinched a little and pulled away.

“I’m serious!” Gobbet said. “At the end of the day, life’s a raw deal. You’ve got yourself and a handful of friends, and that’s it. Nothing else.”

Duncan shook his head at her. “You’ve got some strange ideas about life. Sure, life’s a meat grinder sometimes, but come on. There’s gotta be more to it than just surviving.”

“Is there? What makes you the authority on that?” Isobel waved a dismissive hand at him. “I’m done talking about this. Anyway…” She turned and pointed down the street. “We’re looking for the Whampoan Elders. They’re gonna be in the *Whampo* itself. That’s the big ship down the street.”

I followed her direction, spotting a hulking structure in the distance. “That’s the mall that looks like a ship, right?”

“That’s the one. Somebody thought it would be clever to make a uniquely-shaped building.”

I nodded and headed down the street to the left. The mall was huge, and it looked like a ship had docked right there in the middle of the street. We went through the main entrance.

At the bottom of the escalators, the corridor was dark. I walked point and Duncan walked slack, just like old times. Isobel and Gobbet walked between us. Shops on both sides of the corridor wore gaudy neon advertising, and the constant buzz of electric current echoed around me.

Three people and a security drone stood at the other end of the corridor.

“Are you the people Kindly Cheng sent?” one of them called.

I crossed to one of them, an old ork woman, and nodded. “We are.”

Up close, I took note of the circuits, speakers, and tiny trid screens that lay close to her face. All of them were lit up, assaulting her with vid and audio from

different sources. Age had withered her face, but her eyes were keen and lively, and just as hard and cruel as Kindly Cheng's.

"Welcome," she greeted me with false enthusiasm. "Welcome to the *Whampoa*, my friend. I am Elder Ng, and these are Elders Tang and Ip." She waved to the elf and human on either side of her.

Both of the other Elders nodded at us.

"Thank you so much for answering our request for help. We had nowhere else to turn."

"It's the least I could do." That was, frankly, the truth. Kindly Cheng wouldn't have let me do anything less.

Tattoos formed and shifted across Elder Tang's face, changing from cranes to tigers to dragons. The elf wore yellow tinted glasses that juiced vid feeds he looked through to see me. "We're under threat. One by one, we elders are being hunted by some monster. As you may have noticed when you arrived, there's been another killing just tonight."

Elder Ip crossed his cyberarms over his broad chest and gave Isobel a look I didn't care for. He seemed too smug and full of himself for my taste. His black hair was cut close and he sported a thin mustache and goatee. Like the others, he wore plenty of hardcore cyber headgear.

"The prodigal daughter," he said to Isobel, "returned once more. I didn't expect to see you back on the *Whampoa* in my lifetime. When you disappeared, Elder Yetunde was very put out. I'm glad you're still alive. When you chose to walk your own path, I was disappointed. But I still understood why you had to leave." He paused. "I hope my lessons have helped you prosper."

"Didn't expect to be back," Isobel replied in an icy voice. "Work takes you places, though." She dropped her hand to the pistol on her hip. "I don't cart this around for fun. The lessons kept me alive." She looked around. "Where is Yetunde, anyway? I expected her to be here."

Elder Ng reached for Isobel's hand, but the decker drew back.

"She's dead," the old woman said. "So are Gan and Nakamura. And Tong was killed just tonight." She hesitated, getting control of her emotions. "So much blood. You have to stop this."

I remembered the man's name from the screamsheets.

Isobel nodded. "That's what we're here for. We'll stop the killings."

Ng nodded. "Thank you, Isobel."

"What can you tell us about the murders?" I asked.

“They started two weeks ago,” Ip replied. “The first to go was Gan.” He was quiet for a moment before forcing himself to continue. “He’d been...torn apart. His head had been completely ripped off, and most of his skin had been flayed away. There was so much blood it took us a week to clean his apartment.”

I remembered the spirit of man Gobbet had summoned in the Walled City. Before the image could settle too deeply in my mind, I pushed it away.

“The rest have been the same,” Tang said. “Always at night. Always dismembered. Each scene is like a nightmare. And every time, nobody has seen anything. The killer is like a ghost.”

“What happened to Tong?” I asked, referring to the man who had just been killed tonight.

“The same thing that happened to the rest of the victims,” Ng answered. “Evisceration and dismemberment. We sent a guard to keep people out of his shop, but he will let you in.”

“When did Tong die?”

“Sometime early tonight. He’d locked up his shop, but Ip stopped by to ask him about some skillchips he had. The door was unlocked, and inside—” The ork woman’s breath caught, and she couldn’t talk any more.

Ip picked up the story thread. “It looked like a bad horror sim. Just like all the other murders. It had to have happened after sundown, because his shop was open when I was on my way to get some noodles for dinner.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

“The Hong Kong Police Force isn’t welcome here,” Tang said. “They’ve tried to force us out several times before, or come hunting for someone to pin a crime on.”

Evidently nobody had any love for the HKPF.

“We do a lot of favors for gangs and triads,” Tang said. “Handle their Matrix security, fix up their gear, and make sure they have access to the Hong Kong Shadowlands hub.”

“We’re too valuable a resource for them to lose,” Ng said, “so they protect us when the HKPF or anyone else decides we’re an easy target. They handle our physical security, and we make sure to send the message via the Matrix. The last time the HKPF made any trouble, we started airing the Assistant Chief’s dirty laundry over the trid and screamsheets. They got the picture and backed off.”

“Have you made any enemies lately?” I asked.

“Not that I can think of,” she answered. “We keep to ourselves. We buy and

sell technology. We're not mercenaries or criminals, we're merchants and deckers. And even if someone was cheated in a deal, this kind of response is unthinkable." She shook her head. "Whatever did this, it wasn't human. The violence and savagery...whatever it is, it's a monster."

"Plenty of metahumans are monsters too, Ng," Tang said. "Just because it's horrible doesn't mean it's supernatural."

"What else do the Elders do?" I asked.

Before they could answer, Isobel spoke up in cold anger. "They make the rules and kick people out who don't obey them. They're a bunch of petty tyrants, that's what."

"You're being unfair, Isobel," Tang objected. "Our laws are for the good of the community." He shifted his attention to me. "We keep the *Whampoa* and its residents safe. We review trade agreements with outsiders, to see if they're for the good of the community. We provide a guiding vision."

"I can respect that," I said, seeking the most neutral response. I didn't want to piss them or Isobel off.

"I'm glad you understand," Ng said. "This community is fragile, and the authorities bear us a lot of ill will. A single misstep could spell our end." She paused. "I am the Invoker of Spirits. I commune with the spirits of machines, ask them for blessings, and pass them on to the people here. I heal the sick and ensure the feng shui of our habitats is as good as it can be, given our confines."

"She's a shaman, that's all," Isobel said. "She's just got some kooky spin on it. Claims her totem is some sort of all-encompassing machine god that lives in circuitry."

I gathered Isobel wasn't a believer.

The decker patted her machine as she met Ng's eyes. "Ancient gods and ancestors are one thing. My deck? It's mine. I built it. The only spirits it's got in it are the ESPs I load it up with."

Ng looked like she'd bitten into a sour lemon. "Just because you cannot see or touch a thing does not mean it does not exist. Just because you do not believe in it does not mean it does not protect you from afar."

"I can't touch programs either," Isobel countered, "but at least I can prove they have an effect on the physical world. Your superstitions are just that: bullshit." She looked at me and jerked a thumb at Tang. "This guy treats drones like they're living things."

"Is that right?"

Tang shoved his arms out imperiously. The tattoos there swam and morphed, becoming mathematical formulas that were unintelligible to me. “I am the First and Glorious Servo. I study patterns, repair machinery, and teach others how to attune themselves to the wonders of automation. The Blessed Autofab is my shop and purview—where we make the drones we use and sell.”

I wondered what Racter would make of this guy.

“As for me,” Ip said, “I serve as the Resplendent Voltage Spike.” He grinned. “It means I shoot people who try to screw with us. It’s a fancy title for ‘head of security.’”

“It might be wise to speak to the residents of Whampoa Garden if they’ve seen or heard anything,” Ng added. “After you’ve gone to Tong’s Sensory Carnival. They may have seen or heard things we have not.”

“Good to know,” I said.

I downloaded directions to my GPS, and we headed for the murder scene.

## **CHAPTER 28**

### **SHREDS OF EVIDENCE**

Back out on the street, I looked around at the bright signage and spotted Tong’s Sensory Carnival ahead and to our left. Two stories tall and wearing neon lights like a second skin, the building glittered like a multi-faceted gem.

When we got to the front door, a guy dressed in black and with a serious expression on his blandly handsome face stepped over to stop us. He was in his thirties and moved smoothly, like a dancer.

“Porter Lam, at your service,” he said. “The Elders told me you’d be coming. They told you what happened to Tong?”

“Just the basics,” I replied.

Lam grimaced. “Well, there’s nothing basic about this. I’ve seen people shot, stabbed, beaten to death. Hell, I’ve even seen a corpse that was so dry and desiccated I coulda sworn a vampire got to it. None of that’s got anything on this.

Brace yourselves and go on in.”

I nodded my thanks and passed through the shop door.

Tong’s was a top-of-the-line sensie center. Comfortable chairs sat in front of the latest consoles. Everything was gleaming metal and polished finish.

Except for the huge pool of blood surrounding the dismembered corpse to our left.

Breaking out of the paralysis that gripped me for a second at the sight of the carnage, I walked over to the body. More blood covered the walls and ceiling. Whoever had killed him had wanted to send a message. Or maybe the killer had just lost all control.

All of Tong’s limbs had been ripped from his body. A pile of flayed skin lay beside them. Only the cyberware strands seemed to hold the corpse somewhat together.

“Sweet heaven,” Gobbet said quietly. “I haven’t seen anything like that since Auntie Wong tried to stash some credsticks in a devil rat’s nest. It takes a lot to turn my stomach, but we have a winner today.” She looked away. “This is seriously messed up.”

“I’ll second that,” Duncan growled. “This isn’t a murder. This is more like a...feeding frenzy. If it weren’t for the skin, I’d say Tong stepped on a goddamn mine.”

I turned to Gobbet. “Maybe you can pick up something in the astral. Assense whatever might have done this.”

She looked sick at the thought, but sighed and nodded. “You’re the boss, boss. Man...this is gonna be unpleasant.” She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and let it out. “There’s no fear here. No anger either. Just this kind of...satisfied feeling. Tong never saw it coming, and whoever did it was professional about it. Which is pretty odd, because nobody’s professional at eviscerating a body as far as I know.”

“You think it was a hit?” I asked.

“I don’t know why the killer was after Tong,” she replied, “but it definitely wasn’t any kind of mindless creature, or even someone particularly passionate. It was somebody who planned this and executed it, and was glad about it.” She looked at the body again. “I dunno. It kinda feels like it was just—business as usual.”

I walked over to get a closer look the blood splatter on the back wall.

“Hey,” Duncan said, “I don’t know a lot about forensic science or all

that, but I know what blood looks like when it hits a wall. This isn't natural." He stepped up beside me and studied the pattern more closely. "Somebody deliberately smeared blood all over. See how it looks like it's got paint trails?"

I'd already noticed those, too.

"That's because somebody used Tong's body parts like a brush," Duncan growled.

"So they painted his walls with blood," I said. "Why?"

Duncan snorted. "Do I look like a psychologist to you? Maybe 'cuz he's a freak. Maybe he's one of those sick serial killers that sees their murder as art? I got no clue. All I know is what normal blood looks like on a wall, and this ain't it."

"Some people got a bad grasp of art," Isobel said. "I knew this guy in Kwan Tung who used to make club music out of stray radio static and PanicButton calls. Called it 'Crisiswave.' It was awful."

I stepped away from the wall and headed to the door at the back. Tong had lived right behind the shop he'd died in. The bedroom was small but efficient: a big bed and comfortable surroundings, with a bathroom and an office off it.

We started searching the rooms.

"I got a safe over here," Duncan called, pulling open a door on the desk against the wall by the bed to reveal a built-in safe. The safe door stood ajar.

"Anything in there?" I asked.

Duncan rifled through the contents. "A bunch of credsticks, but they don't have anything on them. The safe's just open. Green light indicates it was opened with a key fob. No robbery."

"Maybe whoever killed Tong forced him to open the safe," Isobel said from the private office.

"No way," Gobbet replied. "Tong didn't see who killed him, remember?" She was searching through the bathroom. "And someone looted his stash. A guy like this wouldn't keep only empty credsticks in his safe."

"There's a Yamaha 95000-V synthsmith in here," Isobel called.

"What's that?" I asked.

"A designer uses it to mix and master simsense chips," she said. "Several of the drive bays and all of the chipjacks are empty. I've got an error message that keeps repeating. 'Warning: requested files cannot be found. Please return drives to bay and try again.'"

"Can you do anything with it?" I joined her in the room, looking at all the



computer equipment standing there in clean, efficient stacks.

“Lemme see.” Isobel pulled out an ergonomic chair and sat. Her fingers flew across the keyboard. After a moment, she leaned back and watched the screen. “There. I’ve put the drive warning on suspend. It’s in diagnostic mode only, though. Maybe we’ll learn something, maybe not.”

A message flashed across the screen.

*> Yamaha SimOS 5.23 systems diagnostics check:*

*> Memory – OK!*

*> Drive – Error!*

*> ASIST Bus – OK!*

*> Beginning core dump, please wait...*

“Looks like Tong was cooking some BTLs here,” Isobel said. “He’s hacked the controller output cutoffs. The delta levels on simchips are usually about four to five. Six point five for Cal Hots. His delta peaks are pushing twelve.”

None of that made sense to me. “What does that mean?”

“That’s brain-burning territory,” she replied in awe. “And all the drives and chips those BTLs were stored on are missing.”

She took a breath. “I never liked Tong, but it wasn’t because he was a bad guy. I just didn’t like any of the Elders. But if he was cooking chips at delta-twelve, maybe he burned somebody he shouldn’t have. Maybe they flipped their lid and came after him. Or a relative did. The metahuman brain can’t handle this kind of output. It’ll shut down after a few of these.” She paused. “There’s a fellow dwarf decker I know named David A. Fry II. He hates this kind of stuff. Kind of a vigilante who ends people who turn out this kind of product.”

“He’s in Hong Kong?”

“Sometimes. I haven’t seen him lately.” She took a breath. “This doesn’t seem like his style, though. Too violent.”

“Our suspect pool is growing,” I said, not happy with the situation.

“Nothing in the bathroom,” Gobbet said as she walked back in.

I looked around. I was pretty sure we hadn’t missed anything.

“What’s the plan?” Duncan asked.

“Like the Elder said,” I told him. “We hit the streets. See what we can find. And since those drives are missing, let’s concentrate on other simsense dealers in the sprawl.”

None of us tried to look at Tong's corpse as we left the premises, but none of us could forget that it was there.

## CHAPTER 29

### STREET TALK

By the time we got back out, the rain had picked up again. I didn't care because my coat covered most of me, and what was already wet couldn't get any wetter.

We spread out and started talking to the people on the streets. Most of the pedestrians marked us as outsiders at once, and didn't want to talk. Except for Isobel. She fit right in.

After a few minutes, she got hold of the rest of us over our commlinks. *"Hey, I got somebody here I think you guys would be interested in talking to. He's a guy who knows some dirt."*

I joined her, and looked at the ork she'd been chin-wagging with. He had a high opinion of himself, and it showed in his knock-off clothing and moussed hair. A goatee framed his jowly face, and he was busy shoving a bun into his face. As I walked over, he wiped one of his hands off and stuck it out at me.

I shook it and felt a little unclean.

"Hey, stranger!" he greeted with a broad smile. "Nice to see you. Zippy Toetag at your service." Even his street name was picked to be cute. "How are you liking Whampoa Garden?"

"Do I know you?" I tried the approach to throw him off. A lot of guys with Zippy's patter couldn't remember everybody they'd talked to.

"We've never met before this, but I know exactly who you are. You're my replacement. The Elders had me autopsy what was left of Elder Gan and Elder Nakamura after they got ripped apart, but I didn't want to dig any deeper. So since I don't know you, and I can smell a shadowrunner a mile away, you've got to be the outsider they asked to stop the killings, right?" The guy grinned again,

obviously pleased with himself.

“Nothing gets by you, does it?” I asked, resisting the urge to be more intimidating. I put out a hand to stop Duncan, because I knew he wasn’t ready for a dog and pony show.

“See?” Zippy tapped his temple. “I have good eyes. A lot of good eyes, actually. If you’re in the market for replacements. Only slightly used, and they come from certified donors, I swear.” He barked laughter. “Man, I kill myself.”

I had to hold myself back. I didn’t much care for organleggers. “Pretty funny,” I said. “You a stand-up comedian?”

“With jokes like that? Are you kidding?” He shook his head. “I’m one of the only trained surgeons around here. I keep the other Whampoans healthy. Got a practice down the road. Blind Chen’s a pretty good cyberdoc, but he’s basically an implant specialist, and that’s it.”

“You don’t look like a doctor to me.”

“I did my residency back in the UCAS. Coulda become a real M.D., too, if things hadn’t gone south for unrelated reasons.” Zippy opened his coat to reveal a cyberdeck that he proudly patted. “I also deck a little, but I’m better at slicing skin than ice. Whampo Garden seemed a good fit for me.”

“Let’s talk about Whampo Garden.”

“Sure thing. What do you want to know?”

“What can you tell me about the murders?”

Some of the humor faded from him, like air escaping a balloon. “Pretty gruesome business. Gan died from a broken neck. Looked like someone had wrenched it all the way around, and his arms and legs were cut off. Some skin flayed away, too.”

I nodded. “Go on.”

“Nakamura had his throat ripped out by someone—or something—with pretty sharp teeth. At first I thought it was a devil rat, but the teeth marks were all from something with a humanoid jaw.” Zippy shrugged. “I didn’t look at Yetunde. From what I saw at a distance, it was the same story. Didn’t seem to be much point to it, since I’d seen it twice already. As for Tong, from what Porter told me, it was Gan and Nakamura all over again. You take a look at him yet?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty much like you described it.”

“Damn. I liked Tong. The BTL business is unsavory, but the man had to eat. And his regular sims were great. Generally all-around nice guy. Friendly with everyone. Never had anyone mad at him. There ain’t no justice, let me tell you.”

I tried another tack, since he was being so forthright. “What can you tell me about the Elders?”

“Well, they’re an eclectic bunch, that’s for sure. Where to start...Ng’s the spiritual leader here. She’s the voice of the Whampoans, I guess. A lot of her close friends are really more of ‘followers,’ since she’s something of a priest for the machine spirits. Maybe it’s a cultural thing for people who grew up here, but it’s never called to me. Still, she makes a damn fine pot of tea.”

I nodded to encourage him to continue talking. He was a guy who liked to talk.

“Ip’s the muscle, and has an encyclopedic knowledge of cyber and bioware. Definitely a good guy to have watching your back. Not too friendly, but you know how it is—you get a lot of cyber, people start wondering if you’ll tear their arms off.” Zippy pantomimed lopping his arm off. “He’s got moves straight out of *Blood Carnival 3: The Reckoning*. Terrible movie, but great fight choreography.”

I’d seen the movie in lockdown on a smuggled-in trid player, and had to agree with his assessment. “What about Tang?”

“I don’t know much about him, but I think he’s got some kind of fetish for automation. Found him cooing over some trids of automated delivery drones in a warehouse once. He works with drones. Has a shop called The Blessed Autofab. He was raving about the efficiency of their movement patterns or something.”

Zippy took another bite of his bun, chewed, and swallowed. “You already know about Tong. Ran sims. BTLs, skillchips. Gan used to be a city planner before he had a nervous breakdown and got involved in statistical analysis.” He took another bite. “Nakamura came from Fukuoka, and was interested in entertainment. Trid, mostly. Spent a lot of time analyzing subliminals in ads.”

He chewed his lip for a moment before continuing. “Then there was Magpie. She was their chief decker. Hot as hell against ice, and built her own hardware. Salty old woman, though. Never met anyone who was quite as shrill or nasty when she was mad.” He grinned. “She was mad most of the time.”

“Did she die too?”

“She didn’t. Maybe a month ago, she just up and disappeared. I went to her shop one day, and she just wasn’t open. Nobody’s seen her since.” Zippy sighed. “Kind of a pain in the ass, too. She owed me some new analysis software she’d picked up.”

“I’ve never heard of Magpie,” Isobel said. “She must be one of the newer Whampoans. If she was the decker, she would have replaced Elder Gao. He was

older than Qin Shi Huangdi's terracotta warriors. When I was learning decking from him, Gao could barely get out of bed. Still fast as hell in the Matrix, though."

That caught my attention. "How can you be new and an Elder?"

Isobel rolled her eyes. "It's a stupid name. It doesn't actually have much to do with time spent in the community. That has something to do with it, sure, but it's mostly about how skilled you are, how good your connections are, and how much you can help everybody here. Shoulda called 'em 'experts' or something."

"Bingo," Zippy said. "That's exactly it. She was only here for about three years, but she knew a lot of people all over the Matrix, in Shanghai, in Beijing... all kinds of places. That plus her skill meant she was a shoo-in when Gao died."

"Why would she disappear?" I asked.

"No idea," Zippy said. "One day she was here, the next, *poof*. At first I thought she was just on vacation, since she'd mentioned wanting to see the Kingdom of Hawai'i someday, but it didn't feel right. She would have at least told me she was leaving." He paused and stroked his chin. "It seems mighty suspicious to me. Nobody else seems to care what happened to her, probably because she pissed them all off so bad."

"Is there any place you think I should start looking?"

"You might wanna check out her shop. It's all locked up, but the other Elders have a spare key. Couldn't hurt to look around, and even though Magpie was always butting heads with the other Elders, they wouldn't have any reason not to let you in."

"What do you mean, they were butting heads?"

"Magpie and the others never saw eye to eye. She was contrary for the sake of it. Most of the rest had a grand vision for what they wanted this neighborhood to become. Magpie just wanted to deck. She was only an Elder because they needed someone with her Matrix chops." Zippy finished off the last of his bun. "The last big argument was between her, Ng, Ip, and Nakamura. It was over something relatively trivial. I think Nakamura wanted to expand the pirate trid business into the Matrix, and Magpie absolutely refused."

"Sounds like she didn't care for entertainment taking precedence over business."

"That's exactly it. She gave Nakamura an earful, let me tell you." Zippy grinned. "She said something about not using up valuable bandwidth for 'trivial entertainment bullshit.' Anyway, it went from there into this rant about how she

wasn't going to let Tang expand his drone business any further, because it would get too much megacorp attention. They accused her of blocking them just because she could. Which is probably true. Lots of screaming.”

“What do you mean ‘blocking’ them?”

“Everybody needed her Matrix skills for their businesses to run properly. There are other deckers that could handle it—me, say, or Moe Jneibi, or Awiin, or The Isomorphic Claw—but she had the infrastructure. If their project didn't interest her, she wouldn't even give 'em the time of day. She's a real hardhead about having her time wasted, but she figures if she's not interested in something, it has no value. Kind of a blind spot, if you ask me.”

“Can you let me into her shop?” I wasn't ready to ask the Elders for the key.

Zippy shook his head. “No can do. Not because I don't want to, but because I just don't have a key. You'd have to get it from Ip. He's taken over all the Matrix infrastructure maintenance since Magpie disappeared. He's not as good at it as she is—or as I am—but they're not gonna let anyone who isn't an Elder take care of that kind of critical stuff.”

It made sense. I thanked him and we stepped away, leaving him there.

“Are we going to go ask the Elders why they left out information about Magpie?” Isobel asked. Her set jaw told me she was ready for a fight.

I wasn't quite there yet, however. “Not yet. I want to poke around a bit more, see what we can find. The people here are surprisingly talkative.”

## **CHAPTER 30**

### **RUMORS, SPECULATION, AND OUTRIGHT LIES**

*“I got a guy over here you probably wanna talk to,”* Duncan said over the comm.

I looked down the street and barely saw him in the shadows, in spite of the neon. He stood next to a burly troll in front of a weapons shop. Even for a troll, the guy was broad and beefy, a walking advertisement for his business.

“This is Breaker Hui,” Duncan said. “He was telling me about a new gang that’s moved into Whampoa Garden. Guys who set up shop without permission.”

The troll nodded. “The Red Spears. They run up in here sometimes, but don’t cause any trouble. Check out the parking garage south of here, they usually hole up in there. Step light, though. If they don’t know you and you cop an attitude, they’ll put you in the ground.” He smiled a little. “Funny thing: I heard there was a shootout with some Hong Kong police in the garage a month ago. I was away in Beijing at the time, so I didn’t see it directly. But everybody was talking about it when I got back.”

“Why is that unusual?” I asked.

“Because most times we don’t let the HKPF in here,” the troll said. “We shoot at ’em if they even try. Every time they come in here, it’s bad for us, because they’re always looking for a scapegoat. Why would the elders let them in?” He shrugged. “Nobody knows.”

I thanked him, slipped him a few nuyen for his trouble, and walked away.

“Okay,” Duncan said into my ear, “we got a disappearing Elder the other Elders didn’t tell us about, and a sanctioned raid by the HKPF after the Elders told us they didn’t allow them in here. I’m smelling something really rotten.”

“Me too. We’ve got two big questions we need answered now.” We were getting in deeper than I felt comfortable with, but I kept telling myself Duncan wasn’t going to leave until we found the old man. And I wasn’t going to leave Duncan on his own. I called Gobbet and Isobel and told them we were heading back to the *Whampoa*.

Surprisingly, the Elders were still gathered around the shops in the mall. They saw us at once and grew quiet as we approached.

“Is there anything we can do for you?” Ng asked.

“I hope so,” I said. “Why didn’t you tell us about Elder Magpie disappearing? In fact, why didn’t you tell us about Elder Magpie at all?”

She kept her face blank. “Why would we have? Her departure from the Whampoans isn’t related to your investigation. It happened before the killings began. I’m certain she’s just off sulking somewhere. No doubt she’ll come waltzing back next month, all full of attitude that life dared to go on without asking her permission.”

“If she does,” Tang added, “we’ll welcome her back. Despite our problems with her behavior, her skills make her extremely valuable. I’ve taken over maintenance of our Matrix infrastructure in her absence, but I’m nowhere near her level. The best I can do is ensure nothing breaks down until she returns.”

“I’d like to take a look around her shop. Do you have the key?”

Ng hesitated. “Yes, but there’s a lot of sensitive equipment in there, including our community servers. We don’t let anyone who’s not one of the Elders in there. Why would you need to look around there?”

I decided to be tactful and maybe a little charming in my approach. “Listen, you wanted me to find a killer. If I’m going to do that, I have to explore every possibility. You know Isobel, and you trust her, don’t you?”

“Very well. Take the key and look around. Just don’t break anything or shut the servers off.” Ng placed it in my hand.

I put it in my pocket, then asked them why they’d let the HKPF into Whampoa Garden. The way they reacted, you’d have thought I dropped a baby nuke among them, but they tried to cover.

“We generally don’t let the police in here, it’s true,” Tang said. “But we made an exception in this case. The police were very polite, and offered to look the other way over some of our deals with the Loha-Jawah Pirates.”

“They also made it clear that if we refused, they might not only take an interest in our deals with the pirates,” Ng said. “They would call in the Special Duties Unit and force their way in. We have repelled the Hong Kong Police Force before, when they’ve tried to push us around. We could probably drive off the Special Duties Unit as well, but the cost in blood would be too high. Since they weren’t hunting a Whampoa, we saw no reason to refuse their request.”

“Who were they here for?”

“They didn’t say,” Ip told me. “And we didn’t ask. The HKPF isn’t exactly forthcoming about their business, and we’ve found that the less we know about their interests, the safer Whampoa Garden is. When you take an interest in the police, they often return the favor.”

I wasn’t completely buying that. No way would they just let the HKPF in with a blank credstick. But I filed that puzzle away for the moment.

“As far as I know, they went into the parking garage, there was a gunfight, and the police never came out,” Tang said. “More showed up a few hours later, looking for their missing officers. We didn’t let those in, though. We just delivered what was left of the bodies to them.”



“Why didn’t you let them in? What was different that time?”

“We were willing to allow the group of four in,” Ng said, “because they asked politely. When the reinforcements arrived, there were over thirty of them. We couldn’t risk the rest of the police setting up camp in our streets. It would have been a circus, and disrupted our lives and business.”

I nodded, like I was happy with all the answers. But I knew I didn’t have all the answers I was looking for. I still didn’t know all the right questions I needed to ask. The Elders were old, and practiced at lying and covering their tracks.

I just hoped what we didn’t know didn’t get us killed. We left the mall and headed for Magpie’s shop.

## CHAPTER 31 THE JACKPOINT

The shop’s name was pretty lame. There’s probably a *Jackpoint* shop everywhere, and nobody really remembers where it is. But maybe that’s by design, too. If a place isn’t memorable to the public, maybe the business it’s doing is more private. Hiding in plain sight.

Neon lit up the shop’s exterior, just like all the other business along the street, but it was dark inside. Not even the sec lights were on.

“We want to do this slow,” Duncan whispered as I took out the key I’d been given. “Could be whoever killed the Elders left a surprise inside for anyone who dug around too deeply.”

“I know.” I looked at Gobbet and Isobel, making sure they understood as well. The fear in their eyes told me they were on track. I used the key, listened to the maglock open, and stepped through the door.

As we went through, the lights in the display cases lit up, probably an auto feature. The soft, glowing gray-blue lights illuminated most of the interior and the display cases on either side of the room.

“Spread out,” I said. “And be careful. No one needs to get slotted up while

we're here.”

“Auntie wouldn't be happy,” Gobbet agreed. She gestured and the rats scampered out across the room. “If there are any foolies and sudden-kills in here, my friends should find them.”

I checked the first display, glancing over the assorted chips, peripherals, and add-on modules for cyberdecks, but I didn't understand most of it. The haphazard way they lay in the display didn't help. I figured a decker like Is0bel would know exactly what she was looking at.

Curious, not wanting to miss anything, I sorted through the collection hopefully.

“That's interesting.” Is0bel was at my shoulder. I'd been so intent on what I was doing I hadn't even noticed her come up. If I kept that up, it wouldn't take long before I was dead.

“What is?” I asked.

“There's a lot of storage memory, I/O handlers, and active memory in this bin. But I'm not seeing any MPCP hardware, response increase chips, or anything relating to the hot shit decking Magpie was supposed to be into. In fact, you couldn't even build a full deck with this. Without the MPCP, it'd just be a glorified commlink.”

“What do you think that means?”

“Well, if I had to guess, I'd say somebody's cleaned her out. MPCP, response increase, biofeedback filters, and all that. They're easy to move, expensive, and highly illegal. All the rest of this crap is good, but it's nothing you couldn't pick up at any electronics shop.” Is0bel looked at me with a small smile. “You've got to know what you're looking for, though. Only a good decker would know what they're seeing.”

“Good thing you came along,” I told her.

She beamed.

“Could Magpie have taken them with her?”

She waved to the other displays, and to a pair of small cyberdecks inside a locked case. “I guess so, but if she did that, why would she leave the completed decks?” She shook her head. “No, I think this was theft. Take a look at the server.”

I walked over to the corner of the room. The front of the server's case hung open. Everything inside was dark and inert. Nothing was powered up.

A clipboard hung on the side of the server, suspended by a piece of gray duct tape. Magpie definitely wasn't into esthetics. The sheet was covered with

notations including *BugsBugsBugs!* and *Black Hammer*.

“Those are probably names of attack programs,” Is0bel said. “She probably used this machine to mount her offensives in the Matrix.” She peered in and took a closer look with a small flashlight. “Somebody’s removed the drives, and it sure wasn’t Magpie. Here, look.”

I leaned down and peered in, following the line of her flashlight, which touched a solitary red light blinking at the back of the tower.

“What am I looking at?” I asked.

“The main drives were disconnected properly, but it looks like she modded the server to have a backup drive with its own battery-based power supply. If it was Magpie, she’d have taken that too.”

I pulled back as she shouldered me aside.

She reached inside the server, leaned in to the point her face was inside the housing, and cursed. “This is a Fuchi XB-1000, and it looks like the battery power ran out a while ago. The XB-1000s are constant-write drives. They’re dirt cheap and have a ton of capacity, but if they run out of power, they lose their data.” She pulled back. “We’re not gonna get anything off it.”

Leaving Is0bel with the devices, I walked to the back to the shop to join Gobbet at Magpie’s desk. Cigarette butts and half-finished cans of soy-kaf shared space with electronic scraps like a collage of decker life. A towering pile of empty instant noodle bowls sat next to the chaos. All of them offered advertising for Honest Wang’s Instant Old-Time Lamian. The logo featured a line of caterpillars dancing with canes while wearing top hats.

“Hey, awesome!” Gobbet said.

“What?” I asked, thinking she’d seen something I hadn’t.

“I didn’t think anybody but me liked Honest Wang’s noodles. Flavor like you’ve never tasted in a package of instant noodles, I promise.” Gobbet picked up one of the containers and showed it to me. “See? This one’s cheese curry broccoli! I dunno why it never caught on, honestly.”

Duncan stopped beside me and shook his head. “Gee, who could pass up the delicious taste of soycheese, curry, and freeze-dried vegetables?”

Gobbet evidently didn’t hear the sarcasm. “I know, right? People out there have no idea what kind of culinary delights they’re missing!”

I left her to her musings and went through the desk myself. Receipts, cigarette packs, optical chips, and cables filled the drawers to overflowing. A lot of food and cigarette ash had fallen down the cracks, too, making the contents

more or less piles of garbage. Notes for two people, one named Mister-Fix It, the other going by the handle Van Graas were also there, but I couldn't make out the symbology in the messages.

There was, however, a tin lockbox in a bottom drawer. I cleared away the detritus and exhumed it, just in case it had a tag-along foolie attached. Only a ragged hole remained where a lock had once been.

Still, I opened the box carefully and examined the keycard storage sleeves. All of them were empty. But there was a note inside:

*Spare stockroom keys—the door is in the rear of Mrs. Yang's restaurant. DO NOT LOSE THESE! Use only if I am not available to open the stockroom.*

“A stockroom, huh?” Isobel asked over my shoulder. “So who broke the lockbox to get the keys out?”

“Probably whoever cleaned out Magpie's equipment,” Duncan said.

The decker shrugged. “I guess that's possible, but why would they leave the lockbox here? They could just pack it up and take it back to the *Whampoa*. Leaving it is sloppy. And look at this.” She pointed to the broken lock. “Most of the elders could crack a maglock. This was somebody in a hurry.”

“You're right,” I said. I replaced the lockbox in the desk and looked up at Duncan. “You searched the bathroom. Find anything?”

“Toothbrush, toilet paper, some hair pins, and a collection of cheap makeup. Magpie wasn't exactly a fashion icon.” Duncan frowned. “There was a lot of crusted blood on the drain. I pried open the cover. Whoever did the bleeding didn't have much left to give by the time it was over. I'm thinking that Magpie didn't take a trip after all. With that amount of blood, I'm guessing someone killed her quietly, and then drained her body in the bath so it would be easier to re-locate.”

I thought about that, and the scenario immediately troubled me. “This doesn't seem to match the killer's other scenes, though.”

Duncan nodded. “I'm thinking there's a lot more going on with these murders than we were initially told. First they don't even mention Magpie to us, and now it looks like she's been killed?” He grimaced and the soft light bounced off his glasses. “Something's not right here. Let's not mention this to the Elders. If they're hiding anything, they may start cleaning up their tracks better.”

“I agree.” I took a final look around the shop. “Anybody know where Mrs.

Yang's restaurant is?"

## CHAPTER 32

### THE RED SPEAR GANG

Mrs. Yang's noodle shop was a mystery to Isobel, which wasn't surprising, considering that she didn't know about Magpie. We swept the streets, searching for information, and ended up with something we hadn't counted on getting.

A street tech dealer named Moe Jneibi—a name I remembered from the conversation with Zippy—told us that a gang called the Red Spears had moved into a parking garage at the south end of the sprawl. According to him, the Red Spears specialized in moving stolen tech.

"You ask me," Duncan said, "we follow the criminals, see which way the nuyen's flowing. Somebody hit Magpie's store. Even if these guys didn't do it, maybe they know who did."

I didn't like exposing us like that, but we'd already come close to overstaying our welcome in the neighborhood. Street talk was starting to center on us. It wouldn't be long before we became the hunted instead of the hunters.

The parking garage had a simple pulldown door in back of two red and white striped sawhorses that blocked any vehicular approach. I hadn't seen any vehicles, so I assumed motorized traffic no longer came into this part of the sprawl. Which meant the parking garage was empty space anyone could use for anything they wanted.

We made sure our weapons were ready, and I raised the door.

Sec lights created pools of light in the darkness, bringing the concrete world trapped inside the structure to bright light in places. A few abandoned vehicles littered various parking spots, and I realized the place was quiet—too quiet.

"Keep your eyes open," I told the others. "The Red Spears probably already know we're here. The fact they haven't attacked yet is a good thing. Even so, let's keep it loose."

I walked forward and to the right, noting that the passageway to the left was piled high with trash that provided an instant defensive barrier. With the concrete walls on both sides, it was a kill box.

I followed the yellow arrows painted on the floor to the back of the garage and spotted shadows standing in a loose formation there. They looked back at me, hands on weapons.

I lifted my hands, knowing Duncan had my back. “I just want to talk,” I said in a loud voice. “No gunplay.”

“That’s far enough, guy,” a woman’s voice told me. I tracked her and watched as she raised an AK-97 to her shoulder and took deliberate aim. “This lot’s our turf. If you’re lookin’ for a fix, you’re welcome to trade. If you’re not here for business, clear the hell out. You try and wander around, we’re gonna have to air you out.”

I halted. “I want to know about the HKPF guys that came through here a while back. I can drop some nuyen on you for the info.”

“Far as I know, some police showed up looking for somebody,” the woman said. “They came in here, all of ’em got killed.” She didn’t sound too broken up about it—her tone was that of someone who had just taken out the garbage. “Whoever they were after was long gone by the time we showed up. Used to be a lotta Whampoans living here. They’d all cleared out, muttering about ghosts and shit like that.”

“Have you heard anything about the murders of the Elders?”

She shrugged and I flinched a little as the rifle barrel moved around. Behind me, Duncan’s breath caught for just an instant, and I knew his finger had taken up trigger slack.

“Nothing much,” she said. “I tell you what, though. I’ve got a guy named Kang, and he was down in the storm drain system last week. Something was moving down there. Big, too. Man-sized. But it wasn’t speaking any language Kang understood. Kid beat feet back here as fast as he could.”

Some of the other Red Spears laughed at that.

“Dumbass dropped his storm drain key on the way out, though. You wanna go lookin’ for whatever it was down there, you’ll have to get a new key from somebody else. Kang stole his from a city worker.”

“You know where I can get a storm drain key?” I asked.

“There’s a guy named Porter Lam who’s got keys to pretty much everything. He’s somewhere between a cop and a handyman.” She paused. “Yuen also

mentioned some elf woman with crazy-colored hair who managed to scam a key. He said she hunted paracritters down there. Devil rats and shit.”

We already knew where we could find Porter Lam, but I decided to go for broke and see if I could save some time. “Can I look around?”

“Man, are you deaf?” Her voice raised an octave. “What the hell did I just tell you? No, you goddamn well can’t wander around our turf.”

“Gangers gotta be here on somebody’s blessing,” Duncan whispered in my ear. “With the way the Elders run everything around here, I’m betting they’re the ones allowing this little nesting place.”

It made sense to me. I put steel in my voice. “I’m on business for the Whampoan Elders. You’re only here because they tolerate you. They hear you’re blocking me, your ass is gonna get kicked all the way to Tsuen Wen.”

Nervously, the ganger leader glanced around at her people. Then she turned back to me. “Okay. I’m listening. What kind of business are you on?”

“I’m investigating the murders of the other Elders. The gunfight with the HKPF might be related.” I had a strong feeling it was. I just didn’t know which side of that the Elders had been on. They’d invited the HKPF here, and that in itself was suspect.

“All right,” she agreed grudgingly. “We only moved in here because all the Whampoans are too shit-scared of monsters and ghosts to come back in. The Elders told us it was all right if we stayed here. Seemed happy to have us camped out, honestly.”

I wondered at that, trying to fit it all together in my head. A picture was forming, but I was still missing too many pieces.

“Look around,” she went on. “Knock yourself out. Just stay outta the way of our biz.”

“Thanks.” I waved everyone forward, and we took our time about it. We also kept our weapons ready.

On the other side of the garage, behind the makeshift barricade, we spread out and started searching. Gobbet sent out a pack of her little friends and they started turning up interesting bits immediately.

“Over here,” Gobbet called, shining her flashlight on a drain coated with rust-colored blood that had been there for weeks. “There’s something down there.”

Her light gleamed on something metallic. A couple of the rats oozed down into the drain and managed to bring the object back up, laying it at the shaman’s

feet. She picked it up and knocked the blood away, revealing a jagged shape that might have been a vacuum-formed piece of something.

“Looks like a fragment of heavy-duty body armor,” Duncan said as we all looked at it.

“Definitely some kind of synthetic ferro-plastic.” Gobbet peered more closely at the scratched surface. “And there’s some kind of writing here. Japanese, maybe.”

“Japanese?” Isobel perked up. “You know, I’m not sure who in Whampoa Garden speaks Japanese, but Wing-Kei Kwok has a shop down in the *Whampoa* itself, by where we met the Elders. If anybody around here would know about armor, it would be her.”

“Good to know,” I said.

“Come look at the scratches and blood on this wall,” Duncan said from a few meters away.

I joined him. In addition to the deep scratches, bullet holes pocked the concrete as well. Enough blood stained the floor that I knew several people had died here. I couldn’t help thinking about the four cops.

“Those look like they’re made from a long bladed weapon like a sword or machete,” Duncan said. “With the number of bullet holes in the walls and cars around here, they must have just been spraying wildly. Our killer must have fought the HKPF in here and cut them apart. Since they never found a body, I’ve gotta assume the killer got away.” He inspected the action on his rifle out of habit. “I tell you what, I don’t want to have to fight this maniac at close range.”

“Neither do I.” I looked at Gobbet, but she shook her head, letting me know her little friends hadn’t found anything further. “All right, let’s go see Porter Lam about getting a key. And we’ll also check in on Isobel’s armorer friend. See what’s what.”

## **CHAPTER 33**

### **THE MOST FASHIONABLE PROTECTION AROUND**



Porter Lam was only slightly inquisitive about the request for a storm drain key. After a few questions without me giving him much in the way of answers, he handed it over. The bottom line was that since we were working for the Elders, we got what we wanted.

Isobel led us back into the *Whampoa* and to Wing-Kei Kwok's tailor shop, which was a surprise, considering she was supposed to be an armorer. When I got a look at the merch, though, I understood. Everything was armor. It was just fashionable, too. And pricy.

"Welcome," Wing-Kei greeted us. She was pretty and stylish herself, looking way too young to be involved in a serious business like this. "Welcome to Kwok Atelier, home of the finest clothing in Whampoa Garden. I am the owner, Master Tailor Wing-Kei Kwok. How may I serve you today?"

The spiel died, and a true smile lighted her face when she saw our decker. "Isobel! You have returned to us!" Wing-Kei stepped forward and wrapped the dwarf in a hug.

They talked for a minute, catching up on old news, then I cleared my throat to get their attention.

"Ah, sorry, Wing-Kei," Isobel said. "We're actually here on biz. I'd like to catch up another time, though."

"Of course. How can I assist you?"

Isobel handed over the fragment Gobbet's rats had recovered from the parking garage. "Do you know what kind of armor this piece is from?"

"Perhaps." Wing-Kei studied the piece and rubbed her fingers over the surfaces and the jagged edges. "Hmm. Japanese markings. I don't recognize all of them, but this first one is Renraku. Fairly recognizable to anyone who's used to seeing the name in *hanzi*."

That surprised me. Renraku was one of the biggest corps. Their top end stuff was expensive. Even their low-end merch was solid. Who the hell had the HKPF run into in that parking garage?

"The composition appears to be high-density ferro-ceramics," Wing-Kei went on. "Probably boron carbide with an interwoven bio-aramid mesh. The staining on the edges suggests it contained pockets of silica suspended in polyethylene glycol—similar to the commercially sold GelPak technology."

She knew her stuff. Duncan's bemused expression revealed that he was impressed as well.

“This armor could have withstood a significant amount of impact force,” Wing-Kei said. “Even standard 7.62 millimeter rounds wouldn’t have had much of a chance of penetrating it.”

“What could penetrate it?” I asked, because something had broken it.

She shrugged. “High velocity rounds with a tungsten-carbide penetrator would be the most common. This is the kind of thing armor-piercing, discarding sabot rounds were designed to defeat. A Dikoted melee weapon could do it as well, but there wouldn’t be the kind of splintering at the edge. Same case with EX—Explosive rounds. We’d see a spalling on the backside.”

“A spalling?” I asked.

“Surface failure,” she told me. “Usually fragmentation.” She tapped the fragment. “Whoever shot this off the owner came loaded with the right kind of weaponry to get the job done, that’s for certain. And you don’t carry that kind of ordnance around unless you’re sure of what you’re facing. It’s just too expensive for common carry.”

“I didn’t expect Whampoa Garden to have a tailor shop in it,” I admitted.

“Many people don’t.” Wing-Kei smiled. “There’s a mistaken impression that we Whampoans are only interested in technology and the Matrix. But even technologists need clothing, don’t they? And many of us gravitate toward lines of work where added protection is required.” She ran a hand over a rack of nearby jackets. “I myself am a materials scientist, as well as a keen follower of fashion trends.”

“What kind of material science?”

“Fiber-related, of course. Primarily aramid fibers. They’re heat-resistant and strong, used a lot in aerospace and military applications, in bicycle tires, and as a substitute for asbestos. The long form of the term is aromatic polyamide.” She shrugged. “I also dabble in graphene composites and dilatants. It affords me a certain unique perspective when designing clothing that is not only beautiful, but defensive as well. I specialize in high fashion body armor. Similar to the kind crafted by SecureTech or Vashon Island, but with a much more personal touch.”

I looked around. The armor I’d gotten on my arrival was wearing thin—multiple bullet impacts tend to do that—and it wasn’t top-of-the-line material like what I saw around me. I asked Wing-Kei to show me something affordable and durable, and ended up picking up a new cloth suit interwoven with graphene-aramid composite fibers, with just a touch of class.

Wing-Kei told me it would offer a lot more protection than my previous

outerwear. The others upgraded as well. Then we went searching for the storm drain Porter Lam had told us about, the one near the Jade Mountain restaurant.

I hoped my new armor would stand up to whatever we were about to put it through.

## CHAPTER 34

### DEN OF THIEVES

The storm drain was in front of the Jade Mountain. We hung out in a nearby alley, waiting until the street was clear and the shadows were thick. Then I opened the drain, and we went down.

I switched on my cybereyes and drew my pistol, not willing to take chances with anything that might be prowling the stinking depths. Rancid water sluiced slowly by us, and Gobbet's friends acquainted themselves with the other rats lurking in the tunnels before running point for us.

I followed the rats and didn't feel any safer, but I knew Duncan had my six. If the tunnels behind us remained open, we were good. But there was no guarantee of that.

Gobbet tapped me on the shoulder as I neared a T-intersection. An open doorway showed at the top of the T. "The rats say they've found something ahead."

"What?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I told them we were searching for signs of murder. They say they smell blood."

Maybe we were on the right track, but I knew there had probably been a lot of people killed in the storm drains. It was a great place to dump a body.

I followed Gobbet's directions into the room at the top of the T. The rats clustered around an area of the dank water inside the featureless room. I looked over the pool and spotted a glint of silver at the edge of the drain.

I leaned down carefully. Wing-Kei had said the new clothes were soil-

resistant, but I didn't want to stain them within an hour of purchase. I hooked my finger in the silver strand and pulled it up, realizing it was a necklace.

The pendant of a long-tailed bird in flight twirled at the end of the necklace.

"That's a magpie," Isobel whispered.

"Yeah," I agreed. I wrapped the necklace in a handkerchief that had come with my armor suit and tucked it in my pocket. "I guess we're on the right trail."

It also meant we were closing in on Magpie's probable killer, the person who had taken out four heavily armed cops without getting killed. The realization was sobering.

I followed the drains around a corner, then halted when I heard voices echoing ahead. I motioned for the others to kill their lights. We stood in the humid darkness and listened to the voices.

"That's Russian," Duncan said.

I wasn't sure, but he'd probably know better than me. He had a better ear for languages than I did. "Can you translate?"

He did. "A woman speaker said, 'Yaroslav says the boat will be ready tomorrow morning. He's gotten everything arranged with the port authority. We move the goods to his warehouse, he'll handle loading them onto the ship, and we can get paid right then and there. I'll be glad to be done with this filthy place.'"

"The second woman says, 'I will, too. I hate having to hide in these damn drains. It stinks down here. I can hear the devil rats running down the walkways. It's a mess, and it's disgraceful. We shouldn't have to put up with this bullshit. And Aleksandr still isn't back from his little trip! We'll have to leave him behind if he doesn't return soon.'"

"The first woman again, 'I know, Galina. Until Andrey says we're in the clear from the triads, we can't be seen with the goods on the street. They find us, we go back to Vladivostok in sausage casing. Those Red Dragon assholes don't screw around when it comes to protecting their turf. Who knows? Maybe Aleksandr was stupid and they caught him. Either way, we'll have to lug this crap through the drains for a few clicks.'"

We'd stumbled onto a den of thieves.

They continued talking, totally unaware of our presence. I eased forward and reached the doorway to the room where they were holed up. A few minutes later, I leaned around the door frame and peered into the room.

Two women, one an ork, walked around the room, sorting through boxes that sat on the floor. Several of the boxes had a distinctive label: a magpie in flight that

looked like the one on the necklace I'd recovered.

The ork woman sniffed suspiciously and glanced around. I decided not to duck back, afraid the sudden movement would alert her, and trusting that she wouldn't see me in the darkness. Her eyes locked on mine, and I cursed myself for not moving when I had the chance.

Her hand shot down to her pistol. "What have we here?" she demanded in Cantonese. "A curious little pest come looking for things that don't concern him. What do we do with pests, Galina?"

Galina racked her combat shotgun and grinned mirthlessly. "We break them, Vasilisa. And then we hammer a spike through each of their throats, so anyone who sees their bodies knows not to meddle in our affairs." She leveled the shotgun at me. "I suggest you stay where you are, pest."

"The Whampoan Elders know I'm down here," I told them, going with the biggest threat I had in my arsenal. "You start a fight, you're going to have every drone and cyber-junkie on those streets crawling up your ass."

"You think we're afraid of those little worms?" Galina asked, but she didn't sound as certain as she had before. "You think we're afraid of *you*? Don't make me laugh. We could be out of here before they ever realized you're missing."

"You think those crazy chipheads will give a shit about what happens down here?" Vasilisa asked. "I don't think so."

Duncan stepped around me, letting the Russian smugglers know I wasn't alone. His assault rifle wasn't quite pointing at them, but it wouldn't take much of an adjustment to change that. "Make a move, shitheads. Give me a reason to put you down. You thugs think you're so hard. I kill trash like you every damn day."

"We don't care what you're doing down here," I said, "or what you've stolen. We just want to find the person murdering the Whampoan Elders."

"You think I give a shit about what you're doing down here?" Galina demanded. "None of that concerns me. So why the hell should we let you live?"

"Andrey is obviously the *vor* here," I said, using the Russian word that loosely meant "captain" or "leader." "You're just enforcers. And I'm sure he doesn't want a scene while you're in Whampoa Garden."

Vasilisa glanced at Galina. "He's right, Galina. Andrey would have our heads if we had to break cover before the shipment was ready."

"Shit," Galina said. She lowered the shotgun, but didn't relax. She fixed me with her gaze. "You don't care about what we're doing?"

"I have a job to do," I told her. "This is incidental."

“So what do you want from us?”

“You stole Magpie’s equipment from her shop. Did you kill her, too?”

“Are you kidding me?” Vasilisa demanded. “And risk the Whampoans coming after us?” She shook her head. “No. We heard she’d left, but her gear was still in the shop, so we liberated it. What’s it to you?”

“It doesn’t matter to me,” I said. “Do you know what happened to her?”

“Like I said, we heard an empty shop was full of things we could fence easy enough, so we broke in and liberated anything we could sell. I have no idea what happened to her. I don’t live in Whampo Garden, and I don’t want to.”

“You took Magpie’s keycards, didn’t you?” I wanted to clear up every loose end I could.

“Yes,” Vasilisa answered, “we did. Aleksandr took one earlier. He said he wanted to sweep the stockroom, see if there was anything worth stealing in it.” She reached into her pocket and flipped me a rectangular keycard.

I caught it and pocketed it.

“We don’t have time to wait for Aleksandr,” Vasilisa went on. “If you see him, tell him to catch the hell up.”

“Sure.” I nodded. “Tell me where the stockroom is.”

## **CHAPTER 35**

### **THE GOURMET**

The stockroom was also next to Jade Mountain. I figured it had once been Mrs. Yang’s, or maybe Mrs. Yang owned the restaurant. Either way, we arrived there and went around back. The keycard opened the maglock without a hitch.

Inside, we stood in a room that held the utility meters and the exhaust fan to the kitchen. I looked around the room as Gobbet unleashed her horde of furry spies.

The rodents squealed in delight in the next room, and when I followed them there, they’d climbed the legs and chairs of a small table and descended

on a gourmet meal served there. Slices of pinkish-white meat, looking like raw pork, lay covered under a light soy marinade. Other small dishes held pickled vegetables.

I glanced around the room. The serving was generous, but it was set up for one.

However, no one was here.

I glanced at Gobbet, but she shook her head. Her rats hadn't detected anyone either.

“Hey.” Duncan stood in a corner near a box containing knick-knacks and other junk. He held up a wooden mask that made me instantly think of the Plastic-Faced Man.

I joined him and took the mask for a closer look. It wasn't plastic. It was wood, exquisitely carved and sanded to a glossy-smooth finish. Since it was painted white, I thought it might pass as plastic to someone not close enough to see it well. Whoever had fashioned it had created raised eyebrows and delicate features, bright red lips and black teeth that stood out against the stark white.

“Got these, too.” Duncan handed a bunch of small charms that looked like square cloth packets about three centimeters wide and twenty-five centimeters tall. They were in various colors, and had Japanese characters representing prosperity, peace, wealth, and protection.

Isobel slipped her fingers into one and pulled out a slip of paper, opening it to reveal *kanji* written on it. More Japanese.

“Fortunes,” she said, returning the paper to its case. She picked up a paper fan from the box, unfolding it and tilting it into her flashlight beam to see it more clearly.

The image showed an old East Asian city that looked at least a couple hundred years old. The curved roofs caught the rays of the sunset next to a deep blue river, where two ships with finned sails passed in front of a long wooden bridge. In front of the river, laborers carried buckets along the shore as a rider rode his horse in the opposite direction. Along the mountainous skyline, a large temple hall and a five-tiered pagoda overshadowed everything.

Behind me, a shoe sole scraped on the concrete floor, and Gobbet's rats shrilled in alarm. I turned and pointed my flashlight at the man standing there.

He was tall and thick, an obvious warrior, and clad in armor that matched the piece we'd recovered at the parking garage. He wore a katana at his hip, one big hand resting on it. His face was a nightmare of ashen gray surrounding dead white

eyes. Jagged teeth showed between his thin lips. Burn scarring mottled the right side of his bald head.

“Careful,” Duncan whispered as he stepped away from me. “That’s a ghoul.”

We’d seen them before, and knew how dangerous they could be. Ghouls were metahumans infected by the HMHVV virus, also known as the Krieger Strain. Although they weren’t undead like the fairy tales concerning them said, they had to consume human flesh to stay alive. Although they sometimes looked like they were falling apart, ghouls tended to be stronger and more durable than humans.

The ghoul cocked his head and sniffed the air.

“He’s blind,” Gobbet said, “but ghouls can smell and hear better than you can, and they’re dual-natured. They can perceive you on an astral level, too.”

Great. We couldn’t use the dark against him, or even the light. He could *see* us no matter what.

“Ah, a hired gun,” the ghoul said in a deep voice that echoed in the cavernous room. “No doubt brought to bear against me by the Whampoan Elders.” He smiled, baring his sharpened teeth and crinkling the scar tissue at the side of his head. “A means by which they can lift the curse plaguing them. I salute your tenacity, but I wonder: will you hear me out before raising your weapon to kill me?”

“You’re a ghoul,” I said. “And...you’re *talking*?” I’d heard that they sometimes could, but I’d never seen one that could speak.

“Yes.” He smiled again, and I wished he wouldn’t. “I am not only talking, I am reasoning as well. And, since you have not attempted to kill me, your own higher faculties are engaged. I am a curiosity to you.”

Remembering the bloody scene at the parking garage and the stories I’d been told about the deaths of the cops, I was leaning more toward a chance at certain death.

“You wish to know not only what I am, but what I have done,” the ghoul continued. “As for who I am, you may call me Gaichu.”

“I know who you are,” I said. “You’re the one killing the Whampoan Elders.”

“You are correct.” Gaichu shifted slightly, but didn’t approach us. “I have killed all of the Whampoan Elders to date, though only Elder Magpie was according to my initial plan. I regret the deaths of the other Elders, but it was necessary.”



“What do you mean, *necessary*?” Duncan challenged.

“This affair began simply enough,” Gaichu responded. “As you may surmise, I am not someone who can be seen in public without great risk. Whampoa Garden is an excellent place to hide: no police or triad presence, and minimal interest in things that lurk in the shadows. Unfortunately for me, Elder Ng discovered me through communion with her spirits. Rather than kill me or chase me away, she came to me with a proposition.”

“Elder Ng?” Isobel asked.

Gaichu nodded.

The decker glanced at me. “I told you they’re a bunch of petty tyrants. Always scamming and looking out for their own best interests.”

I didn’t argue the point. “What was the proposition?”

“Ng and the other Elders were having problems with one of their number,” Gaichu said. “An Elder named Magpie had been holding many of their plans hostage, and would not budge. They could not remove Magpie, however, because her services were too useful to the Whampoans at large. Ng offered me payment to dispose of Magpie, and I accepted.”

“Why the hell are we talking to this thing?” Duncan growled. “It’s a goddamned ghoul, and you *know* what they’re like.”

Not really. I’d never met one like Gaichu before.

## CHAPTER 36 THE MERCENARY

Gaichu cocked his head toward Duncan. “Really? What, pray tell, am I like? All teeth and claws and bad manners, I expect.” He smiled in genuine amusement.

“Really?” Duncan said. “You wanna crack jokes, you cannibal?” He stepped forward and raised his rifle. “You’re the kind of monster that’d devour a family just because it’s convenient. Remember the 162s?”

The question was for me, and I did remember the 162s.

“He’s just like them,” Duncan snarled.

“No,” I said in a calm voice, and put my hand on Duncan’s rifle to point the barrel away from Gaichu. The ghoul’s armor would be a problem if things went sideways, anyway. “The 162s were a gang, Duncan. In the Barrens. We’re a long way from the Barrens, remember?”

“Like that makes a bit of difference!” Duncan bellowed. “Go on, then. Talk to the monster. But I’m keeping my finger on the goddamned trigger.”

Gaichu went on smoothly, like he hadn’t just had a rifle pointed at his face and been threatened. “I believe we were speaking of the Elders’ plans to have me kill Magpie. Surely you must be a little curious about that.”

“You didn’t clean up all of her blood,” Duncan said. “I found some in her drain.”

“Ahh. I thought I was careful. Having it on my hands must have obscured my sense of smell enough that I missed the last remnants in the drain.” Gaichu took a breath. “I disposed of Magpie’s body by emptying the blood in her bathroom. Then, I cut her up into more...portable...pieces. Those were placed in a plastic tarp, which I took to the storm drains and hid.”

Plastic tarp, huh? He and Kindly Cheng shared a propensity for kill cleanup techniques.

“It’s unfortunate,” Gaichu stated, “but my survival depends upon consumption of raw metahuman flesh. Letting such nourishment go to waste would be a foolish error.”

I tried not to think about the snack the rats were feasting on now. “But why kill the other Elders?”

“I contacted the Elders—not in person, of course,” Gaichu said. “They arranged to exchange payment. I assumed that since the job was done, Ng would be a woman of her word.” He bared his fangs and hissed in displeasure. “I was mistaken. I arrived at the nearby parking garage the Elders had told me about. They’d cleared out the other Whampoans under some pretense, though I’m not sure what ruse they used.”

That matched up with what we’d learned from the Red Spear gangers.

“The Elders never showed up,” Gaichu said. “Instead, several members of the Hong Kong Police Force arrived. They were more heavily armed than usual, so I suspect they knew something of my nature.”

“I saw scarring on the concrete from bullets and a blade. You killed them with a sword?”

“And my hands, yes.” Gaichu flexed his hand on the sword hilt. “My blindness precludes the use of ranged weapons. Unfortunate, since I was an excellent shot before I became infected. But my skills in grappling and kenjutsu have only increased. A battle of swords is a clash of souls: mine was stronger than theirs, and they perished.”

I really wasn't liking our chances in the small room. And the only doorway out was behind the ghoul.

“A betrayal of that sort cannot stand,” Gaichu said. “Not only was I not paid for my time and effort, the Whampoan Elders treated me like a common animal. And I am so much more than that.”

I silently agreed, and I started thinking about how I could spin this in our favor. The old man had taken in kids who had nowhere else to go. Gobbet and Isobel were kind of in the same boat as Duncan and me. Or *ship*, I supposed. And Racter was an outsider as well.

“Reputation is everything,” Gaichu said, “and I had none. I had hoped to build a network of contacts so that I would be able to continue finding work, but with that treachery, my hopes were dashed. So I decided to become the monster that they feared.”

He'd done that, all right. The Elders had gone crying to Kindly Cheng.

“One by one,” Gaichu said, “I have eliminated them. They know how to contact me, and could have ended their nightmare at any time by making amends. I would have asked for more money, but I would have ceased my hunt. Yet they did not.” He raked us with his gaze. “Instead, they contacted you, no doubt asking you to eliminate me where the police have failed.”

The Elders had set us up too by not coming clean with us. I definitely wasn't a fan of them at the moment.

“Why would the Elders have you killed instead of paying you?” I asked, because I was wondering how they were going to treat us once they found out we knew so many of their secrets and underhanded dealings.

“Any number of reasons,” Gaichu replied. “They are notorious cheapskates, and will always try to save money when dealing with outsiders. It could be their natural inclination toward profit. They may regard me as subhuman, and therefore unworthy of respect. It could be that they felt I was too dangerous to allow to live. It could even be that they simply did not like me.”

I could see that, and I could see us getting slotted over in the end, too. I wasn't wiz about that, either.

“The net result is the same,” Gaichu said. “They reneged on a deal we brokered, and attempted to have me killed. A message must be sent. Blood must be paid. As they have hired you to kill me, they have obviously not learned their lesson.”

“If we let you live, what will you do?”

Duncan shifted beside me, but didn't argue. Maybe he was thinking about how small the room suddenly felt, too. And I knew he didn't care much for people who didn't keep their word. He never had.

“I will kill the rest of the Elders,” Gaichu said. “And anyone else they send to exterminate me. It is a matter of survival. Should I ever have the opportunity to work freelance again, potential employers need to understand the price of betrayal. These murders are my *curriculum vitae* in revenge.”

“Come and work with me,” I said, thinking of the wooden mask. “I can be your face.”

Gaichu cocked his head in my direction. “A curious offer. And what of the Elders? Will you allow me the satisfaction of killing them?”

“I want to see what they have to say first.”

“Hmm. I would counsel you to not believe their words, but you have the sound of one who is wary as a matter of course.” The ghoul nodded. “Very well. I accept your terms.”

I couldn't wait to see how the Elders were going to react to this unexpected reunion. Of course, seeing it was one thing. Surviving it was another.

## CHAPTER 37

### UNRAVELING THE CONSPIRACY

Cautiously, we made our way back to the *Whampoa*. My mind stayed busy, putting everything together. We'd been set up. Kindly Cheng had been lied to. I didn't know how this was going to work out, but I wasn't ready to be a patsy and get killed taking care of someone else's dirty biz while the old man was

somewhere out there in this godforsaken sprawl.

The Elders had called the tune. Now they were going to pay the pipers.

I messaged Ng and let her know we were ready to meet, but I knew they weren't prepared for what—*who*—I was bringing. Maybe even for dinner.

Inside the *Whampoa*, Porter Lam stood with the Elders. Evidently they'd called him in, but I thought it was just as well. If I'd had a way of contacting him, I'd have called him in too.

As we approached the open dining area in the food court where they stood, Elder Ng's eyes grew wide with alarm.

"What are you doing?" she bellowed. "You've brought this...*THING*...into our home!" She turned to Porter Lam. "Quick! Kill it before it kills us!"

Lam acted the way I thought he would, drawing his pistol and taking a shooting stance.

I lifted my hands and stepped in front of Gaichu to prevent a clear shot. I didn't know if I was doing more to keep the ghoul from getting shot or from drawing his katana and starting carving people up. Either way, as long as I didn't die at somebody's hands in the next couple seconds, I'd count it as a win.

"Look," I said to Lam, "we can do this the easy way and nobody gets hurt. Trust me, I know stuff now that you'll want to know too."

Duncan split off from the group, already working the angles in case things broke wrong. Maybe he didn't like Gaichu, but he still wasn't going to let me hang in the wind.

"Yeah," Lam said, "I have to say, this isn't a good idea." He stared at me, daring me to give him a good answer. "Why the hell is a ghoul in here, and why is it wearing armor?"

"Calm yourselves," Gaichu said over my shoulder. His voice was calm but loud in the emptiness. I think both of those qualities helped. "I am not an *it*. And your Elders know this, intimately." His breath brushed cold against the back of my neck. "Good evening, Elder Ng. I can smell your fear, and I'm glad of this. It means you are learning the price of betrayal."

"Whoa, whoa!" Lam exploded. "What the hell is going on here? Can someone explain to me why the ghoul is talking?"

"It's not so much that he can talk," I said, "it's what he's prepared to talk

about that's the good part."

The Elders shifted nervously, and I watched to see if someone would pull a weapon. The tension was thick, and maybe it would have broken out—if Duncan hadn't been standing there with an AK-97 on full-auto at the ready.

"Gaichu had a contract with the Elders," I said, "and they betrayed him."

Lam glanced back at the Elders, and there was a little hesitation. Maybe their betrayal wasn't a new idea to him.

"You dare to accuse us of conspiring with a monster and covering it up?" Ip blustered. "You're insane! The very idea is preposterous!"

"I'm interested to hear what kind of evidence you have to support this theory," Lam said in a neutral tone. His pistol remained in his hand. "As far as I can tell, this monster killed Tong and the others, and that makes him a threat that should be eliminated."

"Yeah, he even killed Magpie," I said.

"Not helping," Isobel whispered in my ear.

I continued. "Gaichu's a mercenary. A hired gun. The Elders contracted him to kill Elder Magpie, and make it look like she disappeared."

"You believe this vermin?" Elder Ng asked. "This *creature* that feasts on metahuman flesh, that kills and dismembers our tribesmen? You are a naïve and foolish man, if that's the case." She spat at the ground in front of me.

I pulled my front foot back. My suit was still shiny and new.

"What proof do you have that Magpie is dead?" she demanded.

"Ng, please," Lam said. "You know that when an Elder is accused of breaking our law, the other Elders generally judge them. In matters where all of them have been accused, I am authorized to act as judge." He locked eyes with me. "Make your case, shadowrunner."

Whatever good graces I'd worked up earlier was gone. Lam was all business now. So I led with an ace. I pulled Magpie's necklace from my pocket and let it dangle from the fingers of my off hand. I rested my right hand on my gun butt. Just in case things got slotted.

"We found Magpie's necklace in the storm drains," I said.

Lam studied the spinning necklace. "This is definitely Elder Magpie's. If you found it in the storm drain, that's suspicious. But hardly proof on its own."

"Of course it's not proof!" Ip yelled. "The number of things lost down storm drains in Hong Kong must number in the tens of thousands per year. While unusual, it's hardly evidence of foul play."

“There was a large amount of blood in her shower drain,” Duncan said, and I knew he was speaking so no one forgot about him—or his assault rifle.

“So what?” Ip shook his head. “Perhaps she cut herself, and washed it off. Or perhaps you are mistaken about it being blood. You’re probably simply guessing as to what happened.”

“That’s true,” Lam said. “It’s a guess. And even if it is her blood, that doesn’t prove that the Elders hired this ghoul to kill her.” Still, he gave Ip a sidelong glance that told me the Elder wasn’t winning any points here either. “The Elders have always protected Whampoa Garden to the best of their ability.”

“Magpie hasn’t been seen in a month,” Isobel said, “not by anyone. She wouldn’t just disappear like that.”

“That may be unlikely,” Lam acknowledged, “but it’s hardly impossible. You haven’t established that the Elders were involved yet. All you’ve done is make suppositions about it.”

“What proof do you have that we hired and betrayed this creature?” Tang demanded. “I won’t sit by and listen to idle accusations without any kind of concrete evidence to back it up.”

“What about the fight with the Hong Kong Police Force?” Gobbet asked.

“How do you mean?” Lam asked. “What does that have to do with the Elders and the ghoul?”

“You Whampoans don’t allow police inside the area,” I said. “Why make an exception this time?”

Elder Ng calmly folded her hands, but it took effort. “We allowed the police into Whampoa Garden because they were hunting someone. They never told us who or why they were looking for their quarry. It didn’t have anything to do with us.”

“I was only in the garage to collect payment from them,” Gaichu told Lam. “The ordinary residents were warned of the HKPF’s arrival, and were gone by the time I arrived.”

Lam’s pistol dropped a little and he no longer looked as certain as he had before. “That’s...suspicious, I admit.” He glanced at the Elders. “But it still doesn’t prove the Elders knew it was the ghoul.”

He was stubborn, hanging onto something he’d obviously believed in for a long time. But he was the only guy in the room I had to convince.

The others already knew they were lying slags.

## CHAPTER 38

### THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

“Why make an exception for the police this time?” I repeated. I wanted to drive that point home, because once it locked in, the rest of their web of lies and half-truths would fracture and fall.

“The police were polite,” Elder Ng said, “and asked our permission to enter. They were hunting a non-Whampoan. That was reason enough for us to allow them in.”

“That doesn’t add up,” Lam stated quietly. “Why would the police ask us for entry now? They’ve never been polite before, and they’ve always tried to force their way in here. It just doesn’t ring true to me.” He looked at her. “Did you ask them to come? In order to hunt down this ghoul?”

“Preposterous, Porter,” Tang argued. “You know what our community is like. We wouldn’t lie over something like this.” He stared daggers at Gaichu. “This ghoul has been lying the entire time, trying to cover his tracks. He still brutally murdered several Elders!”

“That’s true.” Lam looked back at me. “Those murders were vicious and cruel. I don’t see any way to explain that away. This ghoul is a monster for how he killed Tong and the others.”

“Tong wasn’t tortured,” Gobbet said. “There was no astral residue of pain or fear. He didn’t even feel the blow that killed him. It was made to look more horrific than it was. Like the others.”

“That’s correct,” Gaichu stated flatly. “I struck a single blow while his back was to me. His death was instant. Regrettable that he had to die for your folly, Ng, but necessary to protect my reputation.”

Ng glared at him for a moment, then switched her attention to Lam, who, I was sure, felt himself pulled in opposing directions. “You cannot believe what these people say. They are not to be trusted. And even if this is true, he still killed Tong.”



“Maybe so, Ng. But a monster would not take Tong’s suffering into account. He may be a killer, but he’s not heartless.” Lam looked at me, then at Gaichu. “I believe you. The blood smeared on the walls. The removal of the skin. That’s a scene designed to evoke horror, not the scene of an actual fight.” He turned to the people beside him. “Elders, what do you have to say in response?”

“This is a farce,” Ng said. “We have dedicated ourselves to protecting the Whampoan Tribe and everyone who lives in Whampoan Garden. Do you really believe outsiders and monsters over our word? We who have only tried to end the killings? You’ve been duped, Porter. You and this shadowrunner.”

“I concur,” Ip said. “Porter, you know me! You know the kind of person I am! I wouldn’t be party to the killing of another Elder!”

Tang snorted indignantly. “I can’t believe we’re even entertaining the notion that we have to defend ourselves. We should be disposing of this ghoul instead!” He narrowed his eyes and hissed at me. “If you think I’ll forget this, you’re sorely mistaken. I will not tolerate this kind of insult.”

I ignored him. The only person I had to convince was the same one they were trying to convince. I focused on Lam. “The Elders were all too happy to have the Red Spears move into the garage afterward. Almost like they wanted to keep anyone curious about the fight away.”

Lam nodded. “That’s right. Ip, you even told me *not* to go find out what happened with the fight. You said the Red Spear gangers were moving in, and to leave them alone. Why would you tell me not to look into it?”

“I was only trying to protect you from the Red Spears!” Ip cried. “They’re dangerous, which is why I wanted to deal with them directly.”

“Magpie’s gear was missing,” Isobel pointed out. “Obviously missing. Why didn’t Ip tell us that? Tang had to have noticed, and Magpie’s shop is locked up. Why didn’t he want us investigating?”

“Pure supposition!” Tang scoffed. “You think it proves something that I didn’t notice equipment was missing? Magpie’s shop is always a horrible mess!”

“Tang,” Lam said, deadly serious now, “you did a full inventory of Magpie’s Matrix servers. You assured us everything was running fine, and you would be able to continue her work. I find it hard to believe you missed something as obvious as missing equipment, especially while searching her stock.”

“And?” Ng demanded. “What do you believe the real story is?”

Lam turned to face them, and I knew I had my answer in his body language. I drew in a full breath and waited.

“Gaichu seems to be telling the truth,” Lam accused. “Elders, too many facts don’t add up. You are obviously hiding something—possibly a great deal—from the rest of the tribe. I’m sorry, but I have to take you into custody until the community can decide the extent and manner of your punishment.”

“Death would seem appropriate to me,” Gaichu growled. “Especially given that they kept up this charade even to you, one of their most trusted citizens.”

I thought he was stepping over the line a little, but I didn’t say anything. However, Ip had plenty to say.

“Don’t you dare to talk to me like that, you disgusting beast!” Ip reached for his weapon.

Lam caught Ip’s wrist and kept the weapon holstered. “Ip, no,” Lam said forcefully. “Don’t make this any worse than it is.”

Ip stopped and Lam removed the weapon, sliding it into his own pocket.

Lam turned to us. “Thank you. I’ll make certain that justice is meted out. You are free to go, and I will ensure payment is delivered to you—so long as you take Gaichu with you. I can’t have him staying here.”

I didn’t point out that Gaichu didn’t want to stay there in the first place. I nodded. “He’ll be coming with us.”

The ghoul didn’t speak till we reached the streets. “I confess, I am unhappy with the decision to allow the Whampoan Elders to live. We should have killed them, if for no other reason than to maintain our reputation.”

“If you’re going to run with this team,” I told him, “you’ll have to learn to accept my decisions.”

He hesitated, then nodded, and I couldn’t help wondering just how long that rule would hold. For the moment, I wanted to see what Kindly Cheng had to say, and if she’d gotten any news of the old man.

## **CHAPTER 39**

### **“PEOPLE DON’T JUST COME OUT OF THIN AIR”**

Heavy footsteps rang on the metal ladder to the *Bolthole's* main room. The sec systems Gobbet and Isobel had set up on the ship showed no threats, but I was aware of how foolies could slip past cyberware.

I picked up my pistol and slid out of the seat in front of the computer where I'd been perusing screamsheets. Flicking the pistol's safety off, I let my breath out slowly.

Duncan stepped into the room with a long canvas bag hanging over one shoulder. He saw me and grinned. "*Hoi*, chummer. You finally make it outta bed?"

I flicked the pistol's safety back on. "Yeah. Didn't know you'd left."

He frowned. "I didn't sleep very well."

I hadn't either. It had been a long, restless night that ended up in sweat-soaked sheets. "Nightmares?"

"Yeah." He shook his head and his eyes looked haunted. "I can't remember much of them, but I know I've never had anything like them before." He took a breath and let it out. "Truth to tell, I think it's this place. The sooner we find out what happened to Raymond and get the hell out of Hong Kong, the happier I'll be."

I nodded.

"Anybody else up?" He put the bag on the floor and knelt beside it.

"Not that I know of."

We'd settled Gaichu in one of the spare berths. All the open space seemed to unnerve him a little, but he didn't mention it.

"Where were you?" I asked.

"Out for a stroll. Thought I'd hit up Club 88, see what they had. We upgraded our armor, but I got you something with all those credits Kindly Cheng paid us for that last run." Duncan pulled a slick-shiny Ingram Smartgun submachine gun from the bag. The thick silencer added several centimeters to the overall length, but it was still short, still easily concealable, and instantly deadly in the right hands. Like my hands.

I took the Ingram and worked the action. Everything slid smooth as silk.

"The silencer will come in handy."

"I thought so, too." Duncan smiled and pulled another weapon from the bag.

"Got something for me, too. For when silence is no longer an option." He proudly displayed the Remington 990 combat shotgun. "And for when we need people out of our way. Permanently."

I'd used the Remington before. With all the power it packed, it was efficient,

lethal, and totally unforgiving.

“I also brought breakfast.” Duncan set the shotgun aside and reached into the bag, bringing out two cartons that smelled of spices. “*Shakshuka* eggs with feta and sourdough, and avocado benedict with yogurt hollandaise. I found them by accident, but I remembered Raymond making them for us.”

I did, too, and the memory brought back other memories that I quickly walled away. The old man had given us a good home. I didn’t appreciate it then, and I didn’t want to remember it now. I tried to live by going forward.

We took the breakfasts and a couple of soykafs from the galley and went up on the *Bolthole’s* deck to eat under a stretched canvas canopy. I think we just wanted some time by ourselves, but we spent most of it watching the boats and ships in the harbor around us. The spice in the *shakshuka* killed most of the stink in the air when I was chewing, and the ship rolled slowly beneath us.

“While I was at Club 88, I ran into a couple people I knew,” Duncan said. “Shadowrunners I’d heard about that had done some biz in Seattle. Chrysalis is an elven decker who’s really easy on the eyes. A street sam named Jaxx, also a looker. Has this killer tat of a cherry blossom tree in full bloom on her neck.” He touched his throat with a forefinger. “I asked both of ’em about Kindly Cheng, but they didn’t have much info. They did introduce me to this troll rigger who calls himself MAGNATE. All caps, no kidding.” He rolled his eyes. “Anyway, MAGNATE has dealt with Cheng before. Says we can trust her.”

“That’s good to know. So, they just chatted you up? In spite of you being Lone Star?”

Duncan frowned. “I *was* Lone Star. They already knew about the *was* part, too. Since we’d never gotten in each other’s crosshairs, it was all good.” He leaned back in his chair and looked smug. “Chrysalis gave me a contact for her. In case I want to...contact her.”

“You always did get the girls.”

Duncan suddenly took lot more interest in the remains of his breakfast, but I could have sworn his face reddened a bit. I tactfully remained silent about it, and just kept eating.

Finally, when we were down to just the soykaf, I told Duncan about the sniffer program Is0bel had written to seek any info about the old man that traveled through the ’Net. I’d found it on the computer. “I didn’t know she was doing that.”

“Yeah, I asked her to set that up,” Duncan said. “Kindly Cheng doesn’t strike

me as the giving sort. Anything we get from her, we're gonna pay for. Is0bel agreed, because Cheng's kept things from her and Gobbet before."

I understood the thinking. When someone ran an op with a team, it was better to compartmentalize. I suspected Duncan's history with Lone Star put him in the same position.

"Did she find out anything?" Duncan asked. "I haven't had a chance to look at it."

"She tracked him through his SIN," I said. "At first, she got a lot of hits. Citizens leave a lot of data in their wake. When Is0bel tracked the old man back through records, she found a lot. Power. Utilities. A couple of public discussion sites he signed up for. But the further back she went, the less there was."

Duncan frowned, and I knew he was thinking the same thing I was. "She notes that prior to 2032, she couldn't find *anything*."

I let that sink in, knowing he wouldn't like that at all. But I couldn't hold it back from him. He needed to know what we were dealing with.

Crumpling up the soykaf container, Duncan fired it at the empty carton at his feet. "People don't just come out of thin air."

"No," I said. "They don't."

Looking around at the sprawl covered by the toxic smog filling the sky and turning the morning dark, Duncan cursed. "There's something here that brought him to this place. And he's got a lot of connections here, too. A lot of people seem to know him." He paused. "Raymond's got history here that we didn't know about."

"Whatever it is," I said, "we'll find it."

He looked at me. "Why would you stick with this?"

"I don't want you looking for the old man on your own."

"That's all you feel?"

I tried to avoid his gaze, but couldn't. "Maybe I owe him something, too." I took a deep breath and let it out. "And right now we're on the hook to Kindly Cheng. We'll stick with it until we find out that doesn't work anymore."

"I could handle this on my own." He glared at me as if daring me to challenge that, and for a moment I remembered how stubborn he'd been as a kid after he'd changed.

"I know you can." I sipped the soykaf, which had gone cold. "But you don't have to."

"That's good. Gobbet and Is0bel seem like they'll hang too, but I get the

feeling things will get harder.”

“They will.” I wadded up the soykaf cup and dropped it in the bag. “Have you seen what the screamsheets are saying about those two?”

Duncan shook his head.

“According to the latest release, Gobbet’s real name is Yuchun Gwei. Supposedly born in Xi’an, Shaanxi. She’s twenty-three years old, and supposedly served with the Baihu corporate military until a conviction for insubordination led to her dishonorable discharge.”

“The military?” Duncan laughed out loud. “No fuckin’ way.”

“I think it’s just damage control by whoever set us up. Get that story out there, make her seem more dangerous than she is.”

“She’s dangerous, but she doesn’t go looking for it. What about Is0bel?”

“Her name is supposed to be Fatima Abukar. They have her as a revolutionary trained in terrorism and piracy in the Ethiomalian Territories. She’s wanted in connection with the 2052 bombing attack on the French embassy in Johannesburg.”

“You don’t believe that either.”

“No. She said she was born and grew up in Whampoa Garden. I think that’s the truth. There was too much hurt in her eyes that she didn’t want anyone to see. And she has too much history there.” I leaned back in the chair. “You ready to go to work?”

“Kindly Cheng came through with another job already?” Duncan looked a little surprised.

“She did. She’s definitely not someone to let the grass grow.”

## **CHAPTER 40**

### **THE EMPEROR’S TOMB SCORE**

Once Gobbet and Is0bel were up a couple hours later, I had the run set up for them. We stood in the main room and I worked the computer, playing the video

Kindly Cheng had provided. We stared at the handsome face frozen in the air above the trid.

“Who’s this guy?” Gobbet sounded cranky, and I wondered if she’d been having bad dreams too, but now wasn’t the time to ask.

“An archeologist,” I said. “Kindly Cheng said his name was Mr. Drake, but it might as well be Mr. Johnson as far as I’m concerned, because I doubt it’s his real name.”

“What does he want?” Isobel didn’t sound happy either.

“He wants us to steal some artifacts from a museum in Tai Po,” I said.

Gobbet scowled. “What artifacts?”

“I’m going to let him tell that.” I started the recording on the trid.

Handsome and well-dressed, Drake didn’t strike me as the kind of guy who crawled around in pyramids or trekked through forgotten jungles, but people could surprise me. He spoke clearly and concisely, like a university professor warming up to a favorite subject. The tusks jutting up from his lower jaw marked him as an ork.

*“Recently, a rich investor by the name of Liu Hua decided to expand his manor house on the outskirts of Tai Po.”*

I pulled up an image of the original house, an imposing monolith from another time, set squarely in a well-cultivated garden that was a statement of wealth in a country where space was at a premium.

*“Too much money,” Drake went on, “not enough space for fancy parties. Liu hit a snag with local government officials. They suspected the land his estate was built on may have premodern archeological artifacts dating from the Song Dynasty buried beneath it.”*

“That predates the Yuan Dynasty,” Isobel said from the computer, where I assumed she was pulling up info. “Tenth century stuff. That’s old.”

*“Consequently,” Drake continued, “I was contracted as an archeologist to oversee the excavations and ensure everything was properly recorded and catalogued.”*

“That wouldn’t have made Liu happy,” Gobbet said.

It hadn’t, but I wanted to let Drake tell it.

*“Sure enough,” the archeologist said with more excitement, “we were only a few days into the excavation when we discovered a series of tombs lying beneath the site. The scope of the tombs was far beyond anything Liu or I had expected—several acres of catacombs, at least, and untouched relics throughout. What’s*

*more, they're certainly older than the Song Dynasty. They may even be from the previous cycle of magic."*

"He's talking about Fourth World relics," Gobbet whispered. Her eyes widened and her pupils dilated. The rats in her clothing wriggled around in a frenzy.

That didn't mean much of anything to me. Magic was a tool I didn't use.

*"Before I could make my report to the Free Enterprise Zone authorities, however, Liu called in his allies in Tan Tien Incorporated,"* Drake said.

"Tan Tien?" Duncan raised his eyebrows.

"One of the smallest megacorps still in existence," Is0bel replied. "They're part of the Pacific Prosperity Group. They focus on biological data storage and cranial cyberdecks, and are working on a multi-user cyberdeck interface they're calling Parallel Thought. I got the info from a decker friend named Kein Ding who was once a street mage. He broke into Pacific Prosperity a couple years ago. He's running with another decker named Frigid Flux. They're willing to pay for any info we might turn up."

I nodded.

"Doesn't sound like Tan Tien would be interested in Fourth World relics," Duncan said.

Is0bel grinned up at him. "They're also rumored to have their own *otaku* tribe and be protected by the Great Dragon Lung." She shrugged. "I got that from a mage named Ajax. An—occasional friend. Something's allowed Tan Tien to withstand attempts from Fuchi, Renraku, and Mitsuhamma to swallow them in a hostile takeover. Since they signed on with the PPG, they're almost bulletproof."

"Some say the *otaku*'s ability to interface with the Matrix without cyberdecks is possibly related to magic," Gobbet said. "Tan Tien plays its cards close to the vest."

Duncan folded his arms across his chest. "If a megacorp, no matter how small, is involved in this, there's gonna be a lot of risk."

"On the surface," I said, "Tan Tien isn't interested." I switched the trid back on.

*"Liu sold the entire site to Tan Tien, who then leased it back to him."*

Drake shook his head in quiet fury. *"Because Tan Tien is considered to have extraterritoriality in Hong Kong, local authorities were powerless to stop Liu from looting the tombs. He immediately began building a museum—if you can call it that—atop the site."*



I pulled up an image of the new building that had taken the place of the original manor house. The larger structure doubled the original space and sprawled over much of the acreage. Cheap, gaudy signs hung over the front of the “museum.”

*“He had the gall to call his museum ‘The Emperor’s Tomb’—can you believe that?”* Drake blew out a harsh breath. *“The odds of there being an actual emperor buried there are basically nil, but he doesn’t care! Anything to sell a few tickets.”*

I cycled through images of the museum’s interior that I’d gleaned from the Matrix. The rooms inside the building were pretty plain, showing display cases and shelves filled with recovered artifacts.

*“Liu has continued his excavations,”* Drake said, *“using Tan Tien contractors to expand the dig.”*

I flicked to another image that showed a large room with an opening in the center of the floor. It had obviously been built over the dig site. Railings ran around the cave mouth, but whatever was inside remained hidden. Digging equipment lined the walls.

*“What he didn’t know,”* Drake said, *“is that I bugged his commlink before he fired me. Based on what I’ve heard, something strange is going on in the lower levels. Workers have been disappearing, only to be found dead several days later. Whatever is down there is too dangerous to be left in Liu’s hands.”*

“Well,” Duncan said, “that doesn’t sound good.”

Drake continued. *“Liu must have found my dataline tap, though. I stopped receiving any information three days ago. The last thing I heard him talking about were a pair of ancient texts the workers had discovered. Then he issued an order that further excavation be halted until he can secure the subterranean areas.”* He paused. *“I’m betting those texts are the cause of whatever’s killing the workers.”*

“That definitely sounds bad,” Isobel noted.

*“I have quite a bit of experience with these kinds of dangerous excavations,”* Drake said, *“but an operation of this scale is beyond me. I need a team that’s tough enough to get in and survive, aren’t afraid of making a mess, and who can get out with the books and whatever else they can carry.”*

“This Drake guy must be dropping a lot of nuyen for this run,” Isobel said. “Otherwise Kindly Cheng wouldn’t touch this.”

“She’s not touching it, remember?” Duncan growled. “She’s got us to do the job for her. She gets a piece if we’re successful.”

“When we’re successful,” I said.

“We could walk away from this,” Duncan said.

Gobbet shook her head. “No, we can’t. You owe her, and if you walk away from Kindly Cheng’s *work*, pretty soon you end up floating in the harbor as a message to anyone who thinks about crossing her. If she wants this done, we have to do it.”

I played the rest of the trid recording.

*“Beyond the two texts,” Drake said, “I’m willing to pay very well for whatever other artifacts your team can liberate—the more valuable, the better. Don’t worry, they’ll be going to actual museums, not some rich playboy’s mansion.”* He paused. *“I’ve got a second program in place that’ll suppress Liu’s security system. The team will have to be careful, though—there are only so many alarms I can suppress. Go beyond that number and I’ll scrub the mission.”*

“At least he’s being careful,” Is0bel said. “That means he knows he can get slotted if this thing goes off the rails. We’re an investment for him.”

*“I’ve included a catalog of likely items to help the team appraise the most valuable items,”* Drake continued. *“They don’t need to be subtle—in fact, I’d prefer they make it look like a common robbery. Tell them to smash and grab whatever they can. Let me know when you find a suitable group of shadowrunners.”*

The trid blanked.

I looked at the others. “Kindly Cheng says to let her know when we plan on heading into the museum. I’m thinking we move tonight.”

“We’re pushing our luck,” Gobbet said. “The trip out of Whampoa Garden, now this. I know Kindly Cheng’s running interference for us, but how long will that hold up?”

“It would probably be better to keep pushing it now,” I said. “The longer we take to get things done, the weaker her protection will get.”

Duncan nodded. “I don’t want to wait around and get our covers blown, then not be able to find out what happened to Raymond.”

I looked at Gobbet and Is0bel. “Say the word and you’re out of this one. We’ve got other people we can tag up if we need to. Kindly Cheng gave me a list of shadowrunners we can contact.”

The rat shaman and the decker looked at each other for only a moment, then both turned back to us.

“We’re in,” Gobbet said. “We still want payback for what happened to our chummers.”

“And a payday is good, too,” Isobel said. “The shadows run on nuyen. It takes creds to operate.”

## CHAPTER 41 INTO THE EARTH

We took the mass trans to Tai Po at dusk, and arrived at the station after dark. The sprawl had come alive in bright neon around us, but we stayed in the shadows. Gobbet and Isobel took one cab, and Duncan and I took another a few minutes later. All of us watched for tails and other runners with our hands never far from our weapons, hidden under long black coats.

Just because a job came up didn't mean we were the only people it got offered to. I didn't want to deal with competition popping out of the plascrete.

After getting out near one of the hot spots, we walked the three kilometers to The Emperor's Tomb Museum, rejoining Gobbet and Isobel at the tall sec fence that ran around the premises. Earth-moving equipment stood out on the grounds like metallic statuary, and fresh-turned soil offered evidence of the ongoing work. The wind blew cold off the sea, and debris—both natural and manmade—blew over us. Small dust clouds from the dried earth swirled around us.

Isobel cracked one of the sec checkpoints and hacked into the system and confirmed the passcodes Drake had given us were good. She also took a moment to plug in a subroutine that would allow us to get out even if the archeologist's fail-safe got blocked.

We went through the back gate, near where the heavy machines had torn up the grounds and left deep ruts. Within minutes, we were at the back doors, where Isobel had spoofed the sec cams to loop vid footage of the empty lot so we weren't tracked.

Then we were inside, leaving the wind and cold behind as we stepped into the long hallway leading into the museum. The hallway was one of the recent additions, and held a massive generator against one wall. A Buddha statue also sat

there, along with crates and tarp-covered shipping boxes as well as other, lesser artifacts. Everything smelled of old dust—or the grave. To me, it was a toss-up.

My commlink peeped to life as Drake contacted us. I glanced at the others, and knew they were receiving the same message.

*“I’ll need access to a video feed,”* Drake said.

I nodded to Is0bel, and she brought the archeologist online with us, letting him see what she saw with the cam mounted on one of her shoulders.

*“Good,”* Drake said. Anticipation and tension mixed in equal parts in his tone. *“I’ll be appraising what you see as you go through this floor. Grab the best stuff, and my alarm suppression should keep you afloat. Just don’t get too ballsy.”*

*“We’ll grab extras after we get the books,”* I said. *“We keep our eyes on the prize for now.”* I wanted to keep things as simple as I could.

The hesitation before Drake spoke again told me he wanted to argue, but he knew better. *“If the books haven’t been catalogued yet, they’ll still be in the basement—the tomb. I’ll be in touch.”*

Before we could move, the lights went out. For one cold moment, I thought the sec system had lit us up, but when nothing else moved, I relaxed.

*“Brownout,”* Is0bel said. *“It happens out here sometimes. Ancillary lights shut down, but the sec systems stay online.”*

*“We’re blind in here,”* Duncan growled.

*“Maybe not.”* I headed back to the generator and studied it, tracking the cables that snaked out of it. *“This looks like it hooks up to the building’s electrical grid.”*

Beside me, Is0bel nodded. *“I think so, too. These guys working in here, they wouldn’t want to get caught in the dark down in the ground if a brownout occurred. I say we turn it on, see what happens.”*

Working in the dark wasn’t an option. I flipped the lever, and the generator rumbled to life. Around us, the lights flickered for a moment, then came on in a steady burn that wasn’t quite as strong as earlier.

*“You know,”* Gobbet said, *“I’ve always wanted to do something like this.”*

*“What do you mean?”* Is0bel asked.

*“These artifacts have all been stolen from the earth.”* Gobbet waved at the Buddha statue and other items around us. *“So, now we get to teach a lesson to the man who’s excavating it. That they were never truly his.”*

*“All right, but don’t forget we’re thieves ourselves.”* Duncan grunted sourly. *“We’re stealing things from one man only to give them to another man. And those*

artifacts don't belong to him, either."

Gobbet smiled sweetly. "Oh, he'll get what he deserves, too. Objects like these are too bright to remain in some vault or display case. More thieves will be drawn to them, like moths to a diode. I'm just excited to be a part of the cycle."

I pulled up the museum's online map on my comm and headed deeper into the museum, past rooms filled with display cases holding artifacts. Gobbet and Isobel kept up a running commentary. The rat shaman talked about the history of the things she recognized, while the decker tried to figure out the worth, then began pulling Drake's estimates off the data he sent us. She put together a wish list of things we could take after we secured the two books.

A couple rooms later, I found the room where the dig site was located. The hole was a rough square about five meters to a side. A metal ladder allowed access to the catacombs below, and the stench of old earth filled my nose. Thick electrical cables hung down into the opening as well.

No one else was around.

I took the lead, leaving Duncan to cover our rear with the shotgun. The Ingram hung from a Whipit sling under my right arm as I descended the rungs, ensuring that the SMG would be easy to get to if necessary. It was dark in the hole, but I saw light at the end. I kept going down, and the world around me grew colder.

When I reached the bottom, a doorway filled with light stood to my left. I slid the Ingram into my palm, but left it concealed by the folds of my long coat.

The room on the other side of the door held a desk and computer on the far side, with several chairs and tables spread out between.

"Staging room," Gobbet whispered behind me. "Gives them a place to look over items and catalogue them."

Isobel and Duncan joined us. Duncan monitored the doorway while I took up a position on the door on the right side of the staging room. Taking advantage of the cover there, I peered out into the adjacent cavern, and at what I assumed was the first of several catacombs.

"Got a map of the catacombs." Isobel stood next to me, looking at a sketch on the nearby wall. She used a camera and captured the layout, then scanned it into her comm and emailed it to all of us. Drake hadn't been able to provide that much information about the catacombs.

He was excited about the discovery, and wanted us to keep moving. I let Gobbet deal with him. I didn't want him inside my head unless he could help us.

Moving slow and careful after we ascertained neither of the books Drake wanted was in the staging room, I stepped out into the catacombs and followed the dirt hallways around. I'd heard stories of the Fourth World, and the blood magic those people had believed in. It was hard to keep my adrenaline dialed down as I crept through the shadows, but I let the Ingram precede me, my finger resting near the trigger.

Several holes in the ground provided dangerous pitfalls, and a number of crates—empty and packed—added barriers along the way. I stayed on the outside perimeter in an effort to scope out the terrain and not step into the middle of a group of late-shift archeologists. I listened, but I didn't hear any sounds of anyone else in the catacombs. Still, the hair on the back of my neck twitched, and a chill ran down my spine constantly.

In another large room—or cave, I wasn't sure what to call them—I scanned more crates and loose piles of stone. Evidently the rubble was fresh, the result of the digging that had gone on in the area.

“Wait.” Gobbet put her hand on my arm and stopped me.

I froze, trying to hear what she must have alerted her, but the only sounds that reached my ears were our breathing. The catacombs' acoustics were lousy. “What's wrong?”

“I can sense we're close to something that's anchored in the astral. Give me a minute to see if we can locate it.” She stood still, and a dozen rats sprang from her clothing and raced across the floor to the left.

I held in my irritation, afraid the rodents would trip a sec alarm, but they didn't. A couple minutes later, Gobbet smiled. “I think we've found one of the books.” She took off in the direction the rats had gone, going faster than I wanted.

I tried to stay up with her, but she made a quick turn and stepped into a room ahead of us. I followed as quickly as I could, and fell into position at the corner of a wall just as Gobbet reached a book sitting open on a shelf.

She reached for it. I tried to warn her that it might be booby-trapped, but it was already too late, and I was wondering who would leave a valuable book out in the open.

Gobbet held a hand over the book and closed her eyes. The rats circled her enthusiastically and climbed back into her clothing.

The book was as thick as my fist and as long as my forearm from elbow to fingertips and half as wide. The cover looked like leather, some kind of skin, but just looking at it triggered a pounding vertigo inside my skull. I looked away.

Duncan was looking away too, and Is0bel looked queasy.

“Is it one of the books we’re looking for?” I asked.

Gobbet nodded and picked it up from its shelf. “I think so.” She held the book up in front of Is0bel’s cam, and Drake confirmed it as one of those we’d been sent to find.

Duncan growled a curse. “If I’d had my choice, we’d never come near something like that.”

I silently agreed with him. The problem was, we didn’t have a choice. Not as long as Kindly Cheng called the shots.

“There’s no telling what else may be down here.” Duncan took a fresh grip on his shotgun.

“This place is filled with old spirits.” Gobbet shoved the book into her backpack. The bad vibrations I was getting from it were muted somewhat, but I still didn’t feel safe. “As long as we don’t disturb them, we should be fine.”

“Yeah,” I said, “let’s plan on that.”

I took the lead again. More rooms followed, all empty, but showing signs of habitation where the work crews had settled in to excavate and clean their finds. Then we found what apparently had been a basement area for the original home.

The room was large, the floor covered in plascrete, as were three walls. The fourth wall had been removed to open into the catacombs. The excavation crew must have decided to expand the area as they’d pursued the digging. More tables and chairs filled the area, along with workstations and a computer hookup.

Is0bel glanced at the terminal. “Give me a chance to hack into that. Maybe I can save us some time looking for those books.”

I nodded, and she set to work.

## **CHAPTER 42**

### **CYBER RIDER**

Sitting cross-legged, Is0bel quickly set up her desk, patching cables into her

unit. She looked up at me. “Have you ever been inside the Matrix?”

I shrugged. “Sensies. Stuff like that. I’m not a fan of BTL chips.”

She grinned. “You don’t know what you’re missing. Of course, you gotta know your limitations. Just like with anything else. Cyberware. Magic. Alcohol. And chem stims. The reason I asked is that I’d like another set of eyes backing me up while I’m in there.”

“In the Matrix?” I shook my head. “Get Gobbet to go.”

“I’m not going,” Gobbet said. “My magic doesn’t agree with the Matrix. Even if I could get in with her, which I doubt, I’d make us an even bigger target for ice.”

I looked at Duncan, and he snorted in disgust. “Not me,” he said. “You want me out here, looking out for you.”

I frowned and studied Is0bel. “You can do this by yourself.”

“I could, but together we could do it faster.” She held up a wireless rig like some of those I’d used for sensies. I didn’t reach for it.

“We want to get in and out fast, right?” Is0bel shook the rig at me. “This is how we can save some time.”

Duncan nodded at me. “Do it. I got this.”

Cursing, I sat on the ground with my back to the wall by the terminal. It was one thing to slip into the Matrix for a game or a social event, but something else to break in knowing ice was waiting for you. I didn’t know how deckers had the nerve to do that, but most of the hardcore ones I’d met lived to do exactly that.

I slipped the rig onto my temples and took a deep breath.

Is0bel smiled at me. “I got you. Don’t worry about it. Just keep your—”

“—eyes open.”

I wasn’t even aware of sliding into the Matrix. One minute we’d been in the catacombs, in the next I was standing in a world that looked like an x-ray negative, filled with bright lights and darkness.

“You there?” Is0bel’s voice sounded different, more melodic and confident than I’d ever heard it.

“Yeah.” I tried to move and couldn’t, though I could turn my head and look around. “Why is everything black and white?”

“There are shades of blue, too.” Is0bel took a step forward, and I moved with



her, realizing then that my vision was my own, but all movement was going to come from her. “This is just how the Matrix appears to me. You talk to different deckers, you get a different opinion on what it looks like in here.” She shrugged, and I felt my shoulders lift, too. “It’s just how it is. While you’re here, keep an eye out and let me know if you see any ice.”

“How am I going to recognize that?”

“Trust me—you’ll know it when you see it.” Is0bel moved forward, negotiating a maze of walls that led us deeper into the heart of wherever we were.

I’d listened to deckers talk about their experiences in the Matrix, and all of them had the opinion that cyberspace generally mimicked the real world on some level. People who use magic said the same thing. I’d never under understood any of that. Nemeth, one of the guys I’d run with back in the day who’d handled our decking needs, told me he’d never truly seen the world till he was in the Matrix.

Is0bel froze and leaned into a nearby wall. “That,” she whispered, “is ice.”

Looking forward, I stared at the floating orb with short tentacles.

“Watcher ice,” Is0bel whispered. “It monitors unwanted programming.”

“Like a break-in?”

“Definitely like a break-in. We’ll watch it, see what its pattern is. Usually they’re on a lockstep track and, if you’re patient and observant, you can avoid them.”

“Avoiding is good.” I’d heard about dumpshock, when deckers got tossed out of the Matrix. Even when it wasn’t lethal, it could mess a person up pretty good. I wasn’t quite sure if I could be affected by just hitching a ride, but I didn’t want to end up with my brain scrambled regardless.

Is0bel made dodging the Watcher ice—and there were multiple units—look easy. I knew it wasn’t. People with skills always make things look easy.

Unfortunately, whoever had put the intrusion countermeasures into the system had been good, too. Is0bel stepped out around a wall and got lit up. The Watcher ice froze and locked onto us. Panic raced through me, and I wanted out before something bad happened because I knew I wouldn’t understand any of it.

“Null sheen, *omae*. I can take care of this.” Is0bel gestured, and a blocky, man-shaped thing twice as tall as she was appeared before us. “Extra Shield Protection. ESP program. We’re good to go.”

A second later, she launched a three-dimensional shape that glittered and spun as it sped toward the Watcher ice. “That’s a Killer 2.0,” she said. “Wrote it myself.”

The Watcher ice shivered for a moment, then went inert and disappeared.

“We’re safe?” I asked.

“Not entirely.” She moved on, skating between the barriers and seeking cover from the other Watcher ice zipping around us. “The system has caught a glimpse of us. It doesn’t see us right now, but we’re going to be easier for it to find.”

I wanted to suggest heading back, but I knew from the way Is0bel was moving that she wouldn’t be willing to do that. So I stayed quiet in the back of her mind and only told her when I spotted the Watcher ice circling the area. She was fluid, though, flowing like rainwater through strata, until she reached a spinning circle that seemed to hang in the air in front of us. We’d taken so many twists and turns, I was lost.

“This is one of the interfaces that will take us deeper into the Matrix links for the computer here,” Is0bel said.

“Sure,” I said. If we’d been in the physical world, I’d have been sweating bullets. I’d never been interested in decking. Not once. And after tonight, I never wanted to do it again.

Is0bel stepped through the interface and that level winked out of existence, leaving us facing another maze of barriers and floating Watcher ice. The sec had tightened up here, and I felt my mouth go dry.

“Just keep watch,” Is0bel said. “I’ll handle the rest of this.”

And she did, sliding through the black and white world like she was on a tightrope, gliding effortlessly between the ice. In a matter of minutes, we stood in front of what looked like a safe with a rotating dial.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“This is where the secrets are hidden.” Is0bel held her hands up.

“You’re just going to reach in and take them?”

“No. I’ve got to get through the Blocker ice. No one leaves this stuff unprotected.”

“You can do that?” Massive and thick, the Blocker ice looked like it would be as tough to get through as a titanium vault.

“I can either smash through or hack the locks.”

“Got a favorite?”

Is0bel grinned, and I felt it on my face. “Smashing through is a last resort. No matter what I do, we’ll register on the ice, bring it down on us. I’d rather finesse things if I can.”

“All right.”

She waved her hands again, and the vault changed into a number keypad.

“You see the keypad?”

“Yeah.”

“A number sequence will flash. I need to replicate it, so help me keep up with the order.”

“All right.”

She hit a button and the keypad flashed in rapid sequence. I worked to remember the numbers, but it was difficult. She had them before I did, and the lock released, flashing toward another screen filled with symbols.

“These symbols are like progression,” Is0bel said. “Harder to remember than numbers, but you have to remember the symbols and the places where they show up.”

We both blew one of the sequences, but she got through on the next try. The vault went to pieces and revealed a datachip floating in the air behind it. When Is0bel touched the chip, it disappeared.

“What happened?” I looked around, thinking we’d been caught.

“Nothing. I got the data. Looks like we might be able to sell this, so bonus to us.”

“Anything about where the second book is?”

“No. Looks like we’re on our own for that.” She walked back the way we’d come, dodging the Watcher ice.

“What now?”

“There’s one more vault.”

“The longer we stay in here, the bigger the risk of getting caught.” I didn’t want to get caught in here, get yanked back into my meat body just to find it had been shot full of holes.

“We’re wiz. Trust me. This is cake. And that second vault might have what we’re looking for.”

I shut up and went along with her, because I really didn’t have a choice. Together, we took down the second vault, and this time I remembered one of the sequences she couldn’t recall.

“Nice,” Is0bel said. “I could teach you how to do this.”

“I could teach you how to kill a troll with a toothpick.”

“Not interested.”

“Same here.”

“I suppose we each have our strengths.” She reached in and plucked out a spinning datachip.

“That’s what makes us good together. What’d we get?”

Is0bel was silent for a moment. “Looks like some kind of incantation. Gobbet will know.”

“Will it lead us to the second book?”

“I don’t think so.”

I took a breath. “Now what?”

“We get out.”

“You’re just going to jack out?”

“Can’t. That would cause dumpshock. We gotta go back the same way we got in.”

I thought about the gauntlet of Watcher ice we’d come through.

Is0bel laughed at me. “Null sheen, chummer. I can do this with my eyes closed.” True to her word, she raced back the way we’d come.

## **CHAPTER 43**

### **TOMB CRAWLERS**

I didn’t really know if Is0bel made her way back through the Matrix with her eyes closed. I didn’t. I kept mine wide open, and tried not to offer any distractions. When everything went black, I thought we’d been caught, then I opened my eyes and saw I was back in the catacombs.

Duncan glanced at me. “You okay?”

“I’ve been better,” I admitted.

“You can rest later. Let’s get what we came for and get out of here.”

He offered me a hand up, and I took it. Is0bel looked no worse for the wear, and even kind of jazzed by the experience. She gathered up her deck and talked to Gobbet about the astral file she’d recovered.

I took the lead, flanked by Gobbet’s rat patrol, and we went forward, heading

back to the way we'd entered the catacombs in a roundabout fashion. I stayed wired, but I thought most of it was from being inside the Matrix.

Following the corridors, we reached a large cave that showed signs of recent digging. Piles of stone shared space with workstations, Klieg lights, and artifacts. None of the artifacts were books.

"Here," Gobbet whispered. She pointed to an opening to another cave to our left. "It's in there."

"Okay," I said, and started heading in that direction.

She frowned and shook her head. "Wait. There's something else there, too. Something bad." She gestured, and a few of the rats headed for the new cave, but stopped just as quickly, squeaked nervously, and ran back to disappear in the folds of their mistress's clothing.

"If the rats won't go there, I'm thinking we shouldn't either," Duncan said.

"That's where the book is, though. It's just...not alone."

I lifted the Ingram and readied extra magazines for the weapon. "Slowly, then, and spread out so we don't interfere with each other."

"Copy that," Duncan said as he drifted out to the right, holding his shotgun level and snugged into his shoulder.

I walked forward, and spotted a winged shadow standing in the darkness. For a moment I thought it was a statue, something dreamed up from that ancient world.

Then it stepped out into the light.

I'd heard of gargoyles, but I'd never seen one before. This one was so white and gaunt that it looked like it had been carved out of alabaster. It even moved heavy, and I guessed the wings were decorative and wouldn't provide any lift.

As I neared the entrance, I spotted another book lying on a table. It looked a lot like the one Gobbet had picked up.

"That's the book," she whispered over my shoulder.

"Yeah, well it looks like this one wasn't left unguarded," I said.

"I'm thinking we found the reason for those mysterious deaths Drake told us about," Isobel added.

As I stepped toward the book, the gargoyle flapped its wings and came at me too fast to dodge. I tried to roll away, succeeded, and ended up getting tagged by a fist from a shambling human figure wrapped in rags that looked like it had been dead for centuries.

I blanked out for a moment, and when I opened my eyes again, I was in

another cavern. All alone. I hauled up the Ingram and opened fire. The bullets rocked the thing back on its heels for a moment, knocking dead flesh and dust away in puffy clouds that floated around it.

When it recovered, it came at me again, and the silence it maintained was eerie. I dodged and ducked, staying just ahead of it as I burned through a full magazine and slapped in another. The wrappings sloughed off the mummy and it fell in pieces to the cavern floor.

Just as I looked around to get my bearings, searching for Duncan and my team, my vision blinked out again, and I was back in the big cave. Only this time I stood in a far corner of the cave that held the book, on the other side of the gargoyle and the group of mummies that had staggered into view.

Duncan's shotgun roared again and again, and Gobbet summoned an earth spirit that sprang up from the cave floor in a jumble of broken rocks that took on a humanoid shape.

The earth spirit launched itself at the gargoyle, taking out one of the mummies on the way with a powerful backhand that reduced it into a dust cloud that swirled around it and the gargoyle.

The jackhammer crack of rock meeting rock filled the cavern with thunder as pieces of the gargoyle and the earth spirit surrendered to the power of the blows. Both fought in a frenzy, almost too fast for the eye to follow.

Shadows peeled out of the darkness behind Duncan and the others. I fired at one of the mummies, drawing its attention and causing it charge at me. I kept firing and it blew into dust before it reached me.

"Behind you!" I shouted as the undead reinforcements and a second gargoyle closed in on my team.

Duncan wheeled and unleashed two blasts of double-aught buckshot into the nearest mummy's head. It came apart, dropping into dust.

The earth spirit beat the gargoyle into pebbles that collapsed into a pile at its feet. At the same time, a noxious green gas cloud rose up from the gargoyle's remains and spread across several meters around it.

"That's poison!" Gobbet warned. "Get back!"

If our attacker had used long-range weapons, getting away from them and the poison cloud would have been harder. As it was, we had the reach. Duncan and I focused on the second gargoyle while Gobbet and Isobel fired on the mummies. The earth spirit waded into the middle of them and flailed away with its unforgiving boulder fists.

By the time the last mummy fell to the cavern floor and the green, gassy remnants of the other gargoyle dispersed, the area looked like a battlefield, with bullet holes scarring the rock and earthen walls.

Gobbet retrieved the book, verified it was what she'd claimed, and returned to us.

The commlink crackled in my hearing as Duncan and I walked back the way we'd come.

*"You've got the books,"* Drake said excitedly.

"Yeah," I said. *"We did."* I didn't point out that he took on none of the risk. "How do we get out of here?"

*"Head upstairs so I can wipe the security data. Then you're home free."*

Duncan looked at me, swore, and shook his head.

I didn't believe it either. "You saw those creatures?"

"Yes," Drake replied.

"Did you know they were here?"

"No." He sounded more solemn. *"I planned this run down to the last detail, but those monsters were a happy accident."*

*"Happy accident?"* Duncan exploded. "Those things tried to kill us!"

*"They also killed all the researchers, preventing these books from being catalogued,"* Drake replied. *"Finding them would have been a lot harder had these creatures not come along."*

I knew Duncan was ready to explode. I shook my head at him and pointed ahead. I was going to worry more about getting us all out safe than assigning guilt right now. We weren't in a position to push back much anyway.

*"Now,"* Drake said, *"time's wasting. Security room's at the top of the stairs leading back into the museum floor. Get in there so we can get you out of this place safely."* He clicked off, gone again.

"I really hate that guy," Duncan said.

"Yeah, but we need to stay on point here." I headed back to the room where the stairs were.

As I crossed the threshold, a red fog that reminded me of the green poison gas appeared, making me step back. I leveled my Ingram at the center of the swirling mass.

## CHAPTER 44

### DEALING WITH DEATH

Although the thing that took shape looked human, like the other mummies we'd faced, it was better dressed, and didn't quite look as dead. Unless you looked twice.

As my finger touched the trigger, ready to take up slack, it held up a hand.

"Stop," it rasped in a hollow voice that echoed around the room.

I held up. The other mummies hadn't spoken, and Gobbet touched my shoulder gently.

"Let it speak," she suggested.

I waited.

"It seems you can move freely through this realm," the thing said. "Coming and going. Taking what is not yours."

"Who are you?" Gobbet asked.

"I was once a man, as human as you are now." The dried lips pulled back in a grim rictus. "Now I am a dead man. My soul is bound to this place, and I cannot leave."

"You believe we can get you out of here?" Gobbet asked.

"You can." It nodded and reached into its robes. When it held its hand out, a porcelain ring sat on its withered palm. "Take this talisman and place it among the other artifacts you have taken. Once you have moved this beyond the binding threshold of this excavation, I will be free."

"Let's say we do this," Gobbet said. "What is in it for us?"

The pruny lips twitched in another ghastly smile. "The sure knowledge that you have done what is right."

Gobbet folded her arms and straightened her back. "You're gonna have to do better than that."

I focused on the thing's head, in case it decided it *didn't* have to do better than that.

It didn't blink because it didn't have any eyelids, or eyes, but it did hesitate. "When I am free, I will give you a thing. A token. Crumble it in your hands, and I



will come to your aid...but only once. One time, and no more.”

It stared at Gobbet with those deep-set hollows, and I could have sworn small fires danced at the back of its skull. “I trust him,” she told me. “A couple of mages I know, people I’ve run with, have dealt with intelligent mummies.”

“You’re sure about this?” I asked.

She nodded. “I heard RC and Demergo made a deal like this once, and ended up with a ton of nuyen, too.”

“Will this be sufficient, human?” Its voice had turned cold, almost arctic. I shivered. “Will you accept my offer?”

The rat shaman wrapped her arms more tightly around herself. “Okay, we’ll do it.”

“Thank you.” The thing bowed its head. “I will be forever in your debt.”

“Not really,” Duncan muttered. “Just till we use the ring. If ever.”

The creature flipped the ring to Gobbet, who caught it in both hands. Then the dead thing faded from view, like it had never been there. Except Gobbet held the porcelain ring.

No one said anything else, and I took the lead up the steps.

Getting up to the main level felt good, like crawling up out of a grave, which I guessed was pretty accurate. We moved quickly, all of us in silent agreement that we’d taken all the chances we intended to take. We had the books, whatever bonus materials Is0bel had scored, and there was no reason to get greedy.

We’d gotten lucky, and we knew it.

“We still have to wipe the security logs.” Is0bel turned and pointed to an open door in the same room as the dig opening. “That way.”

Holding the Ingram across my body in a ready position, I led the way into the room. Two computer terminals occupied a back wall around the corner.

*“The one on the right,”* Drake announced over the commlink. *“Flip the switch on the bottom right, then plug in my datachip. The script will doctor the security logs so we can sneak you out.”*

Reaching into her pocket, Is0bel pulled out the datachip she’d filled with the files Drake had sent us. I nodded to her and she slotted it in the computer, then flipped the switch.

*“It’s executing now,”* Drake said. *“And...done. Get out of there.”*

Some of the tension knotting up my chest unraveled, and I breathed a little easier as we headed back the way we'd come.

"You know," Gobbet said quietly, "there are some interesting artifacts along the way. We could do a little shopping as we pass by. I'd like a closer look at some of those things. Wouldn't have to go through this Drake character to sell 'em, either. Kiluminati Alabrad would pay well for just about anything we could bring out of here. And RainbowSmite would snatch up anything we could find that deals with paracritters."

"We stay focused," Duncan said before I could reply. "We've got a chance to get out, we take it and move on."

"Agreed," Isobel said.

"You're no fun," Gobbet replied. "And I know we could unload that skeleton on Pipeline because she knows a ton of collectors. Arrrgggghhhh. This is killing me."

"The Chairman would take those scrolls in a heartbeat," Isobel said, sounding wistful.

We'd barely cleared the open doorway when I saw movement in the far room, shadows slipping through the darkness.

"Get down!" I waved the others to cover.

"Sneak us out, my ass," Duncan snarled. "I *really* hate this guy."

Thinking about how close that exit was, and how the window of time we had to reach it was shrinking if those shadows belonged to Tan Tien sec men and they'd called for backup, I reached into my chest pouch and took out a high-explosive grenade. Drake had wanted the job to look like the work of amateurs. Blowing drek up was about as amateur as things got.

"Cover your ears," I advised. "Things are about to get loud."

I pulled the pin, slipped the spoon, and lobbed the grenade. For a moment I was afraid the HE was going to fall short and disappear into the hole to the dig site. But it bounced once on the other side of the room and exploded in mid-air.

I didn't see the flash. I had my eyes closed. As soon as the light show faded, with the detonation ringing in my ears, I charged to the left, sweeping out around the hole and firing in short bursts at a cluster of muzzle flashes. The shooter jerked and fell back, and the slack way he collapsed told me he probably wasn't getting back up.

I slammed into position on one side of the doorway. Duncan took the other. One of the three sec men had gone down when the grenade detonated. Duncan

and I fired on the third man as he laid his own trail of bullets across the floor, homing in on Duncan's cover.

I wasn't sure which of us put the guy down, but he crashed to the floor.

*"Change of plans,"* Drake said smoothly as the last dead man sprawled out in a bloody, lifeless heap. *"Search those bodies for a key fob. You'll need it to access the side door."*

"What side door?" Duncan demanded, but he was already sprinting into the room toward the nearest body.

I sprinted toward the second man, who'd been ripped all over by the grenade.

*"In the lobby,"* Drake said. *"My program didn't work as well as I'd expected."*

"No drek," Duncan muttered as he patted another sec man down.

*"I've been monitoring the exits on my cameras, and the HKPF have the front locked down."*

They'd worked quickly. I wondered if they were there because of the robbery, or because of us. There was no percentage in worrying about that, though. I concentrated on finding the key fob. Blood covered my gloved hand.

*"Since you can't go out the front now, you've got to exit out the side,"* Drake said. *"That key will get you through the locked side door, which will take you out the east service exit. That way is clear."*

"If it's not," Duncan said, "and I live through this, I'll find you and slot you myself."

Gobbet searched the third dead man and held up a key fob. "Got it," she announced triumphantly.

We backtracked for a moment, following Drake's hurried directions, and stepped into another room. A bullet cut the air by my head. I ducked and yelled a warning to the others.

Gobbet waved and a wall of shimmering energy spun out toward the men entrenched in front of the door we were headed for. Green fog rose up around them, caused them to choke and cough.

Duncan stepped into the room with me. Together, we picked them off, but at least two rounds thudded into my armor, knocking the wind out of me.

Then they were down and we were running. The key fob worked on the first try, and we plunged through the door into the darkness.

## CHAPTER 45

### AND GIVE UP SHOW BUSINESS?

When Kindly Cheng told me two days later there was someone she wanted Duncan and me to meet at the mahjong parlor, I knew the meeting was going to be about biz. I didn't think the Straw Sandal drew a breath she didn't charge someone for.

She made arrangements for the transfer of Drake's two books and our payment. The archeologist was somewhat disappointed that all we'd brought out of the museum that he knew of were the books. Since she was getting a percentage of the haul, Kindly Cheng was irritated as well, but after I explained how things had gone, she stopped complaining. She didn't like being lied to—or *misinformed*—any more than we did.

I told her we'd meet with the prospective client within the hour, then I got the team ready. Duncan and I were dragging ass, and the women didn't look much better. The nightmares were getting worse, and the more time that passed without getting any word about the old man, the worse we felt.

The night before, Duncan had stumbled across another ex-Lone Star guy, who now called himself Oakland Bob and was also running the shadows. He was currently working with an ex-UCAS Army officer named Tango, and promised to let us know if he heard anything about the old man.

We were doing everything we could do to find Raymond, but it never seemed to be enough.

“This is a new friend,” Kindly Cheng said after we arrived at her mahjong parlor. “Mr. Shenyang. He has a job that we are interested in.”

I noted the *we*, and that told me the run would be one we accepted.

The “friend” looked out of place in the gaming establishment. Rotund and balding, the dwarf wore a smile that was only skin deep and was as artificial as

rethreaded DNA. The gold chains around his porcine neck were for show, but they were real. He spoke in a nasal voice that didn't match the barrel chest, and it was fake New York.

“Pleased ta meetcha,” Shenyang said, thrusting out a huge hand. “Cheng was kind enough to arrange this little sit-down between us. You can call me Dr. Shenyang.”

We shook hands all around, and his hand was puffy, soft. Not one of a man who had to do manual labor.

“Pleased to meet you,” Gobbet said. “How can we help you?”

“I’m, ah...lookin’ for a little...*outside help* on a problem I’ve been having.” He frowned, looking both pained and embarrassed.

“We’re here to help,” Gobbet said.

“Ordinarily,” Shenyang said, “I’d handle it myself or have some of my friends see to it, but it’s kinda...*delicate*, you know.”

Gobbet nodded.

Duncan and I swapped looks, and I knew neither of us was impressed with Shenyang or his problem. I figured we weren’t in for an easy time.

“My guys’d be noticed before they made any headway on my problem,” Shenyang said. “So I figure, hey, I hire contractors all the time! Might as well get some contractors of a different stripe.”

“Tell us about your problem,” Gobbet suggested.

“I run a little film studio, Southern Crown Films.” Shenyang looked at us expectantly. “We mostly do trid work, but we record some sims, too. Maybe you’ve seen some of my stuff...*Space Mongols from the Moon? The Flavor of Pomegranates? Ultimate Kill Squad?*”

I hadn’t heard of any of them—not surprising, considering just how many smaller studios there were around the world. Duncan shook his head, too, and Isobel looked equally at a loss.

Gobbet, however, smiled. “Sounds familiar.”

“Oh, a fan!” Shenyang clapped his hands. “Good. It’s always nice ta meet a fellow film enthusiast.” He sipped the drink one of the servers set down in front of him. “Anyway, there’s this other guy in the industry, and we’ve been buttin’ heads since day one. Name’s Neville Ma, and he runs Yellow Springs Studio.”

I drew another blank on that one.

“No matter what I do,” Shenyang went on, “I can’t shut Ma outta the biz. He always manages to get one over on me, steal my stars, muscle me out of new

distribution. It's a tough racket, and if you wanna stay on top, ya gotta use every advantage ya can get."

Gobbet nodded, and he remained focused on her.

"Recently," Shenyang said, "Ma's been runnin' me into the ground with this show called *Promises in Moonlight*. The star's a girl named Penelope Wong. New talent, but the viewers have been goin' nuts over her. She's the linchpin, the one who holds the whole show together."

Bored, Duncan tried to cut to the chase. "And so you want something to happen to Ms. Wong?"

Shenyang shot him an irritated look. "Hang on, I'm gettin' there. So about six months ago, Neville was out in Guangzhou for some hoity-toity party. He's on the road, probably drunk, a semi comes outta nowhere, and *POW!* Wrecks his fancy new Eurocar Westwind."

From Duncan's sour look, he had the same suspicions about the "accident" that I did. I figured we weren't the first group of shadowrunners Shenyang had hired.

"Bad luck for Neville," the studio head mused, "good luck for me. I figure, hey, that's the end of him for the year, and I start plannin' some new stuff he can't compete with from inside a hospital." He looked around the table. "You follow me so far?"

"Lemme guess," Duncan said. "He found a way to compete with you from the hospital."

"No, worse!" Shenyang slapped the table hard enough to get Kindly Cheng's attention. "The bastard is *out* of the hospital. He's back in the game, bringin' out season two of *Promises in Moonlight*." He leaned toward us and spoke softer, but with a desperate edge. "I need that show off the air, one way or another. And that, my friends, is where you come in."

"Tough break," Duncan said. "Maybe the wreck wasn't that bad."

"Yeah, right." Shenyang brought out a micro-trid, placed it on the table, and showed us an image of a fire-red Westwind scattered across a four-lane highway. "His car was totaled. No way he walked out of that wreck unscathed."

Seeing what I was seeing, I had to agree. Now I was curious.

Shenyang put the trid away. "I tell ya, kid," he said to Gobbet, "Neville shoulda been in that hospital for at least three months, and in physical therapy a lot longer. Only took him a week to get out. Couldn't freakin' believe it. That kinda medical care costs top nuyen. He's got a lot of money, but not *that* much."

I waited. Duncan seemed as interested as I was.

“Recovery time like that means that one of two things is goin’ on.” Shenyang counted them on his pudgy fingers. “Neville could’ve found himself a silent partner...someone willin’ to pay top nuyen for cutting-edge care. I don’t think it’s likely, but it coulda happened.” He took a breath. “If it ain’t that, the smart money says he’s been skimmin’ off the top of Yellow Springs’ earnings and not reporting it to the other shareholders.”

“And you want us to look into that, I take it,” Gobbet said.

Shenyang nodded. “I need you to go get me something to blackmail Neville with. Find out how he could afford to get outta the hospital so fast. He works out of his penthouse most days, so search his computer, closet, sock drawer, whatever. There’s gotta be something incriminating in there.”

“Where is this penthouse?” Gobbet asked.

“Neville lives in The Repulse Bay—it’s this real swanky joint on the south end of Hong Kong Island, by the bay with the same name. I haven’t been able to get anybody in to poke around his apartment because the security’s too tight.”

That didn’t sound good.

“Lucky for you, though,” Shenyang said, “Neville’s throwing a party on the mezzanine level with all the shops and a restaurant and balcony and such. He’s celebrating the second season launch of his show, and everybody’s gonna be there. Gonna mean a real snarl for the building security.”

That would give us an edge, a thin one, but something we could work with.

“You might also wanna hit up the party if you can bluff your way in—everyone close to Neville will be there, and most of ’em will be three sheets to the wind. Some discreet questioning might get me the dirt I need.”

“Sounds good.” Gobbet smiled.

“Just remember,” Shenyang said, “if you go to the party, don’t use your real name. Go with ‘Argyle.’ Should be safe enough. There’s nobody in the biz out here with that name, so nobody’ll ask any questions about how your work’s going.”

“Hit the apartment, hit the party, dig up blackmail information on Neville Ma.” Gobbet shrugged. “Sounds easy enough.”

“Oh yeah.” Shenyang nodded and grinned. “Cheng talked you up when I approached her with the job. Given what she told me, this job should be cake.” He paused. “Now, the blackmail material is what I need more than anything. But if you can get Penelope Wong outta her contract too, I’ll pay you extra, got it? I

want that star power on *my* side.” He finished his drink. “One last thing...I don’t want you starting a scene while you’re there. You interrupt his party, make a mess, or trash his apartment, and I’m not paying you anything. We clear on that?”

“Why the concern?” Gobbet leaned back and crossed her arms, closing herself off from him. “If you’re gonna hamstring us before we even go on the run, we wanna know why.”

“Because it’s gauche,” Shenyang replied, “and I can’t have Ma knowing I’m after him. In my business, everybody’s got dirty tricks, but if you make it public you’re using ’em?” He drew a forefinger across his throat. “That’s it. My career’s as dead as the People’s Republic of China. Nobody’ll work for or with me ever again. So don’t embarrass me, hey?”

“No mess, no guns,” Gobbet said. “Got it.”

Shenyang shook his head. “Oh, you can pack heat. Just don’t kill anybody at the party or in Ma’s apartment. You gotta fight, you find somewhere else to do it. If security gets on you, do what ya gotta do. I’d rather explain a few bullet holes than a pile of dead shadowrunners. Got me?”

“Yeah, got it,” Duncan growled.

“Good. If you pull this off, I’ll recommend you to all my friends, too.”

Shenyang waved his hands, obviously impressed with his own generosity.

“You don’t seem like you deal with shadowrunners much,” Gobbet stated.

“Shadowrunners, moonlight prancers.” Shenyang shrugged. “Who gives a crap? I got money and a job, and I don’t care who does it as long as the price is right. What’s more, I got a lotta friends around town, and a lot of ’em run in your circles, too. In fact, I was gonna hire a couple guys I’ve used before. A pair of street muscle runners named Bennett Flynn and Isane Konnair, but they’re busy. The good ones stay busy.” He looked around the table at us. “So what? We got a deal? You gonna do it?”

“We have a deal,” I told him, and I couldn’t help but hope this mess was going to get us closer to finding out what happened to the old man.

“Good!” Shenyang grinned, and the effort was the most genuine I’d seen. “That’s what I like to hear! When you’re done, drop Cheng a line. I’ll meet you back here and hand over the money.”

Across the room, I knew Kindly Cheng heard about the money. She looked at me, smiled, and took another drag on her thin black cigar.



## CHAPTER 46

### APARTMENT 2

The Repulse Bay Hotel took its name from Repulse Bay on Hong Kong Island. We took the MTR and a ferry over to the hotel, and got out from under rolling storm clouds that fought the toxic fog for air space. The place looked expensive, but it was perched on the edge of an impending natural disaster, judging from all the dark clouds swelled with toxic rain scudding overhead.

We followed several well-dressed people into the hotel just as the clouds and fog momentarily cleared and let the blood red sun sinking into the west beat down on us. The elevator operator took us all to the second floor mezzanine, and the sounds of music and partiers slammed into us when the doors parted.

Nobody paid any attention to us. We'd bought suits that fit in with the crowd and only carried light armament. After all, this was only supposed to be a fact-finding mission, and Shenyang didn't want us spilling blood.

The black and white marble flagstones covering the mezzanine floor gleamed under our feet. Potted plants and elegant seating lined the hallway in front of the plush dining room.

Duncan pulled at the collar of his tuxedo and grimaced. "I'm kinda out of my element here. I'm not much of a party person." He looked around. "How do you wanna handle this? Check the apartment first?"

Gobbet looked at the dining room wistfully. "My vote is party first. Can we go to the party?"

"The party is too high-visibility for my liking," I told her. "Let's try the apartment."

She sighed in disappointment. "All right. If you insist. Go on, lead away."

"Before you start leading," Isobel suggested, "maybe we could check out the computer terminal." She jerked a thumb over her shoulder at the small office behind us. "I checked the building's schematics before we came. There's a jackpoint in that room that can get us info on the rooms. I'm betting Neville Ma didn't leave his room open with a big *Welcome* sign hanging on it."

I told her to see what she could do while the rest of us remained on watch. She disappeared into the office.

Gobbet walked toward a sullen-looking troll standing outside the dining room. “Hey,” she greeted him.

“You’re out of luck if you came here hungry,” he told her in a booming voice. “No restaurant service tonight. The kitchen staff’s too busy with the party to serve anyone.”

“That’s too bad,” Gobbet said. “It smells wonderful. What’s so special about this party?”

“Guests only,” the troll said. “The guy throwing the party seems connected to the trid industry. There are tons of actors in there—some of them from *Promises in Moonlight*.” He looked at Gobbet. “You know the show, right?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“You *need* to see it.” The troll’s voice tightened with excitement. “It’s the best show on trideo ever!”

Gobbet leaned back a little as he loomed over her, invading her personal space. I reached for my pistol and Duncan did as well.

“I’ll, uh, get right on that,” Gobbet said. “Good luck with the kitchen, buddy.”

The troll wandered away with his hands in his pockets.

Is0bel reappeared at my side and spoke in a quiet voice. “Neville’s in Apartment 2 in the penthouse. The door code is 1635.”

“Any problems?” I asked.

She frowned at me. “Really?”

I shook my head. “Forget I asked.”

“I also found out there were six unclaimed invitations to the party. I took the liberty of downloading them.” Is0bel smiled mischievously. “In case we need them. Or if we get hungry after we’ve cased Neville Ma’s suite.”

“I’m hungry now,” Gobbet said, smiling.

“No,” I said, and headed for the elevator.

Gobbet trailed after me, saying things beneath her breath that I was certain weren’t complimentary.

The elevator let us out in a narrow hallway that ran the length of the top

floor. No one else was there. They were probably all at the party.

I walked down to Apartment 2 and entered the code on the keypad, sliding my pistol into my hand as the door opened. Duncan had his pistol ready as well.

We walked into the empty room. A display case to the right held some knick-knacks and two potted trees stood on either side of a door leading to another room. A second room was to our right by the display.

The door closed behind us, and we waited a few seconds to see if anyone would respond to our entrance. When no one did, I assumed no one was in the suite and we turned on the lights.

“Spread out and toss this place,” I said as I headed to the room on the right.

“It’s cold in here.” Gobbet rubbed her arms as she walked to the back of the room. “Or is it just me?”

“It’s not just you,” Is0bel replied. “It’s freezing in here.”

“I can see my breath,” Duncan added.

I ignored them, but it was cold in the suite. I didn’t see how anyone could stay there and be comfortable. Inside the room, I found racks of tailored suits, boxes of fashionable shoes, and men’s accessories that looked brand-new off the shelf. Ma spent a fortune on designer wear.

“Got a locked room here,” Duncan called. I joined him and the others in the neatly appointed dining room and living room in the back. To my left, a conversation area occupied half the room in front of a fireplace. A large dining table and chairs occupied the right side. Behind the table, a wet bar stood against the wall.

“Take a look around,” I said. “Let’s see what we turn up. Is0bel, see if you can do anything with that door.”

I walked over to the wet bar and went through the liquor bottles, looking for hiding areas or bottles that might not contain alcohol. One of the bottles held a crimson liquid that caught my eye. I drew it out and it felt solid, heavy.

I uncapped the bottle and sniffed it. The scent was a mix of copper and salt, and it smelled somehow familiar. Curious, I tipped the bottle up and took a sip, and almost gagged because it was far saltier than I’d expected.

“You okay?” Duncan asked.

“Yeah.” I put the cap back on the bottle and put it away. “That stuff is really bad.”

He snorted. “Teach you to go around drinking other people’s liquor stash.” I wiped my mouth and looked at Is0bel as she turned to me.

“I can’t crack the door,” Is0bel said. “It’s heavy. Wall’s been reinforced to fit it, and the work is fairly recent. Those maglocks are all top-of-the-line commercial-grade and are equipped with an RFID reader. We’d have better luck breaking through the walls, and I can’t guarantee they haven’t been sheeted as well.”

“It’d be too noisy anyway.” I glared at the door, willing it to open. It didn’t oblige me.

“We need to get through there.” Gobbet came over to stand beside me. “You know, chances are good that someone down at that party, maybe someone other than Ma, has a key to that door.”

I scowled at her.

“I’m just saying it wouldn’t hurt to go take a look.” She nodded toward the door. “If you put up a door like that, you’re protecting something.”

She was right, and we all knew it.

So we headed back down to the party. I wanted a drink anyway, something to clear out the foul taste in my mouth.

## **CHAPTER 47**

### **PARTY CRASHERS**

A small but efficient looking sec detail stood in front of the doors to the balcony overlooking Repulse Bay. Lights from buildings across the harbor made a courageous effort to pierce the scudding clouds and rolling smog.

“Private party, pal,” one of the sec men told me as I approached.

I handed him four of the invitations Is0bel had downloaded from the computer. I pointed to my companions and smiled. “Here you go.”

He examined the invitations and I read the disappointment in his flat gaze when he realized they were legit. He waved to his companions, and they all stepped aside.

“Enjoy the party, sir.”

We walked out onto the balcony and into the open air. Static charges from units mounted on the wall and on the low railing that surrounded the area on three sides kept the smog particulates pushed back. The air outside was more acrid than inside, but it was tolerable.

Several tables were scattered around the balcony, and a U-shaped wet bar occupied the center. Dozens of people stood around, chatting and trying to impress each other with what they'd done and who they knew.

I didn't feel comfortable out there among them, but I put on my best face and acted like I belonged. Gobbet easily mixed in with the throng, while Duncan and Isobel hung back.

Recognizing Penelope Wong from Shenyang's file on Neville Ma, I slowly drifted over to her. Her brown hair held red accents that gleamed in the light. Her little black dress showed off every curve of her lithe body. She was beautiful and she knew it, and I was instantly aware of why Shenyang wanted to steal her away from his competitor.

I walked over and smiled. "You're on *Promises in Moonlight*. Love the show."

She smiled back at me, but it was just a reflex, something she'd trained to do. Like I'd trained to use a heel-palm strike on an opponent's nose. Like the strike, the smile was designed to be instantly lethal.

"Good evening," she said. "Penelope Wong." She took in the cut of my tuxedo. "But, please, call me Penny."

"Pleased to meet you, Penny. Name's Argyle."

She lifted her drink and took a small sip. "What brings you to our little soiree, Mr. Argyle? I don't believe I've seen you around the studio before."

I'd scored a flute of champagne from a passing server and took a drink, grateful when it washed away most of the salty taste from the bottle in Neville's room.

"Just business," I said. "I'm surprised Mr. Ma's up and about so soon after his accident. I have friends who are worried."

"Your friends have nothing to worry about." She looked at me appraisingly. "I must admit, I nearly died of fright when I heard what happened." She glanced across the room where the studio exec was holding court with a group of people. "But to look at Neville now, you'd never guess he'd been hurt." She smiled. "It's miraculous, isn't it?"

"I'll keep his secret if you will," I said. "It's a shame the rumor mill's caught

wind, though.”

She blinked at me. “There are rumors? I haven’t heard any rumors.”

I decided to take the kid gloves off. I didn’t know how much time we could pull off crashing the party. “Word around the Matrix is he’s been skimming off the top to pay for his treatment.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Penelope’s face reddened with anger. “The studio’s doing better than ever. We’re even expanding. No money lost there.”

I shrugged. “Well, I wouldn’t put any stock in Matrix rumors anyway. Especially the ones about new investment partners.” That had been another little tidbit Shenyang had given us to work with.

“Someone...new?” Penelope looked at her boss and wrinkled her brow. “No, I don’t think so. But...Neville *did* make some new friends while he was in Guangzhou.”

That was where the accident had taken place. “What friends?”

The frown deepened. “There was a woman...can’t remember her name... who now visits Neville regularly. I hear she’s quite the fashionista.”

“This a business or personal relationship?”

Penelope hesitated for a moment, and I knew she was wondering how much to tell me. Of course, she was also wondering how much I knew, and she couldn’t just leave it alone.

She shrugged. “They seem to get on well. I’m a little sad he’s never introduced us, though.”

“Never?”

“She’s supposed to make an appearance tonight. I’m very much looking forward to meeting her.” Penelope looked past me then, and her eyes narrowed. Then she smiled, but it wasn’t directed at me. “Oh, please excuse me. That’s Mr. Yao, and I promised him I’d say hello tonight.” She touched my arm briefly. “Enjoy the party!”

“One last thing before you go, Penny.”

She stopped, but I could tell she wanted to leave as soon as she could. She just wasn’t sure how much influence I had on her career.

“Do you have a key fob for Neville’s security door?” I asked. From what I knew of Neville Ma, I suspected he had really *close* relationships with some of his stars.

“I do.” She looked puzzled again. “But...how do you know about that?”

“Neville asked me to grab something for him from upstairs, but his door’s

locked,” I explained. She hadn’t been tracking my conversation with her too well, so she had no idea how well I knew her boss. “I’d ask him for *his* fob, but he’s busy chatting with some guests right now.”

Penelope opened the small clutch she carried. “Oh! In that case, please, take mine. Just bring it back when you’re done, okay?”

I took the key. “Thank you, Penny. You don’t know how helpful you’ve been.” I tipped an invisible hat to her as she waved and made her way in the direction of Mr. Yao.

Hoping she didn’t get a chance to compare notes with Neville anytime soon, I waved to the others and headed for the door. With a canapé halfway to her mouth, Gobbet was the only one who looked disappointed.

## CHAPTER 48

### KU FENG

“I’m just saying,” Gobbet said, arms folded over her chest and her attitude showing for all to see while we rode up in the elevator, “a few more minutes wouldn’t have hurt anything. A chance to go to a party like that doesn’t come along every day.” Her nose wrinkled in displeasure and several rats bulged beneath her suit as they squirmed around.

“If it did, with all the chances we had of getting slotted while hanging around down there,” Duncan said, “you wouldn’t last a week.”

“At least I’d die on a full stomach.”

The elevator dinged as we arrived at the penthouse. I stepped out onto the floor and headed down to Neville Ma’s suite. The hallway remained empty of guests. I wondered if he’d rented the entire floor.

Inside the rooms again, I walked back to the reinforced door and used the key fob. The light switched from red to green just before locks *thunked*. The door slid open, and air even colder than that in the outer room gusted over me, raising goose bumps and a strong feeling of trepidation.

“Shit!” Isobel exclaimed. “What’s he doing? Hoarding ice in here?”

“Only one way to find out,” Duncan replied.

Holding the pistol level before me, I advanced into the room, moving slow so Duncan could stay close on my right flank. Recessed lighting pushed back the darkness, exposing the bed on a pedestal ahead of us. A bathroom with a sunken bath was off to our right. A small office was also on that side.

A large-screen trideo was mounted on the wall on the other side of the bed. To one side, a high-end computer sat on a small, expensive desk. The screen displayed wallpaper featuring Penelope Wong from *Promises in Moonlight*.

I nodded Isobel forward and she sat down in front of the keyboard. Her fingers flew across the keys. “I can log in as a guest.”

“Find out what you can.” I paced the room, keeping an eye on the door we’d come through.

“He’s got a lot of spam,” Isobel commented. “He needs a better filter.”

“Maybe when we get finished here, you can offer to upgrade his computer,” Duncan said.

She ignored him. “Neville exchanges a lot of email with a woman named Ku Feng. Got a lot of thinly veiled innuendo here.”

“The status of this slot’s love life isn’t any more interesting than his spam,” Duncan said.

“That’s ’cause you’re not reading it. Neville’s been dropping a drekload of nuyen on her to show his affections. I got receipts here for gifts, rent, and some truly awful poetry.” Isobel made brief gagging noises.

“Any idea who she is?” I asked. “Wong mentioned that he’d made some new friends from Guangzhou.”

Isobel nodded. “Rent checks are to a property there, and Ku Feng’s name is on the rental agreement.”

“What about the hospital bills?” Duncan asked. “One thing I learned at Lone Star was always follow the finances. Who’d he pay at the hospital?”

“A few docs, but—” Isobel flipped through screen after screen of financial records, “—he didn’t pay more than chump change. If the accident was as bad as Shenyang thought, there should be a lot more cred involved.”

Duncan looked at me. “Something’s not adding up here. Doesn’t make sense. That guy looked like he hadn’t even been in an accident when I saw him.”

I looked at the office door on the other side of the room. I had found a keypad, and I didn’t even see any maglocks, so it was locked from inside. “Isobel,



got anything on this door?”

“I can unlock it with the computer.”

That was different. I stepped back and raised the Ingram. “Open it up. Let’s see what’s behind it.”

She tapped keys. A second later, mechanisms *clicked* and *snicked* inside the door. Then it slid to one side.

Another blast of cold air gusted over us from inside. The hair on the back of my neck stood at attention.

Gobbet shoved a hand out in front of her. “Where is that coming fro—”

A pale woman with a regal air stepped out of the darkness gathered in the rear of the room. Black hair framed a beautiful face with cherry lips and almond eyes that held an orange-red gleam.

Behind her, a group of men and women dressed in armored clothing spread out in a loose half-circle. None of them spoke, and their unblinking stares were unnatural.

“Ahh,” the woman said. “The little dog who’s been sniffing around Neville Ma’s affairs.” The arrogance in her words was as cold as the temperature, and as cutting as a shark’s tooth.

I centered the Ingram on her, but I kept my finger from the trigger. “No one fires until I say so,” I told the others. One of Shenyang’s stipulations had been that no blood be spilled in Neville Ma’s rooms. I wouldn’t do that unless I had to.

The woman smiled and held a hand up to her people.

“Ku Feng, I presume?” I said.

She nodded. “Just so. My servants have been watching you since you arrived.”

I thought I recognized one or two of her people, but none of them had shown too much interest in us as we’d mixed with the party.

Gobbet stepped close to me. “She’s not human. She’s undead. I can almost assense her.”

“I suspect that you are an evil man,” Ku Feng accused, “and that you are here to do harm to Neville. And so I came to stop you.”

“*Vampire*,” Gobbet whispered into my ear.

That caught my attention. I’d never dealt with vampires, but I’d heard stories about them. They weren’t metahumans to mess around with, and now we’d caught the attention of this one.

“I couldn’t be less interested in hurting Neville, lady,” I assured her. “I’m

just here to finish a job.” Learning that Neville Ma was in league with a vampire would be something Shenyang could use. Of that, I was certain.

Getting out of here with that news, however, was going to be difficult.

“If that’s true,” Ku Feng said coolly, “then it is a shame. You have seen my face and you know what I am. Naturally, I cannot allow you to leave.” She smiled, showing sharp, white fangs. “And you can’t afford to fight me here for fear of police involvement.”

There was more on the table than that with Shenyang’s rules. I didn’t respond.

“Perhaps we can settle this in a more civilized manner.” Ku Feng shot me a withering glare. “A face-off in a neutral location. Will you accept my challenge?”

From the corner of my eye, I saw the sun sinking and the sprawl turning dark, lighting up with neon. I didn’t know if vampires were more powerful at night or not. It stood to reason, though.

“If you choose not to face me,” she stated in a cold voice, “I have your scents. I will track you down and kill you.”

“Where?” I asked.

“The rooftop,” Ku Feng stated. “You go first, and we will follow. If you try to return to the elevator or take the stairs, we will kill you there.”

“We’ll see you there, Ku *Fang*,” Duncan said.

## CHAPTER 49

### VAMPIRE DUST-UP

A few minutes later, we stood in the rooftop garden waiting for Ku Feng and her group to put in an appearance. Part of me hoped they’d run, and part of me thought maybe we could have run.

Gobbet spoke to herself and gestured. Shimmering waves coiled around her. Isobel checked the loads in her pistol.

“We’re gonna make a lot of noise,” Duncan said.

The decker looked up at him. “A *vampire*’s about to try to slot us, Gun Show. I’m more concerned about getting exsanguinated than getting busted for a noise violation.” She was trying to be sarcastic and humorous, but the effort sounded false and brittle.

“The HKPF’s gonna be on us like a roaches on a soy bacon strip,” Duncan said.

“By the time they get here,” Isobel insisted, “one way or another, this fight’s gonna be over. If you wanna worry about the cops, go ahead. Me? I’m planning on staying alive.”

Duncan cursed.

I looked at him. “You ever fought a vampire?”

“Couple times.”

“Win any of those fights?”

Duncan grimaced. “One. That was a bad night. A lot of guys got slotted.” He worked his jaw. “They can be killed.”

“That’s what I wanted to know,” I said.

“But it’s a bitch to do it.”

“We could run.”

Duncan laughed without humor and shook his head. “I’d rather take something head-on than to have to look over my shoulder for the rest of my life.”

“Me too.” I slapped the magazine back into the pistol and readied a couple of micro-grenades I’d hidden on ankle straps. “I just wanted to make sure we were in sync.”

“We’re there, brother.” Duncan offered me a big fist, and I bumped knuckles with him.

Only a few minutes later, Ku Feng showed up with her minions. Her eyes widened a little, and I wondered then if she’d expected us to run. Maybe she wasn’t as confident as she’d acted.

But she also didn’t look like she was going to back down.

She stopped a short distance away. The wind ruffled the flowers and the grass, and shook the tree branches over our heads. The landscapers who cared for the garden were going to find a battlefield where their bright spot of serenity had been.

I held the pistol with my left hand, a micro-grenade in my right.

“Are you prepared to become my servant, human?” Her cold voice sliced through the chill air. “You must not resist, or I’ll be forced to kill you. Should it come to that, I’ll endeavor to make it swift and painless...but no promises.”

“Not gonna happen,” Duncan growled.

Ku Feng smiled. “This will be entertaining. Kill them!”

At our side, Gobbet yelled out and raised her hands. The wind halted momentarily around her and we felt the pause. Then a translucent figure materialized, made up of the air itself. As it moved, tornadic wind screamed around it.

I flicked the grenade’s pin, held it for a short count, and lobbed it into the center of her underlings. Ku Feng saw the grenade hit the ground and shouted a curse as she moved away with superhuman speed. I tracked her and unleashed a full magazine that chopped into her, toppled two small trees she ran behind, and spilled flower petals like multi-colored confetti.

The grenade blew up and tossed two of her henchmen back, reducing them to blood tatters despite their armor. Still, they tried to get back to their feet.

I swapped out magazines as Isobel flipped a micro-grenade from her clutch into another group of Ku Feng’s followers. It was disguised as a compact. The explosive detonated and knocked three of them down, but they immediately tried to get back up as well. Even though the blasts were still ringing in my ears and I was partially deafened, I realized that none of the people were crying out in pain—or speaking at all. They were in thrall.

I lined up headshots and put three-round bursts into four of them while Duncan took out the others. Then we raced after Gobbet and the air spirit, who were hot after Ku Feng.

The vampiress ducked around a tree, vanished for just a moment, then took shape as a mist that mixed with the air spirit. Thunder and howling winds raged over the rooftop. Sirens sounded far off, but I knew they’d close on us quickly.

The wind spirit roared in pain and shredded to pieces as it left the physical plane and returned to the astral. In the next instant, Ku Feng resumed her corporal body and leaped at Gobbet, nails glistening like razors.

Gobbet threw a hand out. A shimmering barrier took shape between her and Ku Feng. Snarling, eyes wide, Ku Feng dodged and spun around the barrier with blinding speed.

“Incoming!” Isobel shouted as she threw a grenade disguised as lip gloss.

Gobbet threw herself down and covered her head with her arms. The grenade detonated in the center of Ku Feng's chest and blew her off her feet, slinging her several meters back.

Blood covered her face and matted her hair. Her armor cracked and fell away.

"Wait, wait!" Ku Feng held up her shaking, bloody arms. "I surrender! Don't kill me!"

I aimed at a spot between her eyes.

"What's wrong?" Duncan challenged. "Not feeling so powerful now?"

Slowly, she got to her knees and held her open hands before her. "The whole 'mistress of the night' thing is just an act. I'm just an accountant that got infected."

"Infected is infected," Duncan said.

"Wait," I told him. "Nobody shoot."

"We can't stay here," Gobbet said. "Not counting HKPF, the hotel's security people are going to be on us in seconds."

"I...I don't really know how to fight," Ku Feng admitted. "I was faking it. I just wanted to scare you into backing down."

"You're an...accountant?" Gobbet looked stunned.

Ku Feng nodded. "I was on a business trip to Shanwei last year. I went to a rave, got drunk, and passed out. When I woke up, I was in an alley and someone had done...*this*...to me."

"I don't need to hear your life story," Duncan said. "Just tell me what you hoped to get out of all this."

"I don't know." In spite of all the death she'd caused, Ku Feng looked very much like a scared young woman in that moment. "Money? Power? Both? Like I said, I don't know the first thing about how to be a real vampire. I figured that if I was smart about it, I could maybe build my own little thing here...like a business. Become the Vampire Queen of Repulse Bay."

"Wait," Gobbet said. "So this whole thing has been just been you...what? Improvising?"

"Pretty much, yeah. Look, I don't really know what the hell I'm doing. I'm just...doing my best." Ku Feng looked at her bloody hands. Her voice turned small. "If I'm ever found out, I'll be killed for bounty money. It was either this or get gunned down by a vampire hunter."

"Shouldn't your family or co-workers be looking for you?" Gobbet asked.

“Not if I can help it.” Ku Feng shivered. “You think I want them to see me like this? No thanks. As far as my friends and family are concerned, I’m missing. Have been for months. They probably think I’m dead by now.” Her breath caught for a moment before she continued. “I think that’s for the best. I mean, how could I explain what I’ve become? Can you imagine how ashamed my family would be to find that I’d become this...*monster*?” She shook her head. “No, it’s better that they think I’m dead.”

“Speaking of being dead,” Isobel spoke up, “if we don’t clear out of here, we’re all gonna be dead.”

I’d been tracking the sirens too. “Security will be on high alert in the lobby. We need another way down.”

Ku Feng pointed back to the building. “There’s a private elevator there. I’ve got access.”

Duncan put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her in that direction. “Sounds good to me. Lead the way.”

## CHAPTER 50

### THE DEAL

We ducked around the cordon HKPF set up around the Repulse Bay Hotel and took a cab to a small diner the driver recommended. None of us wanted to trust any of Ku Feng’s suggestions.

The place we found was at the back of a shadowed alley. Low lights and a thin trickle of clientele told me it was a good place to talk, and that not all the profits were coming from what came off the flat grill. It was a place where law enforcement would hesitate to come.

We fit right in at a back table.

“You haven’t killed me,” Ku Feng said after we’d all ordered soykaf. Well, all but the vampire, of course.

“Not yet,” Duncan told her. He’d handcuffed her and covered her with a

jacket he'd stolen from the hotel's coat room on our way out.

"Can we call a truce or something?" She looked at me. "I scratch your back, you...let me live?" She smiled. "What do you say?"

"I think we can work something out," I said. "Conditionally."

"Yes, yes, anything." The hopeful look in her eyes made her look young and innocent, but I didn't fall for it. We'd left a lot of dead people behind that she'd sacrificed in her effort to kill us. "Just tell me what you need."

"I want some answers. How are you and Neville Ma connected?"

She hesitated and looked around the table. No one offered her any mercy.

She shrugged. "I don't like to drink blood from unwilling people," she said, "so I go to hospitals at night looking for people who won't mind if I take a sip. People in comas, patients with terminal illnesses, that kind of thing. It makes me feel better about what I have to do."

"Neville Ma," Duncan said.

She nodded. "I happened to be in the same hospital that he was, trolling for a meal. I wandered into his room, and I recognized him. I'd seen him on the news... seen photos of the accident." She rocked in her seat, still bothered by the memory. "He was in really bad shape. A lot of broken bones and internal injuries. But somehow, he was still conscious."

"You offered to help," Gobbet said.

"I knew that if I gave uninfected people my blood, they'd be able to heal like I did, just not as fast. I'd figured that out early, and by mistake. But it can come in handy from time to time." She shifted in the seat. "So when I saw that Neville was conscious, I decided to make my grand appearance. I materialized in the room and told him that I'd make him a trade. I'd fix him up, good as new, but he'd owe me some favors for it. I wasn't specific as to how many favors, or what kind."

"And he agreed?" Gobbet asked.

"Actually, he leaped at the chance to become my pawn. I guess that when you're all broken up like that, you'll do just about anything to get better. The deal was done. And...we got along. I think he's charming, he thinks I'm funny, and he doesn't care that I'm a vampire. He told me that he gives me nice things because he likes me, and not because he owes me his life." Ku Feng almost looked embarrassed. "It's all very sweet."

"Is there a cure for your condition?" Gobbet peered into the vampire's eyes.

"I wish...but no." Ku Feng shook her head. "The only cure is being tossed in a bonfire or having your head cut off. And almost every nation in the world

will pay a bounty for a dead vampire.” She paused. “It’s not like I had much of a choice, you know? Be a vampire or get killed for some quick cash. It’s a pretty raw deal for me either way.”

“What’s it like?” Isobel asked.

Ku Feng looked at the decker and shrugged. “About the same as being a person. The Human-Metahuman Vampiric Virus is like any other disease, except instead of a coffin, I can’t go out during the day. It’s not all bad, though. I can turn into mist, and I’m a lot stronger than I used to be. I still have to wash my hair and pay for parking, though.”

She looked around the diner, then back at us. “You know what I miss the most? Steamed buns. I can’t eat or drink anything except blood, and I loved street food before I got infected. Sometimes I’ll walk by food carts just to smell the things they’re frying up. But if I buy something, ten minutes later it’s coming back up in a mess.”

Some of the harshness in Duncan’s face left. He knew about going hungry for things you couldn’t have.

“Now...what can I do for you?” she asked.

“You’re going to get Neville to fire Penelope Wong,” I said.

“Wait.” A look of surprise twisted her face. “All of this is about that stupid soap opera?”

“That’s about the size of it, yeah.” Looking back on it, things sounded kind of lousy to me, too.

“I can’t believe it.” Ku Feng leaned back in the booth. “Of all the idiotic reasons to blow my cover...” She hissed angrily. “Fine. I’ll make Neville get rid of her.”

“You’re sure you can convince him?” Duncan asked.

“Neville can’t say no to me. I mean that quite literally. He’ll do it, no question.” Ku Feng paused to take a breath. “What about Neville and me?”

“I don’t care who Neville Ma associates with,” I said.

“Thank you. He knows what I am, and doesn’t care because I saved his life. I won’t trouble you again.”

“Then we have a deal.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear it.” Ku Feng shimmered for a moment, became as see-through as glass, then she returned to a physical form and dangled Duncan’s handcuffs off her fingertips. “I guess we won’t be needing these anymore.” She dropped them in his lap as he stared at her.



Turning to mist again, she stepped through the table out into the aisle, the solidified once more. She tossed us a wave and walked away. Nearly every eye in the room followed her through the door.

My commlink buzzed for attention, the ID showing it was Kindly Cheng. I answered. “Yes, Auntie?”

“Come to the mahjong parlor, my darling,” she ordered. “I have something I want to show you.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Something I can’t show you over the comm.” Her voice turned hard as steel. “Now hang up and get your ass over here.”

## CHAPTER 51

### WIRETAP

By the time we reached Heoi, the screamsheets were full of the news about Penelope Wong’s dismissal from Neville Ma’s studio and *Promises in Moonlight*. I felt a little bad about that, but I knew Shenyang was waiting to snap her up. So she’d still be employed.

Kindly Cheng sat at a table at the back of her little kingdom, her head wreathed in noxious smoke from one of those slim black cigars. She waved us over, and we settled in around her.

“I assume from the news reports your work for Shenyang went well?” she asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. He should be happy.”

“I’ll broker the credits he owes you, but he wants a final interview with you in the morning.”

“For what?” Duncan asked.

Kindly Cheng shrugged. “So someone can hear him gloat. That’s what men like him enjoy doing.”

“He doesn’t need us for that,” I pointed out.

“No, but he wants you there.” She flicked ash from her cigar. “And I’m charging him for the time he spends gloating, so I don’t want to lose my percentage.”

When there was a percentage involved, there was no use arguing. I knew that, so I stayed quiet and waited.

“The wiretap we placed on the police force has borne fruit.” Kindly Cheng placed a sophisticated commlink on the table with a wolfish grin. “My people have delivered a snippet of a recorded video call between the Plastic-Faced Man and Chief Inspector Krait of the Special Duties Unit.”

“Whoa,” Gobbet said under her breath. Since she’d seen a vampire earlier tonight, I assumed that getting that kind of connection was something startling.

I was definitely interested. Hong Kong was hands-down the most dangerous place I’d ever been, and it was chilling to think the old man was lost somewhere in the middle of the sprawl.

“Unfortunately,” Kindly Cheng said, “it’s only a snippet. There were some technical difficulties with the tap.” She took a puff off her cigar. “The person responsible has been sacked.”

I took that to mean a body would be turning up in the harbor soon. Or would never turn up at all.

She stabbed a lacquered fingernail on a button, and the comm crackled to life with a shrill squeal that made Gobbet cover her ears and the rats under her clothing shift anxiously.

A video blossomed on the screen, and two voices—a man’s and a woman’s—took shape. The woman was louder, closer. She was older and intense. The other speaker was the Plastic-Faced Man.

“This is Chief Inspector Krait,” Kindly Cheng said, tapping the woman.

“...say that again,” Krait said. “*There’s something wrong with this line.*”

“*I said,*” the Plastic-Faced Man said, “*my client isn’t interested in hearing more excuses, Inspector.*”

I swapped looks with Duncan. So the Plastic-Faced Man was working for someone else.

“*That’s what I thought you said,*” Krait replied angrily. “*I’m not making excuses, mister. I have a department to run.*”

“*Not for much longer, if those two Westerners aren’t found.*” The Plastic-Faced Man took a breath. “*They’re linked to this Raymond Black somehow, and my client wants them out of circulation immediately.*”

*“The two runners are his accomplices, too—the little ork and the dwarf with the cyberdeck.”*

Wide-eyed, the two women stared at each other. Before, they’d been tangentially involved. Now they knew for certain they were on the hit list with Duncan and me.

*“I’m aware, Inspector,”* the Plastic-Faced Man grated. *“Thank you. We don’t know how much any of them know, and my client is adamant that the risk be mitigated immediately.”*

*“I’ve already made this the SDU’s highest priority. If Josephine wants more resources on it, I’m going to need allocations from elsewhere in the department.”*

*“That is a problem that can be easily dealt with,”* the Plastic-Faced Man assured her. *“My client wants this over. Now. No more excuses. No more fuck-ups. No more cops floating in the river.”*

At that, Kindly Cheng smiled and waved to one of the servers to replenish her drink.

*“Tell her we’re redoubling our efforts,”* Krait said.

*Her?* I filed that away and looked at Duncan. He shook his head, but his eyes gleamed. We’d just greatly narrowed the list of suspects. It was a move in the right direction.

*“Very good,”* the Plastic-Faced Man said. *“Dead or alive, you bring them to me. My client requires my personal verification that the threat has been eliminated.”*

Crackling splintered the audio for a moment.

*“Hang on,”* Krait said, annoyed, *“this line is getting worse.”*

The recording ended abruptly. Kindly Cheng punched the comm’s button again. *“Unfortunately, that’s all I have at present. There are other avenues of gathering information.”*

*“That’s the guy we saw in the surveillance footage,”* Gobbet said. *“The one who killed Raymond Black. That plastic face looks a lot cooler closer up.”*

*“I think it’s kind of pretty,”* Isobel added.

Duncan sighed in displeasure, and the two quieted. *“That video doesn’t tell us much. I mean, we already know there’s an APB on us. All we’re sure of now is that the man with the plastic face is definitely working for someone else. A woman.”*

*“And I know who the woman is,”* Kindly Cheng said.

She instantly had my full attention.

## CHAPTER 52

### JOSEPHINE TSANG

“I have strong reasons to believe that the woman the Plastic-Faced Man referred to is Josephine Tsang,” Kindly Cheng said.

The name meant nothing to me. I glanced at Duncan. He shook his head and looked impatient.

“That disease-ridden dog-fucker.” Kindly Cheng finished her shot and waved for another. “I should have known it was her from the beginning. And she had the *nerve* to call down the heat on *my* runners? On Nightjar? Oh, that scabrous fossil is going to pay.”

“This woman has enough power to order the HKPF to hunt us down?” Duncan asked.

“She’s a large *contributor* to the HKPF,” Kindly Cheng snarled. “Particularly to the widows and orphans of fallen officer charities. And to various *award* programs for *outstanding* officers.” She spat on the floor. “She’s also the CEO of Tsang Mechanical Services, and a member of the Hong Kong Executive Council.” She shook her head. “Josephine-dogfucking-Tsang.”

“What do you think the connection is between her and the Plastic-Faced Man?” I asked.

“I don’t know yet. But I will find out.”

“He called her his client,” Duncan pointed out. “That may be some sort of lead we can follow.”

“Perhaps.” Kindly Cheng took another puff of her cigar. “Right now, all we know is that he is her instrument—the one who killed Raymond Black.”

“Raymond is *not* dead,” Duncan said.

For a moment, I thought Kindly Cheng was going to react to his opposition. A frozen heartbeat passed, and she shrugged. “Yes, you may have mentioned that before, Gun Show. Regardless, the Plastic-Faced Man is still our best lead for

figuring out what's going on."

I wanted to steer the conversation into a more productive avenue. Before someone got hurt. "What is Tsang Mechanical Services?"

"Josephine's baby," Kindly Cheng replied. "It was a B-rated corporation before she married into the Tsang family." The way her lips twitched in displeasure, I knew there was a story there, but didn't pursue it.

"But after she fought for and won the contract to rebuild Kowloon Walled City, their fortunes rose. High." Kindly Cheng downed another shot. "They began a rise to power that eventually landed Josephine on the Executive Council."

"Walled City?" I repeated. "*The Walled City?*"

"Yes. The same place Raymond Black hired my runners to take him. I've already connected the dots. I don't know what it means, but it clearly means *something*."

"What is this Executive Council?" If I'd been told, I didn't remember.

"May I, Auntie?" Isobel asked.

Kindly Cheng shrugged and smoked.

"Hong Kong is run by a consortium of powerful corporations called the Board of Governors," Isobel said. "They set up the Executive Council, an eight-member committee of exemplary Hong Kong citizens to represent the people and run the city on their behalf. But, of course, you don't vote for them—that would be too...unpredictable."

Duncan snorted in disgust.

"Instead," Isobel continued, "every two years, two Executive Council slots come up for election, and the corporations on the Board of Governors put up some possible candidates and vote among themselves in a closed door session."

"Closed door?" Duncan asked in a sarcastic tone. "I'm shocked."

Isobel ignored him and continued. "Of course, every single one of these candidates is on some corporation's payroll, somehow. Wham, bam. Instant government."

"Tsang's a CEO," I said. "What do you know about her?"

"She was Hong Kong Philanthropist of the Year in 2054 and 2056." Kindly Cheng smiled coldly. "Children's hospitals. Homeless shelters. Food distribution centers."

"Good causes," Isobel said. "And the kind that get good PR because people are too lazy and myopic to look for the *real* people doing the *hard* work. The face-to-face-with-the-poor work."

“Don’t be so cynical, Isobel,” Kindly Cheng said. “Coming face-to-face with the unsanitized-for-video poor is distasteful, dear. You know that.” She shifted her attention to me. “Beyond being a CEO and a philanthropist, I also know that Josephine Tsang is a lying, conniving bitch.”

Oh, yeah, there was definitely a story there. “Philanthropist and bitch? Those two things sound mutually exclusive.”

Kindly Cheng snorted derisively. “Wake up. Power is power. Whether you’re providing children with three hots and a cot or you’re negotiating a treaty with a multinational corporation, it’s all the same.”

“It doesn’t sound like you like her very much.” I wondered if we would eventually get the true story.

“Whatever gave you that impression, my sweet?” Kindly Cheng’s smile cut like a razor. “No, my darling, I don’t like Josephine Tsang. And I’m going to fuck her up. I’m going to fuck her up *bad*.”

“Care to elaborate on that?”

“No.” The Straw Sandal picked up her shot glass and drained it. “Not now. Not today. But you’ll be there, my darling. I’ll make it a party.”

“What can we do?”

“For the moment, nothing.” Kindly Cheng rolled the shot glass between her palms. “There’s nothing we can do to touch Josephine Tsang, as much as I hate to admit it. But the Plastic-Faced Man is a different story. He’s a third-party operative who’s been careless, and he’ll live to regret it.” Her black eyes turned hard as anthracite. “For a while. If Tsang thinks she can take out two of my runners and get away with it, I’m going to have to *explain* some things to her.”

It didn’t take a lot of imagination to figure out what she meant by that. I realized again, I was a lot deeper in the shadows now than I’d ever been. And there was no turning back.

Duncan nodded, and I thought maybe he was adapting faster than I was to our situation, which was scary.

“We’re going to *find* the Plastic-Faced Man and we are going to *hurt* him,” Kindly Cheng promised. “We’ll hurt him until we know everything he does. And then we will use that to strike back at Josephine Tsang. You will have your vengeance, and I will have my own...*satisfaction*.” She stood and turned from the table. “Now get out. I have work to do. I’ll contact you when I know something.”

## CHAPTER 53

### “THEY ONLY HAVE APPETITE.”

When we got back to the *Bolthole*, I crashed hard, and nightmares chased me through the small hours of the morning. I dreamed I was standing in front of the Walled City in the rain, and as I looked at the dark skyscrapers, something reached into my chest and squeezed my heart. Adrenaline filled my body, but I couldn't move. Somehow I managed to keep from passing out or falling over.

Then I was inside the Walled City. Residents knelt all around me on the needle-covered ground, chanting, and the coarse language they spoke sounded like gears grinding. More people knelt on balconies of the leaning buildings that seemed only centimeters from tipping over.

When the world exploded around me, all I could see was gnashing teeth. Thousands and thousands of them, waiting to chew me to bits. Duncan, back when he was ten years old, managed to run between them, narrowly escaping death time and time again. Halloweeners, Seattle gangers in garish masks who altered their faces and bodies, chased him out of the shadows, just as they had all those years ago.

I caught his hand like I had back then and we ran. In front of us, a heavy industrial door suddenly took shape. There were words scrawled there in yellow paint, but I couldn't read them.

I woke up gasping for breath, covered in sweat. I wanted to get up and walk it off, but I was afraid of what lay in the darkness.

Instead, I picked up my pistol and put my back against the bulkhead, letting the cold seep into me as I waited out the night.

The next morning, I felt like I'd been hit by a maglev train at full tilt. Duncan looked like he'd been at the next station. Neither of us talked about what had kept us up. I thought we both just wanted to forget about it, but we knew we couldn't.

While we were at Club 88 getting more ammo and munitions, chatting up a couple street sams—Andrei Lukianov and Gherik, friends of Isobel—about other munitions dealers in Heoi, Kindly Cheng contacted us over our commlinks. I wondered if the woman just didn't sleep, or if she was having nightmares like we were. I didn't ask. She didn't tell anyone anything unless there was a chunk of nuyen in it for her.

She said Shenyang wanted to meet, and told us where. I told her we'd be there because I knew we didn't have a choice.

Shenyang met us in a teahouse not far from the MTR. Today he had bodyguards, both of them people Gobbet knew: a street mage named Dimalanta and an ork named Shiny who was as close to being a cyberzombie as I'd ever seen. Unlike us, Shenyang looked well rested and pleased with himself. "Good morning, good morning." He waved us to seats.

We sat. The bodyguards sat at another table.

"I have to say that I am pleased with the way things turned out," Shenyang told us, "but that has got to be one of the single strangest stories I've ever heard. Vampires in the trid industry." He shivered theatrically. "What a nightmare. Can't believe you let that leech keep suckin' on Neville. Big ace to have in his pocket. And what if she starts bitin' on other people? Actors and whatnot?"

"That's not our problem," Duncan said. He cracked his knuckles. "Who knows? Maybe there's a sequel in the works? We'll get paid again to pull somebody's ass out of the fire."

Shenyang grimaced. "Not an optimal outcome, but I guess it's okay. You got me Wong, and that means Neville's show's dead."

His commlink rang for his attention. He checked the screen and held up a finger as he scooped it up. "Wait one." His voice changed as he answered, became gruffer. "Yeah, who is it? Whaddya want?"

Duncan rolled his eyes at me.

I shrugged. We were getting paid for this. It was all good.

Neville Ma's handsome face bloomed on the commlink screen. "*Hello, Shenyang. I just wanted to let you know that I've released Penelope Wong from her contract. If you're still interested in her, she's all yours.*"

Like the screamsheets hadn't already been filled with the news.

"*Also,*" Neville went on, "*I hope your business is doing all right. I'd heard you'd had some problems with cash flow. If you need a loan, I'd be happy to help.*"



I shot a pointed look at Shenyang. If he was going to default on payment for the run, Kindly Cheng would want to know that.

Shenyang quickly shook his head. Then he turned his focus back on Neville. “You don’t sound too mad, Nev. What’s the catch here, anyway? You must have the next big thing lined up already.”

Duncan snorted and shoved his feet farther under the table, looking as bored as I’d ever seen him.

“*Oh, Doctor,*” Neville said, “*there’s no need for a next big thing. “Do you want to know why I keep winning our little contests, and you’re always playing catch-up? It’s because you think people like Miss Wong actually matter. They don’t. Stars are crafted—molded out of talent, yes, but ultimately constructed. With enough time and effort, anyone can be made into a star. It’s just a question of manipulating public perception.”*

“Maybe so,” Shenyang said stubbornly, “but I got her now, and your show’s dead in the water without the star. What do you think of that, eh?”

Neville smiled. “*I’m going to do what any good soap opera producer would do: write her character out with a tragic death, and bring on someone new. You labor under the misapprehension that viewers have loyalty. They don’t. They only have appetite.”*

Shenyang looked like he’d swallowed a toad.

“*As long as you chase stars like Wong,*” Neville said, “*you will always lose. Don’t be afraid to think bigger, Doctor. Go for the drama, not the dramatists.”* He broke the connection.

Looking up at the ceiling, Shenyang unloaded a stream of particularly creative curses and called down retribution from the heavens on his rival. After he ran out of breath, he looked at Duncan and me.

“That dirty little weasel,” Shenyang said. “Insulting my creativity like that! The nerve!” He threw his napkin on the table. “We’re done here. Thanks for all your help, but I gotta get going. I gotta talk to a guy about buying a buncha snakes.”

He got up and left the table, his bodyguards trailing after him.

Duncan and I watched them go, then waved the server over and ordered the breakfast we’d missed at the *Bolthole* that morning. Shenyang hadn’t given me an appetite, and the menu at the diner wasn’t really compelling, but we were out of sight of the HKPF, and I knew I needed to eat.

After we finished eating, I checked in with Kindly Cheng, letting her know

the meeting was over.

*“Good,” she said. “I’ll send him our final bill. In the meantime, I have another run you will be interested in.”*

## CHAPTER 54

### THE SHANGRI-LA SNATCH

“What is it?” Duncan asked. “We barely got back from the last one.”

*“Nonsense. You’re young. Make profits while the gods are charitable.”* She took a drag on her cigar. *“One of the things I’ve learned over the years is that even the rich and powerful have annoyances. Thorns in their side, if you will. No one is without troubles. The rich just have different ways of solving them. And we take our profit from it.”*

I mouthed Raymond’s name to Duncan, reminding him why we were there, and he reluctantly quieted.

“Who’s the client?” he asked in a more civil tone.

*“Mr. Johnson.”*

“One of many Mr. Johnsons,” I said, not liking the fact we were being kept in the dark.

Kindly Cheng grinned. *“The Johnson family is rather large, it seems. Our client for this run has grown tired of one particular thorn in his side: Cheung-Sing ‘Rooster’ Lo. Lo is a Red Pole for one of the small triads here in Hong Kong, the 289s. Or the ‘Easy Money’ gang, if you prefer.”*

I’d actually heard of the 289s. They usually liked to prey on the Yokogawa Corporation in Japan and its holdings around the world. Yokogawa specialized in producing medical supplies for DocWagon, products in high demand by the Easy Money gangers.

*“Despite their small stature,”* Kindly Cheng went on, *“Lo’s illegal activities have managed to damage the client’s profits. Mr. Johnson would like you to help him show Lo the error of his ways.”*

An image of a high-end restaurant formed on the commlink's screen.

*“Lo takes an evening every few months to dine at the Shangri-La Restaurant in Aberdeen, which is why the schedule is so important. That night is tonight. He stays on the move. If you aren't aware, the Shangri-La is an elite establishment, serving primarily corporate clientele from Wuxing, Incorporated. Because of this, it's not unusual for diners to bring bodyguards or assistants with them. In Lo's case, he brings a particularly brutish enforcer known as The Talon, and undoubted feels well-protected.”*

The restaurant image faded away, replaced by a hulking behemoth of an ork with a scar splitting one side of his hard face.

*“You're going to prove just how wrong Lo is in this regard,”* Kindly Cheng said. *“You are to kidnap Rooster Lo. So long as he is alive and in relatively good health, all options are on the table. While keeping the run quiet would make things easier for Mr. Johnson, no one will shed too many tears over a few dead triad thugs.”*

I took that all in for a moment. Managing a hostile prisoner in enemy territory wasn't a pleasant proposition.

*“The client has arranged an exit via boat,”* Kindly Cheng said. *“So long as you can get Lo from the interior to the restaurant's dock, the client will handle everything else.”*

*“Having the water so close means we're limited on escape routes,”* Duncan said. *“In case this boat captain doesn't come through.”*

Kindly Cheng ignored the protest. *“Despite being a Red Pole, Lo is a tactician, not a fighter. Don't expect him to put up much of a fight. The Talon, on the other hand, is as nasty as they come. Be careful about how you confront him, or things may go badly.”*

*“You're not giving us much time to prepare,”* I said. *“That means things may go badly.”*

Kindly Cheng sneered at me. *“This run pays primo nuyen, my sweet. We are not going to turn it down. Not if you want my help with your missing father.”*

Before I could point out that maybe she wanted our help with Josephine Tsang, she broke the connection. I looked at Duncan. *“What do you think?”*

He frowned. *“We still need her. She's got a lead on Raymond. I don't want to lose that.”*

*“All right.”*

*“Besides, getting to crack triad skulls instead of chasing after soap opera*

stars is more my style. I need to cleanse my palate after that last run.”

Back at the *Bolthole*, we brought Gobbet and Isobel up to speed. I was thinking that with the 289s involved, it might be a good time to bring Gaichu into the mix, but the ghoul wasn't around to take the meet. I wondered what he was off doing, then reconsidered that. Maybe I didn't want to know.

Isobel pulled down as much info from the BBS as she could, tagging up with runners they knew who moonlit as bodyguards who'd been in the restaurant. A street sam named Zekellios gave us a general layout, but didn't know the upper floor. An elf named Adarion covered the second floor, however. And a decker named Levic Stolls provided the sec system blueprints. Primed and ready, we headed to Aberdeen on the MTR.

The Shangri-La restaurant sat on the docks, partially out over the water. Waves churned by boats and ships further out in the harbor lapped against the pilings as we approached the gaudy, neon-lit establishment. A considerable amount of foot traffic surrounded us, a sizeable portion of it headed for the restaurant.

Parquet flooring polished to a high sheen spilled like a wooden tide throughout the large foyer. A huge troll in an armored maître d's uniform stood like a sentry in front of an entrance made more narrow by stanchions sporting golden ropes. A cornucopia of spices flooded my nose. I didn't see Lo or The Talon seated at any of the tables or the bar.

“Welcome to the Shangri-La,” the troll said in a clipped British accent. “We strive to provide our patrons with an exquisite dining experience. If you have any questions, or require special accommodations, don't hesitate to speak with our staff.”

Duncan nodded to the barely filled bar area. “Looks like we've got our pick of tables.”

The troll's accent turned even more stuffy. “I'm sorry, but this is not a seat-yourself establishment. If you'd like to choose where you sit, I suggest you make a reservation for one of the private rooms upstairs.”

“Thanks,” I said as I noticed Duncan bristling. I pulled on his arm and stepped in front of him. “Perhaps you could get us seated.” I slipped him some folded nuyen.

“Of course, sir.” He spoke briefly on his commlink, and a waitress joined us.

“Welcome to the Shangri-La, sir,” she greeted. “I’ll seat you in the lounge for the moment, if that’s all right.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’m also hoping to find an acquaintance of mine. I hear he sometimes eats here.”

“I might know him, but we have a lot of guests.”

Noting her reluctance, I also crossed her palm with some nuyen. There were few servers in the world who wouldn’t sell what they knew. They usually got treated like dirt in most establishments, high-end or not.

“His name is Mr. Lo. He has a reservation here tonight,” I said.

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. “Sorry. I don’t know him.”

I guessed Lo traveled under the radar when he hit up the Shangri-La for dinner, but there was no way The Talon could do the same. “I’ll bet a hardworking waitress like yourself is good with faces.” I gave her a few more folded notes. “You’d certainly remember this man. He travels with a big ork who’s got a nasty scar on his cheek.” I traced it across my face.

Her eyes widened. “I might know the ork. If he’s who I’m thinking of, he only comes around a couple times a year. I’ve never served him, but I’ve heard he gets real pushy with the other waiters.”

“Pushy? Sounds exactly like the guy I’m looking for.”

“He’s allergic to shellfish, I think. We get so many orders, sometimes mistakes are made.” She clapped a hand over her mouth. “I didn’t just say that! I can assure you our service is second to none.”

“Tell me where my friend’s eating, and I won’t mention your little indiscretion to a soul,” I assured her.

“If I could, I would. We have two-dozen private dining rooms. I don’t work those, but I can tell you he’s not out here.” She paused. “Now, excuse me. I need to place these orders. I hope you find your friend.” She turned and walked away.

“There’s a guests’ computer at the bar,” Isobel said. “Give me a few minutes with that and I might be able to turn up Lo’s location. I’ve got some wiz sniffer programs that work quick.”

I nodded and we headed to the bar. All around us, men and women sat at tables with armored fashionwear and concealed weapons. Violence might not have been on the menu, but it was everywhere. One wrong step would plunge us into a firefight.

## CHAPTER 55

### ROOSTER LO

True to her word, Isobel worked miracles in short order—fitting in a restaurant, I supposed.

“Got it,” the decker said, smiling. “Second floor. Room 3. Says there’s a VIP party of five.”

“You’re sure?” Duncan asked.

“There’s a special note that says one of the diners is allergic to shellfish.”

“Sounds like our guy,” Duncan admitted.

I thought for a moment, gazing across the bar at the kitchen beyond where white-suited restaurant staff labored while an older man in a chef’s hat barked orders with the efficiency and volume of a military commander. “Has the order been filled?”

Isobel shook her head. “Not yet.”

“Might be time for a word with the chef,” I said. I looked at Isobel. “Why don’t you see if that diner’s food can *accidentally* be cross-contaminated?”

“Thinking about taking out The Talon before we engage Lo?” Duncan asked.

“Thinking about cutting down the odds. We’re supposed to stay low-key on this run.”

“How am I going to get the chef to *accidentally* get the order wrong?” Isobel asked.

“Offer him a bribe.”

“And,” Gobbet said, “tell him The Talon is cheating on you with your younger sister.” She smiled. “He looks like the fatherly type.”

Isobel nodded and walked into the kitchen. The conversation that ensued held all of our attention. At first the chef seemed reluctant and almost combative, then Isobel cried for a little bit—which surprised me.

“Oh, she’s good,” Gobbet whispered. “If she wasn’t such a great decker, she could have been a street hustler.”

After the tears, nuyen changed hands, then Is0bel wiped her eyes, smiled, thanked the chef, and returned to us.

“Okay,” she said, “the fix is in. Their order’s going up in a few minutes.”

We waited and sipped our drinks at the bar. After servers took trays of food through the door to the stairs, it wasn’t long before one of them came running back to the kitchen.

I could only just hear his panicked voice as he spoke. “Chef! We have a problem. A *big* problem.”

“Cut the drama, cork mage,” the chef replied belligerently. “We’re working here.” But the nervous looks he gave over his shoulder said he knew exactly what that *big* trouble was.

“Our second floor guest is pissed. His head of security’s spewing up prawns and looking for someone to blame. Better brace yourselves for a mouthful of fists.”

At that moment, The Talon banged through the door. Evidently his allergy to shellfish was pretty pronounced. His face was swollen up like a balloon, his eyes almost closed. He strode toward the kitchen.

“Move,” I said, and headed for the door The Talon had just come through.

On the other side, a staircase led up to the second floor. I pulled my pistol and headed up, closely followed by the others. At the top of the staircase, I followed the hallway, checking doors till I came to number 3. Easing around the corner, I peered in.

Buffet tables laden with Asian delicacies occupied the center of the room. Lo sat at a table at the back. Three men sat in chairs around him. Two massive dragon statues stood against the walls. The unpleasant odors of seafood, spices, and vomit lingered in the air.

“Okay,” I said to my teammates in a low voice, “let’s do this.” I followed my pistol around the corner and stepped into the room, then raised my voice. “Keep your hands where I can see them and nobody gets hurt!”

The men froze, and Duncan and I swept forward, staying clear of Gobbet and Is0bel’s shooting lanes in case this went sideways.

“Who are you?” Lo demanded. “What do you want?”

“We’re kidnapping you, idiot,” Duncan snarled. He secured Lo’s men with zip ties, then did the same to Lo. When he was satisfied the man was secured, we yanked our prisoner to his feet.

“Listen, Gun Show,” Gobbet said, “we may have Lo, but these stiffs were

probably just a handful of his guards. He could have more downstairs. We can't leave the same way we came in."

Duncan shook Lo and spoke in his cop's voice. "Tell me where the back door to this place is, and I'll let you keep your teeth."

"It's just outside this room," Lo said. "To the right, But it's locked. I have a key in my pocket." He nodded to his jacket.

I took the key out and we headed back to the hallway. We entered another hallway and reached a security door. The key let us through with no problems.

A few minutes later, we stood on a boardwalk over the harbor water at the rear of the restaurant. Boat motors growled in the darkness, running lights marked the vessels, and sail rigging pinged against masts. The salt scent cleared the spices from my nose.

"Do you see a boat?" I asked, and immediately wondered if something had gone wrong at Mr. Johnson's end.

"No," Duncan growled, and blistered the air with curses.

My commlink chirped for attention. When I checked, it was the channel we'd been given for the boat captain. I exchanged passwords with him.

"My name's Pei-Lon. I'm your getaway driver. We have details to discuss, but let's keep it brief. Time's ticking."

"We're the people just ahead of the guns," I pointed out. "Talk fast."

"I'm at the loading dock across the bridge from the restaurant's main entrance. Big old schooner. Can't miss me. But neither will the HKPF, who I've just learned are on their way here in response to a security call."

"We can handle a few HKPF officers," I said, and I hoped that was true. Most of all, I didn't want the guy getting scared and pulling out early.

"One last thing," Pei-Lon said. "I may be the pilot, but this ain't my rig. The boathouse door is locked and I don't know the code. You may have to break in. Good luck and get moving."

The commlink clicked dead.

I cursed, and told the others as we went through the darkness around the restaurant.

Bright lights hung over the tables out in front. Several obvious gangers lounged with drinks and dawdled over dinners. The bridge was located about halfway down the open-air seating area and spanned a narrow canal filled with dark water. At the other end of it, a boathouse stood swathed in darkness, only its face in sharp relief.



Before I could stop him, Lo stepped forward and shouted, “Men! Help me!”

## **CHAPTER 56**

### **BATTLE ON THE BRIDGE**

Lo yelped as Duncan grabbed his collar and yanked him back.

Taking cover behind the building’s edge, I waited for the gangers to make a move. They didn’t look too interested in a confrontation. Then one noticed us next to him.

“Hey!” one shouted. “It’s them! It’s those runners they’re offering the big bounty for!”

They went for their weapons. Evidently Lo didn’t carry a lot of weight with them, but the possibility of a bounty recalibrated things.

“I got this,” Isobel said, and stepped forward with her small grenade launcher, which she’d hidden under her coat. I let her take the point, and she fired a grenade into the center of the group.

The resulting explosion scattered the gangers. I fired into them, picking off strays and providing cover. “Get Lo across the bridge!”

Duncan got moving, half-carrying, half-dragging our prisoner across the bridge. A couple gangers took cover and started taking potshots at the two men. Rounds ricocheted off the bridge’s metal railing and bounced off Duncan’s armor.

I opened up on full-auto as Gobbet raised a sudden blast of wind that hurled tables and chairs before it, stripping away the cover and turning it all into lethal projectiles.

“Go!” I waved to Gobbet and Isobel as I slapped a fresh magazine home.

They ran and I protected our six, chopping out three-round bursts to discourage anyone tempted to take up the chase.

“Door’s locked!” Isobel yelled. “I see a computer junction at the back corner! I can get in through that!” She dropped to the boardwalk in front of the terminal and got to work.

Dodging behind a stack of crates, Duncan shoved Lo to the ground and put a big foot on the ganger's head. "You try anything, I'm gonna snap your neck like a twig."

More gangers sprinted out of the restaurant, and I got the feeling we were about to get fragged. One unlimbered a rocket launcher, but she fired on the fly and the warhead sailed into the bay behind us. When it exploded, water rained down on us.

Gobbet spoke and held out her hands. Immediately, a drenched figure took shape in the falling water and advanced on the gangers, closing in on the one with the rocket launcher. I kept firing, driving the ganger to cover and pinning her down.

In seconds, the water spirit was taking heavy fire, but it didn't stop till it reached the ganger with the rocket launcher. Lifting its prey over its head, the spirit enveloped the ganger's face in a globule of water, drowning her.

Finally unable to maintain corporal form, the water spirit splashed over the boardwalk and the limp corpse dropped into the canal.

At the front of the boathouse, the cast-iron door suddenly opened, and Isobel rejoined us.

"Got it!" she cried excitedly, putting her deck away. She readied her grenade launcher and plopped another one into the biggest group of gangers.

When it detonated, though, a white cloud filled the boardwalk. The gangers coughed and retreated, tears streaming down their face. As I watched, the cloud drifted slowly back toward us.

"Run!" Isobel shouted, and followed her own advice.

I grabbed one of Lo's arms and Duncan took the other. Together, we hauled the ganger with us toward the door. Just before she ducked into the boathouse, Isobel fired another HE round into the remaining gangers.

Then we were into the boathouse. Heavy-caliber bullets rattled against the structure, punctuated by a grenade blast that ripped the cast-iron door partially free of its hinges.

Ahead of us, the schooner sat pulling at its moorings, a greyhound ready to run. A man I took to be the captain screamed at us. "Hurry! Hurry!"

We scrambled toward the ship, unleashing carnage in our wake. Bullets and grenades scattered cargo—machine parts and other goods—into the air. Flammable liquids burst into flames and the growing inferno danced madly.

It wasn't the most graceful escape I'd ever managed.

“Over here!” Gobbet waved us to a door and we scrambled down a hatch.

Well, Lo didn’t scramble. Duncan threw the ganger down into the schooner’s hold.

The cramped interior rocked slowly, then more quickly as the powerful diesel engines shuddered to full speed.

“The 289s are gonna jam you up for this.” Lo sat on the floor, hunched over and pouting like a kid. He wiped blood from his nose and mouth.

“If you don’t can it,” Duncan promised, “I’m going to jam up your face.”

## **CHAPTER 57**

### **RAYMOND BLACK IS WHO?**

Duncan and I oversaw the handoff to a car Mr. Johnson had arranged for the pickup. I didn’t recognize the guys, and they weren’t the talkative sort. We weren’t either, though Lo spewed enough threats to make up for all of us. I was sick of the guy by the time they took him off our hands.

When we got back to the *Bolthole*, it was late. I figured Isobel and Gobbet would be asleep, or at least unwinding. Instead, they were waiting up for us and looking tense.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We’ve got more information on Josephine Tsang and Tsang Mechanical Services,” Isobel said. “A couple runners—Warg-sub and Clevermire Underfoot—who owed me favors managed to score some intel Auntie didn’t give us.”

“Spill it.” I grabbed a couple beers from the fridge and handed one to Duncan.

“In 2011, Tsang Mechanical Services was a D-level corp floundering in the shallow end of the Hong Kong corporate pool,” Isobel said. “That’s when Josephine Shui married into the family. Josephine thought big. She conceived of a massive project that would catapult TMS into the big time. Something she called

the Prosperity Project.”

The name instantly rang a bell.

“Prosperity?” Duncan sat up straighter. “That’s what Raymond was mumbling about.”

“What’s the Prosperity Project?” I asked.

“Once upon a time in the 1900s,” Isobel told us, “the Walled City was a densely populated slum. Something like thirty thousand people crammed into six and a half acres.”

“We already heard this story,” Duncan said. “Shithole. Hell on Earth. Yadda yadda yadda.”

“That’s *today’s* Walled City,” Isobel said. “The *second* Walled City. The first Walled City started life well over a hundred years ago, and lasted through both World Wars and almost to the Awakening. It was torn down in 1994, when the government had finally had enough. It had become such a haven for criminals that the cops would only enter it in large, well-armed groups.”

“Still sounds familiar.” Gobbet stroked the heads of two of her little friends, evidently channeling some of their calmness.

“In 2021,” Isobel went on, “Josephine Tsang proposed a vision for a new type of low-income housing project. The Prosperity Project. A self-contained, low-cost walking neighborhood for the poor, but on a grand scale. The Prosperity Project would give Hong Kong’s poor and the flood of refugees pouring into the country a place they could call their own. Something that felt more permanent than the sprawling tent city that spontaneously sprang up after the first Walled City was demolished. The slogan was, ‘A Place of Destiny—Where Prosperity Begins.’”

Duncan scratched his chin with a thumb. “Sounds like something Raymond would buy into.”

I silently agreed.

“The apartments weren’t much bigger than the space you’d get in your average coffin motel, but they were built around plazas and marketplaces that contained goods and services catering to the poor. The government forgot the lessons of the last Walled City. They loved the idea of containing the refugees and the poor to only a few densely populated blocks. It kept them out of the public eye.” Isobel paused for a moment. “Securing the contract also secured Tsang Mechanical Services’ fortunes. It eventually put Josephine Tsang onto the Executive Council.”

“One slum made her rich?” Duncan asked.

“It’s a very big slum,” Isobel pointed out. “Apparently that was also the beginning of a series of lucrative building contracts that propelled TMS into the big time.”

Duncan grew impatient. “Where’s Raymond come into all this?”

“Raymond Black doesn’t come into it at all,” Isobel said. Before Duncan could protest, she added, “But Edward Tsang does.”

“Edward Tsang?” I asked.

“That’s your foster father’s real name.” Isobel watched us with pensive interest.

Duncan and I couldn’t speak.

“Raymond Black was actually Edward Tsang,” Isobel told us, “the only son of Josephine Tsang and her late husband, Breakwater Tsang. Edward was in charge of laying out the groundwork for the Walled City—excavation and utilities, running in power lines, sewage, that kind of thing.”

I couldn’t focus. I wasn’t ready to address the old man’s real past. I seized the most disparate bit of the story. “What kind of name is Breakwater?”

“Cooler than he was, apparently.” Isobel smiled. “Breakwater Tsang was kind of a nobody—the nothing son of the company’s nothing founder. The best thing he ever did for his company—or his family—was marry Josephine. Then die of a heart attack and get out of her way.”

“Wait.” Duncan breathed out in frustration. “This doesn’t make any sense.” He looked at me. “Remember that massive gray water leak that flooded the basement back in ’48?”

I did. “Yeah. Remember what happened to Mrs. Malony?”

“You mean her feet?” Duncan winced and grunted in disgust. “They swelled to like *three times* their normal size. Yeah, thanks for bringing back *that* memory.” He paused. “But think about it. Did Raymond have *any* idea of how to fix that leak? No. He didn’t know the first thing about sewer lines. He hired a small army of plumbers, probably paid ’em double what the job was worth to fix the thing, and it still took almost two months to get it under control.”

“Not much of a utility expert,” I agreed.

“I don’t think Raymond had anything to do with the utilities in the Walled City,” Isobel said.

“So if he wasn’t in charge of the utilities for the project, what was he doing down there?” Duncan asked.

Isobel shook her head. “I don’t know. But Edward Tsang disappeared from the public eye around 2031, shortly after Prosperity was completed.”

“That was about the time he moved to Seattle,” Duncan said. “Around thirteen years before he found us.”

“But what happened in the Walled City?” Gobbet asked.

“And what would make Raymond want to go back in there now after all of these years?” Duncan asked.

Isobel shook her head. “I don’t have a clue.”

I took a breath and let out, keeping myself calm. “We know more,” I said. “We know more now, and we’ll find out more as we go.”

## CHAPTER 58

### RIVALS

Duncan and I couldn’t stay in the *Bolthole* after Isobel’s bombshell. Both of us were too wired to sleep, and I wasn’t looking forward to more nightmares, so we decided to go see Kindly Cheng. Isobel stayed with the ship to search the Matrix for more history or clues. Gobbet walked with us.

“I think I can add a little context to that thing between Auntie and Josephine Tsang,” the rat shaman told us. “You know, the thing that makes Auntie hit the sauce and talk revenge. This is a combo of stuff I heard and stuff I put together over a few drinks with Anita Blanco and Gamege, two shadow buddies of mine, so your mileage may vary.”

“You know more than we do,” Duncan said, trying not to sound sour about it, but failing miserably.

Gobbet didn’t take offense. “For years, the Yellow Lotus acted as tax collectors within the Walled City. Since the Walled City was built by Josephine Tsang, and the Yellow Lotus was run by Auntie Cheng, they must’ve had a working business relationship...for a while, at least.”

We passed a bunch of old men playing cards on a boat, and didn’t resume

talking till we were out of earshot.

“From what Nightjar told me—he was her favorite, you got that, right?—Auntie was known as a real up-and-comer back then. She was on the fast track to be the next Yellow Lotus 438. That’s a big-deal gig. Money and power galore. Now, you need to know there were a lot of triads and corps doing biz in the Walled City. All sorts of stuff. Sometimes they worked together nicely, and sometimes people got bloody.”

“That happens in any organization,” Duncan said.

Gobbet nodded and petted one of her rats that slithered out onto her shoulder. “The way I heard it, Auntie came up with some sort of grand plan to consolidate business in the Walled City. The power would be split between the Yellow Lotus and Tsang’s company, and everyone else would get cut out. If her plan worked, Auntie would rise in the Lotus like nobody’s business, and Josephine would make long bank.”

“I guess that didn’t last long,” I said.

“There was a catch, though,” Gobbet agreed. “In order for the plan to work, both women would need to jump through a *lot* of hoops. There’d be street-level maneuvering and power-plays on Auntie’s side, and blackmail and negotiations on the corporate level from Josephine Tsang.”

“So it was matrimony made in Hell,” Duncan said.

Gobbet continued petting her little friend. “My info gets sketchy here. From what I’ve pieced together, Tsang went behind Auntie’s back and took her plan to her boss, a 438 named Wong Lun Fat. The two of them cut Kindly Cheng out of her own plan.”

“Why’d Tsang do that?”

Gobbet shrugged. “My guess is that she saw Auntie as some sort of threat. People in the know say that Wong Lun Fat is weak and greedy. She can be manipulated if her palm is well greased. Long story short: power *was* consolidated in the Walled City, just like Auntie planned. Only she didn’t wind up getting any of it. Her climb up the Lotus ladder came to an abrupt halt. She’s still a Straw Sandal, just like she was before Tsang backstabbed her. And now she’s stuck in Heoi like a fly in amber.” She kicked a wonton box into the stinking canal. “If it were me, I’d be pissed, too.”

Kindly Cheng wasn't at the mahjong parlor when we got there, but Bao was. "You should wait," he told us. "Kindly Cheng has business to tend to. She will be in touch when she wants you."

Having no other destination in mind, we stopped at a small diner and had soykaf. Before we'd barely settled down, our commlinks pinged to let us know we'd gotten a new message.

I opened mine, and saw it was from Kindly Cheng.

*I've got another job for you—one that should prove very lucrative indeed. I've been contacted by an employee of the Eastern Tiger Corporation, and he needs you to steal some research data and biological samples from his employer.*

*The man's name is Tigath Wright. Until recently, he was a researcher on a genetic engineering project—he was cagey with the details, but I gather that it centered around phenotypic alteration and post-natal genetic enhancement.*

*Unfortunately for Wright, he's got a conscience. Stupid man. Luckily for us, he's willing to pay to have his conscience assuaged.*

*Wright's project was apparently quite horrible—experiments on living children, total disregard for biomedical ethics or safety, and when he raised concerns, he was taken off the project. He's decided to step outside the bounds of the law and expose their "wrongdoing" to the world.*

*The snag, you see, is that his wife and child live in Seoul—not quite the heart of Eastern Tiger's power, but close enough. He's afraid that if he releases the information himself, they'll be taken prisoner and used as leverage against him. The idiot should have thought of that before, but that's not our problem.*

*The samples and data are currently on an Eastern Tiger cargo ship—the MV Nalchi—sailing near Hong Kong, on the way to Seoul. The storm's slowed the ship down, so you don't have to go right away, but don't take too long.*

*Once you have the data and samples, you're to call Wright. I've attached his number. He'll give you instructions on how he wants the information leaked.*

*When you're ready, let me know. I'll arrange transit with Captain Jomo. He's a local Loho-Jowah pirate and smuggler, but don't let that put you off. He's as good as they get, and he'll have you on that ship without incident.*

I tried calling her back. She didn't pick up. I glanced at Duncan with a quizzical expression.

"She's not going to play till she's ready," he said. "I'm too mad to sit around.



If there are skulls to bust, I'd rather be busting skulls.”

I nodded, called to leave a message, and set up the meet with the pirate captain.

## CHAPTER 59

### BOARDING PARTY

Just before midnight, the sky spat toxic rain strong enough to burn bare skin. We wore black ponchos over our combat gear, which also allowed us to conceal the heavy armament we'd brought for this run. All of us expected a high level of protection on the freighter.

Captain Jomo was young and fashionable, an elf with a Mohawk that would have been stylish if it weren't for the wind and rain. An abbreviated mustache and goatee framed his lips. He was talking into his commlink when we stepped over to him.

“Come on, Jomo. Win, not lose! Maybe buy yourself that new hat!” A sad, high-pitched riff played on the commlink, and the skipper cursed. “Stupid game. Always, it cheats me! Never a good hand.” He looked up at us and smiled. “Kindly Cheng sends you, *lah*? You need Captain Jomo to take you to play pirate?”

His lilting accent made Isobel smile. “That's right.”

“Come!” Jomo waved us toward his boat. “Board the *Swift Dream*! We are on a tight schedule, and the sea does us no favors tonight!”

Jomo was right about the sea. Fifteen- and twenty-foot waves lifted the *Swift Dream* and turned the voyage into a long, turbulent nightmare. All of us stood in the pilot cabin, none of us wanting to trust belowdecks. Jomo handled the wheel with an expert, relaxed flair, somehow managing to hang onto a cup of steaming

tea while steering.

“I see you are worried about this!” he shouted over the gale thundering outside the Plexiglas. “But you should not be. This is nothing. I’ve been out on this sea when the waves could drown skyscrapers.”

He spun story after story between curses, talking about all the ships he’d pirated during his years. Evidently he was a lot older than he looked, but that was how elves were.

Long minutes later, the black hulk that was the *Nalchi* swelled out of the darkness. The freighter was a thousand meters in length, and towered above us. I didn’t see any guards at the stern as the *Swift Dream* closed the distance. We were running without lights, just a shadow on the sea.

“Be patient,” Jomo advised. “I will have you there soon. See? I told you this would be easy.”

One of his crewmen went forward and popped a grappling gun out of a deck hatch. When we were within thirty meters, the crewman fired the grapple on Jomo’s order, and the hook sailed over the railing, trailing a nylon rope ladder after it.

“There you go,” Jomo said. “Now hurry. I make this look easy, but it is quite difficult to maintain pace without smashing to pieces against that ship’s hull.”

“You’ll be here when we need a ride back?” Gobbet asked. She frowned at the whirling sea, obviously rethinking her decision to accompany us.

“Sure, sure.” Jomo nodded. “Kindly Cheng won’t pay me unless I bring you back.” He clapped her on the shoulder. “So don’t get yourselves killed and cheat me out of my wages!”

Out on the deck, I took the lead and fought my way across that swinging nylon ladder while sea salt stung my eyes and tested my grip. Finally, I reached the stern railing and pulled myself over onto the heaving deck. I slipped the DMSO trunk rifle from my shoulder and extended the folding stock. All of us were using the trunk weapons so we could go in silent and not kill if we didn’t have to.

Dimethyl sulfoxide was an organosulfur compound that dissolved compounds to liquid. It was also used as a cryo-protectant to prevent cell death during freezing. We’d loaded ours up with a powerful anesthetic that guaranteed the sailors we put down would be out for an hour or more. The ship’s near-AI piloting systems would keep the ship safe, and we’d be gone before the effects wore off.

Once we were all on board, Duncan unhooked the grapple and tossed it into the water. The sailor reeled it in as Jomo steered his craft away.

*“It’s too late to wish you smooth sailing,”* Jomo called over the commlink. *“Instead, I wish you luck from the shadows.”*

“Just be there when we’re ready to leave,” Gobbet said.

We crossed the stern, listening for sec klaxons to blare, but all we heard was the storm raging around us. We halted by the open door that allowed access to the amidships deck. I pointed at the sec cam arrays posted around the freighter.

“Give me a minute with the terminal,” Isobel said. “I can take down the sec cams.”

She opened her case and plugged in her cyberdeck. She finished up in a matter of minutes while we waited tensely.

Gobbet had turned gray.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. Maybe. I think so.” She swallowed. “I’ve never been out on water like this. Always had the good sense to stay on land during storms.”

Three of her furry companions clustered around her neck, gently patting her with their tiny paws.

“There we go,” Isobel said when she rejoined us. “I’ve rebooted the camera, patched them into our commlinks, and locked ship security out.”

I brought the cameras up on my commlink and flicked through the views, spotting the sailors standing guard in the rain. Evidently the ship’s captain liked to be thorough.

“Good job,” I said.

“I couldn’t get into the cameras inside the ship, though,” Isobel said. “They must be on a different circuit.”

We went forward and took positions behind crates as we tracked targets with the sec cams and the nightvision scopes on the rifles. One at a time, we took down the crewmen, hauled them into the shadows, and left them zip tied.

A few minutes later, with eight sailors down behind us, we entered the hatch to the lower deck. It felt good to get out of the blinding rain, but the storm was only slightly muted.

Gobbet squeezed rain out of her braids and seemed a little more like her old self now that we were inside the ship. “Nicely done. We’re almost to the goods, and the rest of the ship’s got no idea we’re here.”

“We stay slow,” I said. I folded the trunk rifle’s stock, making the weapon

more manageable in the tight quarters. Then I went forward, following the freighter blueprints we'd gotten from a runner named Youxia, who'd worked security on the ship once. We'd had to pay for the info, of course, but he had no love for the corp.

An open door on our left allowed access to a computer room.

Is0bel studied the setup and smiled. "Hey, you know what? I bet we could screw with the guards down here using this computer. Draw them away to a different deck or something." She stepped up to the array and glanced at it. "A few tweaks, and I think I can probably fake a voltage overload elsewhere on the ship."

I nodded. "Get it done."

Is0bel tapped keys and grinned. "All right, I just set off a system alarm on C Deck. It won't fool anyone for long, but they'll have to send a crew to make sure it's not a real alarm. That will temporarily cut down the numbers."

I went forward again, leaving Duncan to walk slack.

## **CHAPTER 60**

### **VATBREED**

Is0bel took a moment at the next cabin as well, popping in long enough to hack the sec cam monitoring the deck we were on. In seconds, we had eyes on the ship's crew and they couldn't see us.

We moved quickly, knowing time was against us, and we were still heavily outnumbered. If the crew got its shit together and attacked us all at once, we were dead.

Gobbet and Duncan peeled off long enough to take down two sailors grabbing a late-night snack in the galley. Both went down before they knew anyone was there.

I started feeling good about the op. We were clicking by the numbers, hitting the rhythm we'd established. I was feeling like part of something again, and it was

a good thing.

The cargo area in front of us became our next immediate problem, due to the handful of sailors standing around talking. I wasn't sure if they'd been assigned to protect the cargo or if some kind of watch rotation was being conducted.

Either way, they had to be dealt with.

We picked our targets and opened fire, but there were more than we could take out in our first volley. Gunfire erupted, and the thunder inside the hold drowned out the storm outside.

At that point, the trunk guns weren't viable. It was one thing to target unprotected flesh, but the thin-shelled DMSO projectiles weren't going to smash through armor. I slung the trunk gun and drew my Ingram, adding its muted chatter to the cacophony.

One of the sailors raised a fire spirit that hurled a fireball at my position. I ducked back and felt the heat of the blast scorch the back of my jacket through the bulkhead.

Gobbet stood with her back to the bulkhead as well. She spoke and gestured, and a rocky figure took shape before her just as a trio of sailors rounded the corner of the hallway opposite the one we'd just come through.

I opened fire, breaking their attack and driving them back. The fire spirit rushed through the doorway straight at me, covering me with blistering heat. I ran, heading toward the three sailors, who stood frozen as the two spirits locked together in combat in the hallway. Stones and red-hot embers soon peppered the metal bulkheads.

I shot the first man in the face, knocking him back into his companions. While they tried to recover, I lunged into them, intending to put the sailors between the spirits and me, and rolled over their backs, knocking us all to the floor.

One of the men pushed himself up with one hand. I tried to bring the Ingram to bear while staring down the muzzle of his assault rifle. A fireball slammed into him just as his bullets streaked past my ear and I put a round into his forehead. Flames engulfed the corpse as it rolled away.

I rolled in the other direction, then turned to the other man and put a round in the back of his head as he struggled to get to his feet. I pushed myself up, slipped in the blood on the deck, and reached a standing position at the corner.

The earth spirit pounded on the fire spirit with knobby fists till it ballooned out in an explosion of fiery gas. The earth spirit stumbled forward, its footstep

shaking the entire corridor, then tumbled to its knees in an avalanche of loose stones before it disappeared.

I sprinted down the hallway and found Duncan at the other end, reloading his shotgun. “Everybody okay?”

“We’re wiz,” he replied. “But the ship’s gonna need more crew.”

I peered into the hold and saw bodies strewn across the floor. Blood pooled in spots and mirrored the ceiling lights.

“Time’s wasting,” Duncan urged.

I nodded and headed into the room with Isobel, leaving Gobbet and Duncan to bring up the rear.

After a quick search, we found the cargo area where the bio-samples were being held. Tube-shaped cryo units filled with emerald liquid stood against the wall, but one of them glowed blue, and I saw something moving within it. I stepped to it while Isobel went to the computer terminals in front of two massive freezer units.

Inside the cryo unit, a mass of organic matter drifted against the glass with a soft *thump*. According to our intel, the blue liquid was Omega Sequence #358G, and was kept in constant circulation to keep the tissue viable.

Suddenly, a pale, lidless eye in the mass locked on me as the—creature, or whatever it was—drifted closer to the glass. I peered more closely, hypnotized by the grotesque thing on the other side of the glass. Gradually, I made out a grossly-distorted face, nearly hidden by swollen tumors and scabrous pustules. A mass of teeth stuck out like flower petals around what may have been a mouth and nose. Pain and fear filled that lone eye.

Instantly reminded of all the nightmares I’d been having aboard the *Bolthole*, I drew back, never wanting to see something like that again.

“Let me,” Isobel said softly. She tapped the cryo unit’s keypad, and a built-in drawer slid out, presenting a rack of vials containing tissue samples. She took all of them and put them in a protective case. Then she looked up at me. “What do you want to do?”

“What is it?” I knew there really wasn’t time to ask, but I couldn’t help myself.

“A thing they grew and tortured.”

“It’s—alive.”

Isobel’s voice was dry. “Yeah. I downloaded the files on it, but I looked through them enough to know it’s alive, and probably in pain.” She paused.

“What do you want to do?”

“Shut it down,” I said hoarsely. It was the only humane thing to do. Nothing like that would want to live.

Isobel shut down the cryo unit and the mass pulled back, disappearing into the blue depths.

I turned away, trying not to shiver or be sick, and called Jomo over the commlink.

The captain’s face blossomed on the screen and he smiled. “*Jomo is listening! You ready for a pickup, my friend? We’re standing by, and have eyes on the ship.*”

“Come get us,” I said.

“Easy, *lah*. We’ll be there in a few minutes. Be ready where we dropped you off, friend.” Jomo cut the commlink.

“Let’s go,” I told Isobel. “I want to have a closer look at what you found before I call Mr. Johnson back.”

## CHAPTER 61

### OMEGA SEQUENCE #358G

*Eastern Tiger FileOS 2.2.1*

*Files:*

*1) Development Diary—Project Overview*

*2) Development Diary—Phenotypic Alteration*

*3) Development Diary—Longevity Research*

*Please select file data.*

### **PROJECT OVERVIEW**

*Initial research into metagenetics presents a singular challenge: to wit, the study not of genes themselves, but of the interaction between genetics and the*

*unseen world of astral space.*

*If the creation of a particular metatype or magically-expressed phenotype was as simple as the recombination of given amino acid sequences, then the creation of mages would be as simple as the expression of a given eye color or skin tone.*

*Unfortunately, such expressions are far more complex. The expression of traits previously considered to be “supernatural” is a complex interplay between mundane DNA, the condition of the ambient manasphere at the time of development, and the interactions between genes and what we have dubbed “astral shadows.”*

*Any research into these is fraught with difficulty, due to their resistance to traditional—that is to say—technological—instruments.*

*Ergo, Omega Sequence #358G is a project de-coupled from the usual safeguards against project overruns. We have been granted extensive magical assistance in our pursuit of higher metagenetic understanding—as well as autonomy from legal concerns.*

*As such, Omega Sequence project materials must be kept in Eastern Tiger secure facilities only. Deviation from this may result in local law enforcement interest, and subsequent cleanup costs can be prohibitive.*

## ***PHENOTYPIC ALTERATION***

*Phenotypic alteration is the key process that allows for the Omega Sequence project to progress. Ordinarily, an organism’s phenotype is set and cannot be changed after a very early point in development. Morphology, phenology, replication processes: any alteration in the coding sequence of a living organism is invariably fatal.*

*Except in the case of the Omega Sequence.*

*A combination of alkylating agents, ambient mana control, and potent alpha*



*emitters allow us to control the replication of the Omega Sequence metagene.*

*This is accomplished through alteration of the interactions between DNA and their astral shadows—the building blocks of metagenetics and mana-based abilities.*

*To understand this concept, consider an Indonesian shadowplay. The story one watches is not of the puppets, but the shadows they cast. A skillful puppeteer manipulates not just the puppets, but also the space between the screen and the viewer.*

*So, too, is it with metagenetics. Magical aptitude, metagenetic traits, and formerly unknown parazoology are revealed when mana levels reach a sufficient point to allow the astral shadows of DNA to engage in their delicate, powerful dance of replication.*

*To change the metagenetics of an organism, we do not only manipulate the subject's DNA, but the space between the DNA and the astral plane. We cast the requisite shadows, engendering change that cannot be explained solely by base pairs, alleles, and nucleotides.*

*Control is our challenge. Control is a delicate art: it requires patience and perseverance, as well as scientific acumen. But with a fine enough degree of control, we will be able to replicate magical abilities, trait expressions, and “black swan” effects.*

*What are these “black swan” traits? Individuals born during events that cause ambient mana to spike have been known to express extreme magical potential and metatraits not possessed by the majority of their metatype. Research into Homo Sapiens Nobilis subjects born during the Awakening, for instance, indicate that ordinary Elven longevity simply does not apply—that there is no upper bound to their telometric regeneration.*

*Effectively, they appear to be immortal.*

**LONGEVITY RESEARCH**

*The goal of the Omega Sequence project is to harness and unlock these “black swan” metatraits, beginning with the question of the longevity factor in Homo Sapiens Nobilis.*

*Treatments for extending human lifespans already exist, of course: organ transplantation can extend life by up to fifty years, and Leonization treatment can theoretically extend life for several hundred years. Yet the drawbacks of these are apparent to any who scratch the surface.*

*Leonization is prohibitively expensive, and erodes the patient’s essence with every treatment, leading to eventual total systemic collapse. Organ transplants can preserve the body, but plaques build up in the patient’s neural tissue, and the patient must take a cornucopia of immunosuppressants for the duration of their life.*

*True longevity lies in preventing aging from occurring at all.*

*Omega Sequence #358G represents our most advanced metagenetic prototype yet. Preliminary results indicate that the test clone’s age will lock at 19 years, and progress no further. In order to test this, we have induced artificial aging of the clone through our FastGro organ replacement process.*

*Unfortunately, this led to an explosive cancer and mutation rate, rendering it nonviable for any other types of metagenetic research. Even so, the value of this test subject cannot be overstated.*

## **CHAPTER 62**

### **THE OFFER**

After everyone had read the data Is0bel had downloaded from the cryo units aboard the freighter, we sat back against the bulkheads of the *Swift Dream* and didn't talk for a while. It was a lot to take in, and what we carried with us seemed suddenly a lot heavier.

"You saw this *thing*?" Duncan asked me.

I nodded.

"And it was alive?"

"If you call that living," Is0bel answered in a small voice.

Gobbet shook her head as she teased one of her rats. The creature stood on its back legs and danced on her thigh as she dangled a morsel just out of its reach. "Can you imagine the ramifications if these people do what they're trying to do?"

"Fill the world with people who can work in the astral?" Duncan asked.

"That, but think of the consequences of immortality for the masses. We've already seen how overpopulating this planet is detrimental to the environment. And to the people who live here. Those poor individuals in the Walled City are proof enough of that."

"Yeah, well people still have a tendency to kill each other," Duncan growled. "That'll provide some population control."

Gobbet gave the morsel to the rat, watching as it sat on its haunches and ate. "Not enough. Wars don't even do that." She looked at me. "What are you going to do with the tissue and the data?"

I thought about that for a moment. "I don't know. I just want to find the old man, if he's still out there."

"He's still out there," Duncan said.

"The big picture isn't my problem," I said, but I was trying to convince myself, not them. My heart wasn't in just giving up the goods and getting paid for this one.

"You can't just hand that information over," Is0bel said.

"And what do you think Kindly Cheng's gonna do if we don't give it up?" I asked.

No one wanted to answer that one.

I checked the time and discovered it was way past the time frame we'd been given to complete the assignment. "I gotta call the Johnson." I stood and walked toward the stern, where the boat didn't jerk as much as it sped across the ocean.

I entered the number Kindly Cheng had given me, and the commlink rang once before it was picked up.

Tigath Wright looked like the photos in the Omega Sequence file. He was young and handsome, everything elves who lived easy lives were. His brown hair was cut short, and made his pointed ears look big.

*“This is Tigath,”* he said. *“Is the task done?”*

“The cargo was heavily guarded,” I told him, keeping all the revulsion I felt for him from my face and voice. “But we’re done here.”

*“As long as you have the samples and data, that’s all I care about.”* He hesitated. *“Unfortunately, there’s been a complication. I can’t transfer you your payment until we meet in person.”*

That didn’t sound good, and I didn’t hide my displeasure any more.

*“I’ve had a tail on me since I arranged the run with Kindly Cheng,”* he continued. *“I think the Seoulpas have caught up with me, and are watching to see what I’m up to.”*

I knew about the Seoulpas from Seattle. I’d worked hard to stay away from them. They were Korean crime syndicates who’d tightened their hold on Seattle after the Yakuza had opened up a wholesale slaughter of the Seoulpa members. But instead of dying, the Koreans had just fought back harder, and ended up expanding their territory. They were small but organized, and all kinds of lethal.

*“I can shake the tail, but I need to ensure my safety before this is done.”*

“Frankly, that’s not my problem,” I told him, and I knew Kindly Cheng would take the same stance.

Tigath grimaced, then nodded. *“I’ll pay whatever it takes to get them off my back. If I can’t, my family’s still dead.”* He took a breath and let it out. *“I have a safehouse in Ho Chung Village that I set up before landing here. Meet me there—call me when you’re close, and I’ll shake the tail. As long as we get it handled in a hurry, I should be clear to get out of Hong Kong.”*

“My rates just went up. Significantly.” I was still thinking about that thing I’d seen in the cryo chamber.

*“We can discuss whatever extra payment you think is fair once we meet in person.”* Tigath broke the connection.

I looked back at my team.

“He didn’t even dicker over the price,” Isobel said with a suspicious look. “That’s never good.”

I agreed, but before I could tell her that, my commlink vibrated in my fist. I turned it on again.

A young guy with a cybereye and a squared-off haircut looked back at me.

His face was a webwork of old scars. *“You’ve been making a lot of waves lately, haven’t you? Naughty, naughty.”* His confidence showed in his small smile.

“Who the hell are you?” I asked.

## CHAPTER 63

### COUNTER-OFFER

*“My name is Hwang Jae-Min. I run the Blue Heaven Seoulpa Ring. You’ve just stolen something from Eastern Tiger.”*

Whoever this guy was, he knew entirely too much about our biz.

*“Don’t bother denying it,”* he said. *“I’ve got your employer’s commlink hacked. I heard the whole exchange.”*

I just looked at him, waiting. The fact that I didn’t immediately hang up was a sign of weakness, and we both knew it.

*“We both have to live and work in Hong Kong,”* Hwang said. *“You’ve made a bit of a name for yourself, and I respect that. But just like you, I have a job I’m being paid for—and that’s to make sure your employer doesn’t ever get his hands on the data and samples you’ve got. I think we can help each other.”*

“How do you figure?”

*“You’ve been lied to from the very beginning. Once that elf has the data and samples, he’s going to kill you and dump your body in a shallow grave—if he bothers to bury you at all. I have access to information you don’t.”*

“I’m listening,” I said.

*“The elf’s full name is Tigath Wright, and he’s a spy for Tir Tairngire. Some kind of field agent for the Council of Princes.”*

The fact that the elven nation was interested in the Omega Sequence wasn’t surprising, and it was scary as hell. The odds against our completing this run alive had just gone up dramatically.

*“Tigath launched a failed attack on the original research lab in Tacoma,”* Hwang said. *“That’s why Eastern Tiger is moving the project equipment and data*

*to Seoul. He's also tried attacking that ship near Perth and Riau Islands."*

"How do you know all of this?"

*"Tigath may be skilled, but he's piss-poor at Matrix security." Hwang waved dismissively. "We cracked his encryption within an hour of his landing in Hong Kong. We've had eyes and ears on every call, every report, and every take-out order he's made in the Free Enterprise Zone. He's left every team he's hired out in the cold—or worse. You're just the latest in a string of disposable hired help."*

That would explain why Tigath wasn't putting up the cred he'd promised for the run.

*"I understand it's bad for business to cancel a contract," Hwang went on, "but it's much better than being shot in the back of the head."*

"Roger that," Duncan said quietly.

*"Here's my proposal," Hwang said. "You give me the data and samples from Omega Sequence #358G, and I'll give you a cut of what I'm being paid. Then we take care of Tigath together. It's not optimal, I know, but we both come out on top and get to send a simple message—don't fuck with us."*

I made no mention of the fact that I was breaking my contract while Hwang was ending up with the goods we'd risked our lives for. I also noticed he wasn't offering to pick up the tab.

I took the path of least resistance. For the moment. "All right. How do you want to do this?"

*"I'll message you with a time and location near to Tigath's safehouse. Meet me before you go to talk to him. We can spring an ambush on him, and do the trade afterward. I'll bring plenty of backup so you don't have to go in alone."*

"Send me the location of the meet." Once he did, I gave him an ETA and broke the connection.

"You're going to deal with this man?" Isobel asked.

I shook my head, still thinking about the thing in the cryo chamber and all the nightmares I'd been having. "I don't like him any more than I do Tigath."

"You realize we're trapped between two devils," Gobbet said quietly.

"I do, so we're going to have to be very careful with this one. Do you have any friends you can reach out to in order to find out more about these guys?"

## CHAPTER 64

### “HOW DO I KNOW I CAN TRUST YOU?”

By the time we got off the MTR in Ho Chung, we were into the small hours of the night. No one talked much. We weren't in the mood for it after everything we'd been through, not to mention the trials that still remained ahead. Gobbet and Isobel had reached out to a couple of friends they had in the shadows. Both Wichita Red and Timber agreed they'd heard that previous dealings with Tigath had gone exactly as Hwang had described. No one knew anything about Hwang, but the bottom line was that Eastern Tiger wasn't reputed as a trustworthy employer.

The streets stank of urine, and mold covered the nearby buildings, but I took that as a sign that everything within was rotting, too. Shadows of men and women and children, more shambling wrecks than people, got out of our way. We were strapped, and didn't bother hiding it.

“I hate this place,” Isobel said as she looked around. “Everybody gave up on Ho Chung fifteen years ago. They don't get any kind of sanitary service.”

I stayed focused and relied on the commlink's GPS to find the address I was searching for. Too many of them had been worn away or removed.

At the meeting site, Hwang Jae-Min stood in the shadows, a sec drone hovering next to him. Not all of his gear was on his face; it consisted of cutting-edge tech: signal amplifiers, trid projection systems, and a dozen tiny screens over his jacket. He was shorter than I'd expected, but compact and on point.

He bowed and straightened just as I reached him. “Thank you so much for seeing me tonight,” he said. “I realize what an inconvenience it must be for you.”

Duncan snorted behind me, but I ignored it. “You treated me with respect. That got my attention.”

“I'm glad it did. I don't tolerate rudeness. Neither should you.”

I smiled at him. We were all friends here until the bullets started flying. “You said you had proof Tigath isn't who he said he was.”

“I wouldn’t waste your time with a face to face meeting unless I had data to show you.” Hwang pulled a datachip from one of his pockets. “Go on, slot it. You’ll see what I mean.”

I inserted the chip into my comm and pulled up the contents. The initial images were of a gun battle at an Eastern Tiger facility parking lot. Lone Star blasted four people I presumed were shadowrunners into dead meat.

The second set of photos was closer to home. Literally. I immediately recognized the streets of Touristville, Redmond. Two of the runners from the earlier battle stood in front of a tall and haughty elf who was the spitting image of Tigath Wright. He held a large handgun at his side.

“Your employer,” Hwang said sarcastically, “was responsible for a botched shadowrun against the Omega Complex project facility in Tacoma. The entire team responsible was killed, but Eastern Tiger managed to track their movements. The second set of photos came from a private citizen’s drone footage—and, as you can see, Tigath is hiring them.”

“That’s suspicious,” I admitted, “but it doesn’t prove anything.”

“You wouldn’t be the first he’s lied to.” Hwang folded his arms over his chest, and I knew I was getting scanned from top to bottom. “The only question that remains is what you intend to do about it.”

“Tell me about the Omega Sequence project.”

Hwang snorted and shook his head. “Do I look like a scientist to you?”

“Maybe not, but you’re a guy who does his research.”

Hwang’s eyes gleamed in appreciation at my point. “There’s not a whole lot of information on the Omega Sequence project or any of its predecessors. There should be, because back in the mid ’40s, that kind of research was big news with corporate and academic scientists alike. Three major studies were underway. The thing is, there’s no record of most of those studies anymore. They’ve all disappeared.”

“What happened to them?”

“Funding lapsed and the test data vanished, in some cases. Some scientists disappeared, others were disgraced. Two committed suicide—or were killed in a way that looked like suicide. At UC Berkeley, for instance, Dr. Derek McLean headed up the Omega Sequence style project. But there was an organized smear campaign in ’48 which left him unemployed and his theories on other subjects disgraced.”

Whoever had been behind the purge had been thorough. Drake Wang, a



contact of Gobbet's and a mage who specialized in HMHVV-afflicted entities, had confirmed that.

"The thing is," Hwang continued, "McLean's 'disgraced' theories have been largely proven right over the last eight years, but it's too late. He's been blacklisted. That's the way it went with all of these scientists. Most are out of a job, some are dead. Others are just missing."

"What's Tir Tairngire got to do with this?" I asked. That had been a troubling point Drake Wang had brought up too. Gobbet hadn't given him much, but the mage had still focused on that with keen interest.

"The research related to the issue of possible elven immortality—or at least extreme longevity. Beyond that, your guess is as good as mine." Hwang rubbed his chin. "All I know is that the money funding anti-immortality research comes out of Portland. At the end of the day, though, it doesn't matter to me if they stifled the research, or why. I'm getting paid to make sure they don't take Eastern Tiger's property."

He was getting paid. No mention of paying us yet. Since I wasn't asking for payment, I wanted to push back a little so he wouldn't get suspicious. "How do I know I can trust you?"

He spread his hands and smiled. "If I break my word to someone as respected as Kindly Cheng, my life won't be worth the subway fare it'll take to get home. You can trust me because if I betrayed you and lived, it would only be the start of my troubles."

I mulled that over, letting him get the full effect he needed to buy what I was selling. "I'm ready." I nodded. "Let's go see what Tigath is up to."

"Good." Hwang slapped my shoulder, and I decided to sweep my jacket for a tracker later. "You go to the spot where you arranged to meet him. I'll collect my crew and get them ready. When you're prepared, ping me. Tigath won't know what hit him."

"Sounds good to me." We separated, and I led the way through the broken streets and black shadows to our next meet.

# CHAPTER 65

## IMPASSE

Tigath Wright stood in the center of an abandoned outdoor marketplace. Rusted tables and chairs occupied the cracked concrete that was surrounded by a sea of dying grass. During better times, the marketplace had probably been a neighborhood gathering place families had enjoyed.

Now it was a windblown, shadow-filled combat zone waiting to be lit up. I measured out the room we had to maneuver, and where I'd post up snipers and cover fire. Duncan would be doing the same. Gobbet and Isobel had been around enough to know the lay of the land, and they also had the advantage of having been here before.

I didn't like our chances, especially caught between Tigath's crew and the Seoulpa ring. But they were what we had to work with, and the fact that the gangers hated each other should work in our favor.

I hoped.

Tense from head to toe, Tigath tracked me as I approached. He wore an elegant coat that was cut to disguise whatever he had under it. He seemed to relax a bit when I stopped in front of him.

"I'm glad you're here," he said in a melodic voice. "I could swear I'm being watched everywhere I go." He glanced around nervously. "I don't like being out here. It's too exposed."

I didn't fall for his innocent routine because I kept remembering that single eye in that horrible cluster of pustules and cancers.

A police siren wailed in the distance, and Tigath's hand slid under his jacket, confirming he was armed as well.

"Did you bring it?" he asked. "The faster I can get those documents and specimens and leave Hong Kong, the safer I'll be."

"I've got some questions that need answering first," I said. I didn't know how long it would take for Hwang to get his people into play, but I didn't want to engage Tigath before Hwang and his troops were ready to take on part of the load.

Tigath's innocent look darkened into a glower. "My life is on the line, and you want to ask questions? Do you have any idea how stupid that sounds?"

"Hey, my neck's on the block, too," I replied. "I'm gonna have to explain to my employer why I wasn't finished with this when I was supposed to be."

"Fine, fine!" Tigath swore. "Whatever. Ask whatever the hell you think you

need to know. I just want to get this over with.”

“How did Eastern Tiger find out what you were up to?”

Tigath bared his teeth in a grimace. “If I knew that, don’t you think I’d have taken extra precautions when I landed in Hong Kong?” He shook his head. “Maybe they’ve been spying on me for longer than I suspected. Or maybe they only suspect what I’m up to, but I don’t know for certain.”

“Maybe you should let us keep the data,” I said. “That way if they find you, they won’t get it back. It’s a more powerful position.”

“I can’t take that chance, okay?” He looked desperate now. “I want my family and my life back. If that means giving in, so be it.”

“What’s this change of plans mean for your family?” The background we’d gotten on him showed that he didn’t have a family, but it was a question I could raise to fill time.

Running a hand through his hair, Tigath sighed. “I don’t know. But if they got criminals hunting me, they’ll obviously have my family under guard as well.”

“Shouldn’t they be making threats or issuing demands by now?” That was another inconsistency I’d spotted in his story.

“Well, aren’t you the goddamn expert?” the elf snarled.

I held a hand up to halt Duncan, because I knew he was already moving forward.

“Look, I don’t know what they’re thinking,” Tigath said. “Maybe they believe it’s easier to just eliminate me. All I know is that I thought I could get away with exposing Eastern Tiger. I guess that was just a pipe dream.”

I pinged Hwang. “I’m not handing over the specimens or the documents.”

Tigath’s eyes narrowed in confusion. Then he got angry. “What do you mean?”

“It means I’m here to collect the goods, you lying little bastard!” Hwang shouted from behind me. “You didn’t think shadowrunners would show you any more loyalty than you showed them, did you? You expect them to honor the word of a lying, cowardly dog?”

Tigath bolted, unlimbering a large-caliber handgun and firing at me. I was already moving as well, retreating with the hail of bullets, letting them drive me to shelter behind one of the tables.

The elf took cover behind a kiosk, with shimmering waves coiled restlessly around his hands. “What now, then?” he called to me. “It seems we’re at an impasse. And I’m not about to go back to Portland empty-handed.”

I whipped the Ingram out on its shoulder sling and raked Tigath's position with a dozen rounds, then dodged just ahead of the fireball he threw at me in return.

"Company's coming!" Duncan bellowed.

Beyond Tigath, I spotted armored men moving in the shadows, all of them headed for the party.

In the next minute, auto-rifle fire and incendiary spells lit up the darkness.

## CHAPTER 66

### "FRIENDLY" FIRE

I grabbed more cover as the fireball's flames wrapped around the table where I'd taken shelter. The heat caused the heavy lacquer finish to bubble up and explode in little puddles that reminded me of the thing in the cryo chamber.

Duncan, Gobbet, and Isobel had already taken cover as well.

I emptied the Ingram and cut down two of Tigath's men, then slapped in a fresh magazine. The flames clinging to the table heated up, interfering with my low-light vision. I opened a comm channel to the others. "Head south! Let these two kill each other!"

"*Copy that,*" Duncan responded. He swiveled with his shotgun and fired almost point blank into a spherical drone zipping toward him. The drone bobbed, but kept coming as Duncan fired two more rounds. It exploded only a couple meters from him, bursting into a falling cloud of shrapnel around him.

By that time, I was running, following Gobbet and Isobel as we sprinted for the buildings to the south. The cover was more solid there, but I knew we'd be pursued. We still had the data and samples Hwang and Tigath wanted.

Gobbet waved a hand and a wave of shimmering energy slammed into a fire spirit, rocking it back. I added a full magazine of rounds to the carnage, knocking embers and chunks off the thing and driving it back even more.

Only a couple of steps behind me and closing fast, Duncan fired two more

rounds into the spirit and it went to pieces, disappearing in a whirl of flames.

The battlefield behind us looked like a war zone with all the muzzle flashes. The harsh *cracks* of gunfire trapped between the building created a din that blocked normal hearing.

Breathing hard, Duncan and I reloaded while Gobbet called up an earth spirit, the huge thing taking shape next to her in the alley.

“We need to get out of here,” Isobel said as she reloaded her grenade launcher.

“We can’t,” Duncan said. “Even if we somehow manage to escape, they’d come after us.”

“But Kindly Cheng will provide protection.” Isobel looked hopeful.

Duncan snorted. “If you think that old woman would be happy with us dragging this drek to her door, you’re whacked. She’d slot us herself and figure out a way to collect the bounty on our heads.”

“He’s right,” Gobbet said, not sounding happy about it. “One way or another, we have to end this.”

“Then hope those guys out there can all shoot straight,” Duncan growled. “Even if they don’t manage to all kill each other, it’ll cut down on the odds.”

I swapped out the Ingram for my AK-97, pulled out the telescoping stock, and started picking off gangers on both sides, adding to the confusion and panic on the battlefield. Duncan did the same, and for a moment our luck held. Then we got noticed and bullets and astral missiles pummeled the building where we took cover.

“Fall back!” I said.

Even as we turned and ran, though, a knot of Seoulpa gangers rounded the corner at the end of the alley. For a moment, they held up, not counting on coming face to face with an earth spirit. The thing waded into them, swinging fists the size of anvils, cracking armor and splintering bones.

Duncan threw himself forward, throwing his arms wide and taking down three of the gangers with him in a tangle of arms and legs. Isobel barely held back from unloading a grenade into them and switched to her pistol.

I fired my assault rifle into the lead ganger’s face, watched it come apart, and followed his corpse into the mass of gangers as a handful of bullets peppered my armor and tore off a chunk of my right earlobe. Someone grabbed the AK-97’s barrel and I started to fire, but I wasn’t certain where Duncan was. Instead, I swung the assault rifle and buttstroked the guy in front of me in the head, then

released the weapon and let my momentum carry me into them.

One of the guys bent low, grabbing his gut, and I thought maybe Isobel had shot him or Gobbet had hit him with something. I threw myself forward, rolled across his back, and slid between two other gangers. Landing on my feet, I yanked my pistol out and turned back to the gangers, who were only then realizing I'd slipped behind them.

I brought the pistol up and fired rapidly. Warm blood flecked my face and got in my left eye, but I kept firing till the pistol ran dry. By that time I was shooting gangers on the ground, making sure they were down for good.

Battered and broken, the earth spirit roared and banged its fists against its chest in savage celebration.

To my surprise, Duncan echoed the sentiment, howling and thumping his chest as well. It was an old thing, something that harkened back to the days when men had lived in caves and gloried in bloody victory.

I felt it too, but before I could make up my mind whether to join them, someone shot me in the back. The armor held, but I felt the breath go out of me as I staggered.

A machine gun-equipped drone fired a volley of rounds into the earth spirit. No longer strong, the creature collapsed and fell, then vanished.

Duncan raised his pistol and for a minute it looked like he was about to shoot me.

An arm wrapped around my throat and someone screwed a pistol barrel into my bloody ear. Hot breath cascaded across the back of my neck.

“Put down your weapons!” Hwang roared. “Put them down, or I will shoot this dog just as I killed that elven thief!”

Too late, I remembered the hand he'd put on my shoulder. I'd been right. He'd tagged me with a tracker and had his drone keep an eye on me during the battle.

Two other Seoulpa gangers joined Hwang, standing to one side as they covered my team.

“*Duncan.*” I subvocalized over the commlink so Hwang couldn't hear me. “*Take out the drone.*”

“*He'll kill you.*”

“*Maybe, but even if you get him, that drone will take out me or one of you. It has to go.*”

Duncan's face hardened beneath the splotched blood coating it. “*Copy that.*”

“Gobbet, Is0bel, that leaves these other two for you.”

“I want the goods!” Hwang bellowed, and spit coated my neck.

Before they could reply, I reared my head back, turned to my left as I brought my left arm up into Hwang’s forearm. The gun fired, and the bullet burned across my cheek. I kept turning, throwing my weight into it, and fired my left elbow back into Hwang’s face, smashing his cyber eye and driving shards into his head.

The drone blew into pieces a few meters away as Gobbet and Is0bel opened fire. I chopped my pistol into Hwang’s right wrist, breaking it and knocking his weapon away before he could fire again. Still in motion, I spun and shoved my pistol into the center of his face and fired until he went down and the pistol blew back empty.

Nobody moved for a moment. I looked around at my team. We were all still standing.

Then, blood leaking from under the armor at her waist, Is0bel fell.

## CHAPTER 67

### “BE PREPARED TO SHOOT YOUR WAY IN.”

At Is0bel’s side, I tore away her armor and shirt and saw where a bullet had pierced through her side. Blood ran steady, not in bursts, letting me know no arteries had been hit.

“Let me tend to her,” Gobbet said as she knelt beside her friend. Her rat companions stood on her shoulders and chattered anxiously.

I backed off and pulled up my AK-97, watching one end of the alley while Duncan watched the other. When I glanced down at Is0bel, Gobbet was pressing her hands to the wound and shimmering energy turned her flesh blue.

“I’m not gifted enough to completely heal her,” Gobbet said. “We’ll have to get her to a doctor. Kindly Cheng will have someone who can take care of that. We just have to get her back to the *Bolthole*.”

“Roger that,” Duncan said. “Prep her and I’ll carry her.”

Gobbet reached into her medkit and took out slap patches loaded with coagulants and pain blockers. After a moment, Isobel's eyes rolled back up in her head and she relaxed.

“Ready.” Gobbet gathered her things and stood.

Duncan slung his shotgun, then carefully picked the dwarf up. She looked incredibly small in his big arms, like a child.

“Let's go,” he growled.

I took the lead and we went.

Kindly Cheng wasn't happy about getting a doc for Isobel. In fact, she wasn't happy about a lot of things. I sat in the *Bolthole's* main room, along with Duncan and Racter, and listened to her rant. Gaichu sat in a corner by himself, munching on something from a takeout container that I was certain wasn't found on any restaurant menu.

Gobbet was with the doc and Isobel in their cabin.

*“I don't know how to describe this job other than by calling it a complete clusterfuck,”* Kindly Cheng stated.

“Either way it went down,” I said, “we—you—weren't getting paid. Both of those guys meant to double-cross us on some level.” I didn't tell her that the idea of turning over what we'd found sickened me.

She drummed her lacquered nails on a tabletop, took a hit off her cigar, and softened a little. Maybe she recognized the hard spot we'd been in, maybe she was glad Isobel hadn't died.

Finally, she said, *“You did the right thing, killing both Tigath and Hwang. I don't appreciate worms who try to stiff me, and I sure as shit don't like the Seoulpa rings.”*

I didn't say anything, simply because I figured that was safest.

*“I've attached payment,”* Kindly Cheng continued. *“Nobody paid me, but I'm sure I can sell the data and samples you brought back. Consider this your eventual cut of that sale.”*

I didn't bother to tell her that I'd erased part of the data and contaminated the tissue samples. If someone resurrected the Omega Sequence project, it wasn't going to be through anything I'd given them.

*“Let's discuss new business,”* Kindly Cheng suggested.



Of course. Duncan growled a curse.

Unruffled, Kindly Cheng went on. *“Little birds have been whispering in my ear about an urgent and high-paying run. Steel Arm Lu, a Red Pole, managed to get his hands on information concerning a prototype laser weapon in development by Ares Asia Holdings.”*

AAH was a division of Ares Macrotechnology. Headquartered in Detroit, the megacorp was heavily invested in security and weapons development. They also ran Knight Errant, one of the largest security providers in the world.

*“For years,”* Kindly Cheng continued, *“the Yellow Lotus and the Red Dragon have been locked in a cold war. Despite this, we remain evenly matched. Neither one can attack the other without being exposed to devastating reprisals.”*

So this was a run on a personal level.

*“Lu wants to change this, and he has a plan. Rather than strike directly, he intends to aim external forces at the Red Dragon. Specifically, Knight Errant. He intends to frame a White Paper Fan named Golden Fong, making it appear that the Red Dragons have been bribing Ares researchers for classified data. Two leading drone and energy weapons researchers have recently transferred from London to Hong Kong, and are running the laser project.”*

Received files began stacking up on my commlink.

*“Doctors Taylor and Hardingham were respected in Europe,”* Kindly Cheng said, *“but in Hong Kong, they remain unknown quantities. They’re untrusted, and therefore are considered untrustworthy—in other words, perfect targets.”* She lit a fresh cigar. *“We will provide data that will make it look as if the researchers were contacted by Golden Fong and made quite a bit of money, but grew tired of the arrangement.”*

Already I didn’t like the way this job was shaping up.

*“Transfer the attached files to a datachip,”* Kindly Cheng said. *“They are bundled with a worm program that will auto-execute when inserted into the appropriate systems.”* She grimaced. *“Isobel’s wounds will sideline her for a time, but you should be able to accomplish this easily enough.”*

I hoped that was true.

*“You will need to plant data in the visitor records system and the camera systems in Hardingham and Taylor’s lab,”* Kindly Cheng said. *“Financial data is to be transferred to Doctor Taylor’s personal terminal. That in and of itself will not be enough to ensure Knight Errant’s involvement, however. Planting the data is only the first part of your task. The next part is where a heavier touch will be*

required.”

I swapped concerned looks with Duncan; we both knew things were going to get bloody on this one.

*“You will also need to steal the prototype laser weapon. There is a GPS tracking device attached to it, which Lu will plant deep in Red Dragon territory. The apparent theft of a prototype weapon by a disgruntled triad member should convince Ares to dispatch overwhelming force against the Red Dragons, dealing them a vicious blow. As a note, Lu does not care what becomes of the laser weapon, if you wish to sell it or keep it, feel free.”*

“Hell yeah,” Duncan said. “We’re the ones taking the risk.”

Racter leaned forward, forgetting about his cigarette dangling between his lips for a moment. I wondered about his sudden interest.

*“I have also attached a map of your extraction route from the building,”* Kindly Cheng told us as more files landed in my comm. *“During the facility’s expansion in 2052, Ares Asia was forced to extend their foundations deeper into the island. They drove piles through the former site of the Central MTR station, which partially collapsed during the Dalu Bay earthquake of 2044.”*

“Well, that doesn’t sound dangerous at all,” Duncan grouched.

Kindly Cheng ignored him. *“Practically, this means that you can exit through the basement, directly onto the MTR line through Central. With any luck, you can be gone without anyone knowing how. Unfortunately, this route is heavily alarmed, so you will be forced to go in the front door. If you can con the front desk, you should have no problems—the facility is both an office and a residence, so strange people coming and going at odd hours is not unusual.”* She paused. *“If you’re not up to fast talking, however, be prepared to shoot your way in.”*

That was not going to be the way we got in. There had to be another way.

*“Lu does not care if you are loud or quiet,”* Kindly Cheng said. *“But a word of caution: he came by all this information via the loose lips of one of the research team. Other fixers know of this job. Move fast, and you are guaranteed success—but there are definitely other shadowrunners with an eye on your prize.”*

“Great,” Duncan said. “Competition is just what this run needs.”

*“Just be better than those other people, my sweets,”* Kindly Cheng told us. *“Now, may I tell Lu that you will take this job?”*

When she asked in that tone of voice—or any tone, actually—I knew we couldn’t refuse.

## CHAPTER 68

### DRONING ON

“My friend, there is something that I would like to discuss with you.”

Glancing up from my battle kit, I saw Racter standing in my cabin doorway. I’d been wondering if he was going to come clean about his interest in the latest run. “Say your piece.”

“Thank you.” Racter stepped into my cabin. “There are men—former colleagues of mine—at that Ares facility. I tracked them here from Russia.” His voice was cold and hard as Siberian permafrost. “They are thieves. They stole my research. Tracking them is the reason why I moved to Hong Kong in the first place. I want—no, I *need*—you to bring me along on this job.”

“With Is0bel off the grid for the moment,” I said, “we can use you on this. Especially with all of the computer work ahead of us.”

Racter smiled. “Thank you, my friend. You will not regret this decision, I guarantee it.”

I hoped not. I nodded, and he left. I went back to packing everything I thought we’d need. Getting a lot of weapons through security wasn’t going to be possible, so we had to go in light, and take what we needed along the way.

We arrived in central Hong Kong at midnight. Even though the Ares corp worked 24/7, I’d figured fewer employees would be on the clock at that time. I hoped to lower the odds and lessen the amount of collateral damage. Maybe Steel Arm Lu didn’t care about the people there, but I saw no reason for innocent wageslaves to die.

The building stood like a towering icon of greed among others just like it. Neon glared out over all the exteriors, advertising each corp’s wares. Skybridges connected them to each other, creating a spider’s web of transportation several

floors above the streets.

We went up to the fifth floor without any problems, and ended up in a gleaming reception room. Ares ads covered the walls and vids juiced the built-in screens. An antiseptic odor burned my nostrils.

“We’re looking for a lab between floors fifteen and forty,” Racter said in a soft voice. His drone stood poised beside him, tethered to its master through a cyberlink. Koschei blinked and twittered like some kind of giant insect. “Everything below fifteen is shopping and recreation, and the residential area spans forty-one to ninety-two.”

He’d cased the building earlier, and added his intel to the information Kindly Cheng had sent. Duncan had hit up a contact he’d made at Club 88, a street sam who called himself El Duce, and got the same info.

“The auto-repair circuits should be up there as well,” Racter went on. “I know Taylor and Hardingham. They’ll keep it close to the main lab so they can work on the project in their off-hours, and they’ll need specialized testing equipment—things you can’t fit in an apartment, even a big one.”

“So everything we’re looking for will be near the main lab?” Duncan asked.

“Yes.” Racter nodded. “Once we plant the altered visitor record data, we can find the lab’s precise location. From there, everything we need should be nearby.”

We stepped up to the reception area, where a young man in a crisp shirt and tie looked us over. He didn’t appear to be impressed, and his hand dropped below the desk.

“Welcome to Ares Macrotechnology,” he greeted with a false smile. “May I help you?”

“I am *Doctor Racter*.” The gravitas in the Russian rigger’s voice surprised me. “I am a former employee of Grishin-Aviakor. I was the director of drone development for over ten years, and the drone you see,” he waved to Koschei, “is part of my latest project.”

The receptionist checked the screen on his PDA. “You aren’t on the guest list.”

Racter’s voice rose, filled with self-importance. “It’s a fully autonomous quadrupedal defense and attack drone with integrated fire direction data management, adaptive autosoft parsing, and modular weapons integration. This drone re-defines *bleeding edge*. What’s more, it has an adaptive experience registry subprogram—to wit, it learns!”

For a moment, when the receptionist just blinked at Racter, I thought he’d

overplayed his hand.

“Oh, I see.” The receptionist opened up a window on his PDA. “What should I put down on the arrival sheet?”

“Put down that I am here to make a sales pitch,” Racter said. “If there is any company in this world with an interest in cutting edge combat drones, it should be Ares Macrotechnology. I have a full report on field and stress tests, part time-to-failure, and combat efficacy.” He pursed his lips. “And I do not like being delayed.”

“Very well.” The receptionist finished a final note and handed us visitor identification tags. “Please stay on this floor until your escort from the drone research division arrives.”

We walked to a nearby corner, and I felt like everything was slowly and steadily sliding out of control. “Are you ready to deal with an escort?” I asked Racter.

“Of course not. I just wanted visitor badges.” Racter looked around. “Perhaps I could arrange for some *downtime* regarding security measures.”

I disliked that idea as well, but the only other choice was to scrub the mission.

“Come,” Racter said imperiously. “I know what needs to be done.”

We followed him into a nearby bathroom.

“Secure the door,” Racter ordered as he reached under his jacket and took out a multi-tool.

Duncan stuck a big boot in front of the door and leaned on it. Gobbet stood near him, looking as tense as I felt.

Ignoring us, Racter removed the duct cover on the wall and commanded Koschei into the ventilation shaft. “This connects to the room where the elevator controls and some of the security measures are. Once Koschei has disabled the security card readers, no one will know where we are, and the badges don’t reveal that information to the naked eye. We’ll have to walk up, but no one will stop us.”

Koschei scuttled out of sight.

“You’re sure about that, Doc?” Gobbet asked.

“Quite.” Racter smiled. “Now give me a moment.”

I had to give it to the guy. Koschei didn’t make a sound and was quick, returning within a few minutes.

“All right,” Racter said as he replaced the vent cover. “It’s done. We now have access to the upper floors.”

An escort hadn't arrived, so apparently Racter wasn't very high on their to-do list. However, we had the badges, and I had to trust that the security measures had been altered—we didn't have much choice.

We followed his lead to a small room next to the room behind the receptionist's desk and Racter took a seat at a public computer terminal. "If you don't mind, I'll handle this."

I handed him the datachip I'd made with the information Kindly Cheng had provided. He worked the keyboard as quickly as Isobel did.

Welcome to Ares Asia Holdings. Please note, all activity on public terminals is logged and recorded for security purposes.

With luck, we'd be gone before any recordings were checked.

Please state your query.

Racter input the information from the datachip, and the logs changed, showing that Golden Fong had visited several times in the past. Then he started a search for Dr. Taylor.

*Dr. Taylor, P.*

*Taylor\_p@aresasia.HKCentral.HKFEZ*

*Drone Automation Division, Floor 27.*

*Biography:*

*Dr. Taylor has transferred to the Hong Kong offices of Ares Asia Holdings from his previous post with Ares Europe in London. His research focuses primarily on drone weapons technology, although previous work has centered on cryogenics technology and the impact of the Matrix on social structures and human development.*

*Dr. Taylor is joint chair of the Ares Asia Drone Research Laboratories with Dr. Ian Hardingham. Current projects include expansion of the Hangzhou Bay tidal power system, a proposal to expand the Hong Kong MTR maintenance program, and further research into machine learning.*

Racter smiled coldly. "That checks out with what I had. I'll soon have those thieves." He entered a request for Dr. Hardingham's info.

*Dr. Hardingham, I.  
Hardingham\_i@aresasia.HKCentral.HKFEZ.  
Advanced Drone Weaponry Division, Floor 27.  
Biography.*

*Dr. Hardingham has transferred to the Hong Kong offices of Ares Asia Holdings from his previous post with Ares Europe in London. Dr. Hardingham holds advanced degrees in weapons design and mechanical engineering, and holds several patents in the field of artificial intelligence research.*

*As joint chair of the Ares Asia Drone Research Laboratories, Dr. Hardingham's duties are primarily related to the research and development of new artificial intelligence solutions that will keep Ares Macrotechnology competitive in this rapidly changing world. While the specific work of the Drone Research Laboratories is classified, previous efforts have been centered around self-repairing machinery, robotic game theory, and collective machine learning.*

Racter logged out from the computer and got up. "Now, let's go find those stairs, shall we?"

## **CHAPTER 69**

### **PROJECTS**

A pair of sec men stood waiting for us when the elevator doors opened. They checked our badges, looked irritated, and grumbled that the security readers were acting up. Racter was good at playing the disgruntled scientist called out of bed by a new idea. Evidently the guards had their marching orders regarding dealing with surly scientists who brought in the big nuyen.

They stepped aside and we entered the main area of the lab. The floor was laid out around a central hub, with small offices spinning off of it. Racter led us to the center hub and settled himself at another computer.

“We’ll upload the worm and the faked camera footage through this one,” he said as he booted the datachip and set to work.

Duncan stood by calmly, searching for all the available cover in the big room the same way I did. Both of us noted the freestanding safe against one wall. Gobbet scattered her little friends out as additional security, and they raced across the floor and took up hiding places.

Racter actually hummed while he worked. I didn’t recognize the tune, but it sounded happy. “That task is done. Now let’s see what we can find on those thieves.”

He tapped the keyboard again, and I watched as screen after screen of information popped up.

*Ares Asia Directed Energy Weapons Laboratory Annex*

*“Aut viam invenian aut faciam”*

*Please direct your query.*

“The auto-repair project, if you please,” Racter said to the computer. He tapped more keys.

*Auto-Repair Project*

*Attention: all information contained herein is considered SECRET/ORCON.*

*Duplication of files is forbidden. Authorized eyes only.*

*Select file.*

A memo popped up.

*Congratulations, everyone!*

*Ares Europe’s given us the go-ahead to enter the Griffin drone prototypes into this season of Desert Wars. Between the auto-repair circuitry, the MP laser prototypes, and the self-organizing threat assessment programs, I think we’ve got a great chance at being one of the standout stars this season. Obviously, we have a lot of work to do between now and the kickoff event, so I’m expecting plenty of crunch time.*

*I know each and every one of you wants this as much as I do. It’s hard for me to express how proud I am of this team and all the hard work you’ve put in over the past year. If we can pull this off, we’re positioned to be one of the biggest*



*teams in security drone hardware in the past ten years. If we buckle down and put in the hours required, I know we can do it.*

*Glenlivet's in my office. Come get some.*

*—Dr. Taylor*

Racter shook his head sadly. “Taylor, how far you’ve fallen. When we worked together, he’d never have written this kind of limp corporate missive. We all cared enough about our work that we never had to motivate the team like this. He’s become a management tool of Ares Macrotech. I doubt there’s much left of the passionate young researcher I once knew.”

“You think he’s lost his edge?” I asked, drawn in despite our risky situation. Racter was a puzzle to me. I liked the insight I was getting, and I knew I might not get it again.

“Not as such,” he replied. “I believe he’s still quite capable as a researcher. But when you spend all of your time managing a budget or organizing your team, what time is left to do the actual work? The reason you got into the field in the first place?” He shook his head. “No, thank you. That is a disgusting world.”

He toggled on *DESERT WARS FIELD TESTING* and another screen opened.

*Hey Ian,*

*I've been encountering a worrying bug in the latest multi-drone mesh network tests. After checking on it, I'm pretty sure it originates in the self-organization subroutines.*

*When the Griffin drones go into self-diagnostic mode and start sharing their telemetry data after field activity, they stop responding to external commands. Even kicking the debugger over to admin mode won't stop them.*

*It looks like they're not responding to outside commands because they're identifying activity orders as non-critical in comparison to their attempts to share and learn from each other's telemetry.*

*It's downright spooky. They even tried to push me out of the room during one of the tests, because one starting firing the onShareCleanupBasecamp function, and the rest picked up on it. They identified me as an object to be removed from their secure space—and the worst part is that the trigger condition was me trying to shut down the mesh network.*

*I don't know, Ian. I don't like the idea of drones making value judgments about administrator orders. I'd like to strip out the self-organization code for*

*future tests until I can debug it. I understand that we're trying to play catchup with Renraku on the pseudo-intelligence front, but the fallout if this bug spreads could be pretty catastrophic.*

*—Dr. Yan*

Racter opened a file on *RE: SELF-ORGANIZATION SUBROUTINE BUGS*.

*Just a heads up for the team—hold on further self-organization tests until you get the all clear from me, Hardingham, or Yan.*

*There's a bug where the drone network refuses external orders while they're pursuing their self-generated directives: data sharing, learning, battle examination, et cetera.*

*It's nothing critical, but it's going to make debugging other systems a pain in the ass until we get it sorted out. General tests are still a go.*

*—Dr. Taylor*

“Ten to one,” Racter said, “they’re still using my old code. It sounds like the same kind of bug I encountered during my early tests in Moscow.” He ran a hand through his hair and squinted at the screen. “The problem is that they’re trying to give orders to the drones, while the drones themselves have prioritized their own desires over those of the end-user. They’ll never respond so long as they’re in group reflection mode.”

“Drones don’t have desires,” I said, feeling uncomfortable that the thought even had to be voiced. Drones were tools, nothing more.

“Perhaps *desire* is not the best word. But they have priorities. Terminating a threat is a higher priority than retreating to recharge at a base station, for instance. The drones are rejecting external orders because they’re a lower priority than finishing the data sharing sequence. The key is to ensure that they *want* to do your work, by weighting external commands so that they mesh with internal priorities. I ordered the drone to recharge *while* attacking, for instance. I would accept both commands. A terribly simple solution.”

I just looked at him.

Racter sighed. “I do not expect you to understand, my friend, but trust me when I say that while it may not work for you, it does for me. Koschei is the single most effective solitary drone in the world when it comes to independent planning and threat control. It got that way through my love and respect for

science. It may unnerve you, but it's a very effective process.”

He moved on and opened up another screen, pulling up another email about the cancellation of the Olympics, which none of us cared about, and then only an email to someone named Xia.

*Xia,*

*I was hoping to take a look at your power output test data sometime soon. I'm going to be in and out of the office all day, so just let yourself in and put them on my desk. The code is 98144.*

*—Dr. Taylor*

“Let's have a look in Taylor's office, shall we?” Racter closed down the computer and headed to the back of the lab.

## **CHAPTER 70**

### **GASSED!**

The code worked fine, and the door clicked open.

Taylor's office was neat and orderly, everything in its place. A lot of drone prototypes and proofs of concept occupied his shelves.

Duncan, Koschei, and Gobbet set up on the door while I followed Racter to Taylor's computer. Racter brought the device online easily enough.

*User: Dr. Taylor, P.*

*Ares Asia Holdings wishes you a productive day.*

“Plant the financial data,” I told Racter.

He booted up the datachip and did just that in seconds. It went off without a hitch.

“Care to take a look at his project records?” Racter asked. Then he hit the

keypad before I could answer. "I would."

The screen blossomed with a new image.

*"Redline" Prototype directory active. Authorized users only.*

*Remember: security is everyone's business.*

*Enter query.*

Racter toggled the first one.

*Attention: Ares Asia Holdings employees and residents.*

*Last week, Knight Errant officers responsible for the security of this facility received several reports of suspicious activity in the public area of the building. At 13:31 last Tuesday, security footage showed a male ork, approximately 20-28 years of age, entering the public mezzanine areas of the building. The subject was seen attempting to gain access to restricted areas.*

*The subject exited the facility before Knight Errant could intercept and question him. Reports from Ares citizenry indicates the subject was asking about research labs working on directed energy weapons.*

*Several hours later, the subject was seen re-entering the building from a side entrance, wearing a custodial uniform. Knight Errant guards attempted to detain the subject, but during their arrest attempt both guards were severely injured.*

*Any employee or resident should contact security immediately if they see this ork. Do not attempt to detain him or interact with him in any way. The subject is considered highly dangerous.*

"I suppose," Racter said, "that is one of the other shadowrunner teams Ms. Cheng mentioned."

"Yeah."

Racter opened another file.

*From: Knight Errant Security*

*Dr. Taylor,*

*It's come to our attention that you have not been treating this threat with the seriousness we believe it deserves. Please remember that the safety of your person and your research is not solely your concern—a strike against you is a strike against all of Ares Macrotechnology. When engaging in off-site entertainment from*

*now on, we would request that you travel with a group.*

*Thank you.*

There were other entries regarding tech stuff that made my head spin. I urged Racter to open the email folder. We got lucky on one of them.

*They changed your door code while you were on vacation. The chips got a little fried when someone forgot to close the shutters in the laser lab when they were testing one of the new emitters. It's 23847.*

“Excellent.” Racter looked up at me. “I suppose there’s no problem with acquiring the laser prototype before we go.”

“Let’s be quick,” I said.

He led the way and I followed him to a small hallway to the right. A Knight Errant officer in full armor stood in a sec checkpoint off to the right.

“Hey!” he shouted. “You can’t go back there!”

Gobbet glanced at me, and I nodded. She waved a hand and a gust of wind blew the guard off his feet into the wall behind him. I darted him with a DMSO sleep pellet before he hit the ground. His eyes rolled back up into his head and he lay there, unconscious.

The code let us through the lab door. I glanced around, making certain no one else was around, then walked to the back of the room where the prototype sat on a table. If I hadn’t seen an image of it in Taylor’s files, I wouldn’t have known what to look for. Racter reached it before I did, and he lifted it up like a kid picking up a new toy.

He turned to us. “This—”

A sudden explosion cut him off, followed immediately by dozens of alarms screaming to life. Green gas spewed into the room. I didn’t know if it was lethal or not, but at this point even anesthesia gas would have cost us our lives. I swapped out the trunk gun for my pistol. Duncan and Gobbet armed themselves as well.

“It wasn’t me!” Racter shouted over the din.

Behind him, through tempered transplas panels, a section of the ceiling in the other lab dropped to the floor. Four figures stumbled through the wreckage and the cloud of dust that swirled around them. I remembered the security reports about the ork and Kindly Cheng’s warning about other shadowrunners trying for the

prototype.

Our competition had arrived.

## CHAPTER 71

### BARGAINING

“Slotting amateurs!” Duncan roared, staring through the transplas. “We had this sewn up till they arrived on the scene!”

The four people on the other side of the glass wore mismatched gear and heavy armor. They looked low-rent, but moved like they knew what they were doing. In addition to the ork, one of the guys sported a full beard and messy hair, another was a woman with long blue hair, and the fourth member of the team wore big glasses and a van dyke.

“Christ on a crutch,” the big ork swore. “That was nasty. Jarl, is that the last of them?”

The guy with the wild hair nodded and coughed as the dust choked him. “Looks like it, Bull. My C-12 wrecked the stairwell, so we’re safe from backup via that route.” He turned to the blue-haired woman. “Dizzy, how are you doing?”

“Remind me again why we went to the executive level before getting to the lab? I’m all for a brawl, but pulling four Knight Errant adepts off Opti isn’t my idea of a party.” She glared at the guy with glasses and pointed an accusing finger at him. “You, sir, need to practice your martial arts.”

Opti raised his hands in supplication. “We had to go up there, Dizzy. Without the keycards to get into the lab, we’re as good as dead. Bull could’ve hacked the door, but his deck got slagged after you threw that guard into him.”

“Okay, okay!” Bull roared. “We’ll have plenty of blame to place later. Right now, we have to get the hell out of here, nab that prototype, and clear out before they get more soldiers down to this level.” He racked the slide on his rifle. “We’ve got a job to do, people, so let’s get cracking.”

The wild-haired guy, Jarl, glanced up at the transplas and locked eyes with

me. Instead of ducking for cover, however, he stood his ground. “Hey, Bull? Looks like we’ve got some company in the lab.”

Bull spun around and scanned us. “Son of a bitch. Guess you guys got here first. Tell you what, we’ll come in there and we can talk this over.” He took a fresh grip on his assault rifle and waved an RFID card at the door.

The door buzzed in denial.

He tried again with the same result. Then he looked sheepish. “Uh...hey, would you mind letting us in? I’d rather not be trapped in here when the Knight Errant backup arrives.”

“Not till you tell us what you’re doing here,” I said. The last thing I wanted to do was open the door to people who’d waste us as soon as they got the chance.

“Probably the same thing as you.” Opti focused his glasses on me. “That lab has a laser prototype, yeah? That’s what we’re here for. It just looks like you got to it first.” He glanced nervously over his shoulder. “Do you think we could have this conversation inside?”

“In a minute,” Gobbet replied. “How hot on your ass is Knight Errant anyway? It sucks that you’re trapped out there, but I don’t want guards crawling all over us either.”

So far none of them had arrived in the lab, probably because we were so deep inside the building, but they’d be along soon enough.

“Given the shitstorm we set off by going to the executive penthouses first,” Jarl said, “we probably have a few minutes. They’ll be too busy trying to figure out what we were doing up there.” He shrugged. “Hardingham and Taylor’s apartments are pretty trashed, so they’ll have to figure out what we’re really after before they can respond.”

“Why were you up there?” Gobbet asked.

“I’d gotten some intel that Hardingham and Taylor would be out tonight,” Dizzy replied, “but they had a secure safe down here. We figured that would be where they kept the prototype, and the keycard we found would work on the lab door.”

I thought about the safe we’d found in the central room.

Bull glared at the keycard in his fist. “If wishes were fishes. Looks like we made the wrong move, heading up there first.”

Racter looked at me and talked softly. “I know Taylor and Hardingham. That key is almost certainly for the private safe where they’re keeping the auto-repair circuitry. We need to let these runners in so I can get it.”

“All right.”

“In the meantime, I’ll have Koschei deal with the gas venting into the lab. I’ve located three areas where it can be shut off. It will give us more time to work.”

Time to work wasn’t what we needed. What we needed was to get the hell out of the building.

I looked at Bull and the keycard in his fist. “We’ll get you out. For the keycard.”

Bull hesitated, looked at his teammates, and nodded reluctantly. “Deal.”  
I opened the door.

“Thanks a lot,” Jarl said. “We would have been cut apart out there. Never let yourself get backed into a corner, you know?”

“Somebody shoulda brought an assault cannon like he’d planned!” Opti said. “But nnnnooooo. Getting it through Sea-Tac security was too much trouble.”

“Don’t sass me, Opti,” Bull said. “If I’d had my way, I’d have brought a second deck, too. Goddamn Sparky ice.” He held up a smoking deck.

I figured Is0bel would have commiserated with him.

“Here,” Bull said, tossing me the keycard. “This thing is worthless.”

I caught the keycard and passed it to Racter, who immediately thanked me and headed back the way we’d come. I nodded at Duncan to accompany him.

“You know where that keycard goes, don’t you?” Bull asked, shaking his head in disgust.

“Maybe,” I admitted. “There gonna be a problem with that?”

“No. Just our bad luck.” Bull shook his head, but he wasn’t happy about it. “We’re copacetic.”

“Wait a minute,” Jarl said. “I recognize you. You’re one of those shadowrunners the HKPF’s got such a jones for, right?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Your names are all over the shadows of Hong Kong,” Jarl went on. “From what I hear, you’ve been doing a lot of work for Kindly Cheng.”

“Well damn.” Dizzy peered at me more closely. “I didn’t expect to run into such heavy hitters on our first run out here.”

I ignored the fanboy gleam in her eyes. “We’re running out of time,” I said. “We gotta move.”

“What’s your way out?” Dizzy asked. “We were going to rappel over to the Federated-Boeing building next door, but with all the racket...” She shrugged.



“Well, I think we’d probably get shot off the line.”

“We’re going out underground,” I said. “Down an elevator shaft, and over to an MTR station.”

“I didn’t even know that was there,” Bull said. “Shoulda done better legwork before we got here. We’ll follow. More guns couldn’t hurt, right? You lead the way. We’ll be right behind you.”

Duncan spoke over my commlink. *“Good news is that Racter’s got his toy and we scored some nuyen, but the bad news is that Knight Errant sec guys are entering the lab right now.”*

I turned and took cover, yelling a warning to the new arrivals as a torrent of bullets slammed into the walls around us.

## CHAPTER 72

### DOWNER

“Want a grenade, chummer?”

That was a question you didn’t hear every day, and under the circumstance we were presently in, one you didn’t turn down. I glanced back at Bull and accepted the proffered HE grenade he held. He palmed another one.

“Together?” he asked.

“Together,” I said, and pulled the pin.

We threw the grenades together and ducked. The explosions detonated at almost the same time, filling the immediate area with concussive waves and rolling thunder.

I pushed myself up and fired at the first Knight Errant guard I saw. Bullets punched his head back, but the armor held. Before he could recover, I’d closed the distance on him while still firing. I shoved my pistol into my shoulder rig, grabbed the guard’s head in both hands, and cranked it around, snapping his spine.

Bull swore behind me as I leaned down to scoop up the guard’s fallen AK-97. I took a few more moments to strip spare magazines from the dead man’s

body.

Gobbet called up a fire spirit and fireballs flew at the guards. Koschei scuttled from a nearby vent and unloaded .50-caliber armor-piercing rounds into the guards, breaking the first wave.

“Hurry!” Duncan yelled as he stepped around the corner of the central room and heaved a couple grenades toward the Knight Errant forces.

The fire spirit held back only a few meters from them. When the grenades blew, it amplified the flames, filling the immediate area with a raging inferno for a few seconds.

By that time, I was running, shoving Gobbet in front of me toward the elevator on the other side of the floor. I noticed the gas had stopped venting into the room, so I figured Koschei had succeeded in shutting down the valves Racter had mentioned.

Knight Errant tried to put up a fight, and we took some bullets and damage, but we reached the elevators. I pushed the button to summon the cage, but it didn't come. Swearing, I pried the doors open and looked at the cables that disappeared into the waiting darkness.

“Elevator's not working?” Duncan asked.

“No.”

“How far down?”

“We're on the twenty-seventh floor. Add at least three or four more for the underground tunnels. A long freaking way down.”

Bullets ricocheted around us while the group returned fire. We all knew we couldn't stay there, though, and we couldn't go back either. The elevator shaft offered the only escape route. I just hoped Kindly Cheng was right about the MRT tunnel.

“Gimme a sec.” Bull leaned in and dropped a chem flare into the opening.

The blue flare sailed down the shaft, bouncing off the sides as it dropped till it finally landed on the floor far below.

“That's a long freaking way,” Bull agreed. “And if we try climbing down, Knight Errant will light us up.”

“I've got this,” Gobbet said. She spoke and threw out her hand.

An air spirit manifested inside the shaft and the howling breeze rattled the cables. The creature hovered there for a moment, its big face appearing and disappearing as translucent eddies whipped faster and faster. Then it streaked down to the bottom and blew the flare around in a whirl that had it bouncing off

the walls.

Gobbet looked at me. “Jump. The air spirit will break your fall.”

I leaned into the shaft, but I hesitated. Before I could say anything, Gobbet shoved me forward, knocking my holds loose, and I tumbled into the shaft.

I might have screamed somewhere in there. It sounded like someone did. All I could think of at the time was how much smashing into the floor below was going to hurt.

Instead, I slowed and only thumped into the ground with bruising force. It hurt like hell, but I was alive. I rolled over onto my back and looked up, watching the dancing flare suddenly shatter against one wall and a cloud of blue liquid and light mix with the whirling winds.

Then I saw Bull, arms and legs flailing as he fell. He did scream. I got out of the way, caught up the dropped assault rifle, and started working on the doors to open the elevator shaft. By the time I had it open, Jarl, Dizzy, Racter, and Koschei were picking themselves up from the floor.

I stepped out into the hallway and looked around. A moment later, the roar of the wind died away. I glanced over my shoulder and saw that Gobbet, Opti, and Duncan had made their escape, too.

“Wow!” Jarl yelled. “That was truly righteous!”

“If you say you want to do it again,” Dizzy warned, “I’m going to shoot you myself.”

“Oh hell no!” Jarl said. “But I will buy the first round of drinks when we find a bar way the hell from here.”

## **CHAPTER 73**

### **“A VERY CLEAR MESSAGE.”**

I was hungover from the after-run celebration. True to his word, Jarl had bought the first round. There were a lot of rounds after that, because we were all grateful to be alive, and with a story we couldn’t really tell anyone. I even bought

a few rounds myself.

I knew I dreamed, but the alcohol kept the nightmares muted. I woke up on occasion, but the fear didn't quite touch me in the same way.

My commlink screamed into my head the next morning—or, I should say, afternoon, because I'd slept in. The noise of mahjong tiles and quiet voices in the background immediately let me know who was calling.

"You've been gone a while, Auntie," I said. "I wondered when you were coming back."

*"I'm here now, and I have a present for you, little one. I have a lead on the location of the Plastic-Faced Man."*

I was instantly awake. Even the hangover retreated. Pushing myself out of my bunk, I reached for a pair of pants. "How'd you get it? From who?"

*"I'll explain everything in person. Come see me and we'll talk."* She broke the connection before I could say anything.

Calling her back wasn't an option. She wouldn't answer.

I went to wake Duncan and the others.

Kindly Cheng had a light breakfast of tea and biscuits waiting when we reached the mahjong parlor, and she told us she would only tell us what she knew if we ate.

We sat and dug in, and the hot tea helped ease some of the residual hangover pounding at my temples. Isobel looked better this morning. Her wound was mostly healed, and she was ambulatory, even in a good mood. She'd heard Gobbet's side of what had happened at Ares, and she was pressing us for our version of the story as well.

Kindly Cheng clasped her hands and looked pleased at the head of the table. She had a black cigar in her teeth and a wreath of smoke around her head. "It seems like forever since we've seen each other."

"You said you had information to share," Duncan told her. His impatience showed in the tense way he sat. Or maybe it was the hangover.

Wincing in irritation, Kindly Cheng patted his hand. "Yes, my darling, yes. I met with several contacts within my network who referred me to others in neighboring cities. Regardless of how far technology moves forward, tradition demands that some things be handled face-to-face. I have returned with the

information you seek.”

Trying to let her know we hadn't just been cooling our heels waiting, and to give her something back, I said, “While you were gone, we uncovered a relationship between Josephine Tsang and Raymond Black.”

Her arched eyebrows rose. “Did you? And what was it you uncovered?”

“He's fiction,” Duncan said bitterly. “Made up. His real name is Edward Tsang.”

“Fiction, eh?” Kindly Cheng placed a forefinger against her cheek and tapped thoughtfully. “Josephine's son, Edward. So. That explains where he went when he disappeared years ago. Seattle.”

“Any idea why he disappeared?” I poured another cup of tea and took a couple more biscuits.

“No. Just that he went missing after Josephine completed rebuilding the Walled City. That was in the early thirties.” She frowned in disgust. “You realize what this means, don't you, my sweet? That inbred little goat-whore was cold enough to have her *own son* executed.”

I remembered the two guys who'd been trying to kill the old man when we'd first crossed paths all those years ago. I didn't know if that had been new business, or part of the old from Hong Kong.

“What did your out of town networking turn up?” Duncan asked.

Kindly Cheng grabbed a bottle of rum and opened it, pouring herself a shot. “I know the *identity* of the Plastic-Faced Man. His name is Lee Tai-Lung and he's an independent contractor—a trusted, deniable asset who handles all of Josephine Tsang's more...*delicate* operations off the books and away from the public eye. The Plastic-Faced Man is her shadow right hand outside of the corporation.” She smiled. “And I know how to find him, too.”

We waited, even Duncan, who I knew was ready to explode.

“I've made contact with an information broker,” Kindly Cheng went on. “Xiaozhi, who works out of an abandoned night market in Shek Kip Mei called the Shing House Court. It's not hard to find. Xiaozhi has gained access to the Plastic-Faced Man's complete itinerary—where he'll be, who he'll be with, what sort of security he'll have—the works.” She flicked ash from her cigar. “You can use it to perform an extraction. Grab him and find out what he knows.”

“Did you find out why Lee has a face made of plastic?” Isobel asked.

“It's not just his face. Lee Tai-Lung's entire skull is synthetic. He's designed himself to be the perfect corporate operative. He's installed a unique piece of

hardware, you see. It allocates and compartmentalizes client-related memories so that they can be erased upon the completion of a job. And as an added security measure, this cortical implant will wipe his entire memory if it detects that he's been captured."

"Seriously?" Duncan demanded in a loud voice. "He can just wipe out everything having to do with Tsang Mechanical Services?"

Kindly Cheng frowned. "Exactly. Unless you can find a way around the cortical implant, you'll have no way to extract the information he has and figure out what happened to Raymond Black." She put her hands together. "Now, I've done *my* part in this, my darling. *You* need to find a way to neutralize that device."

"I know a way," Isobel said. "I've heard of something like this before. I met someone in the Matrix who had to shirk a similar memory-wipe implant once. It was a requirement for a big job, and she pulled it off."

"Keep talking," Duncan said.

"Her handle is Dreamland, and I know where to find her. All we have to do is convince her to give up the secret of how she did it."

I took a breath and looked at them. "Okay, Isobel and I will go see Dreamland before we hit the information broker. Then we grab the Plastic-Faced Man."

"*I'm* gonna be there when you extract the information about Raymond from the Plastic-Faced Man," Duncan declared. "You got me?"

I nodded. "You'll be there."

"We should all be there," Gobbet said. "I know *I* wanna see this. You guys aren't the only ones who lost somebody."

"Very good, my darlings," Kindly Cheng said. "Now listen to me. After you get what you need from the Plastic-Faced Man, I want you to *end* him. You understand?"

No one spoke, but we all understood.

"I need to send a very clear message that *this*—" she tapped the table with her forefinger, "—is what happens when you mess with Kindly Cheng's operations—with Kindly Cheng's people. Josephine takes Nightjar, I take her Plastic-Faced Man."

"We'll send the message," Duncan said as he rose from the table. "No problem there."

## CHAPTER 74

### DREAMLAND

“You’re sure you’re up to this?” I asked Isobel as we trudged down the alley to the tenement where Dreamland lived.

“I’m fine,” she told me. “Practically good as new. I just feel like I could sleep for a couple days.” She frowned. “If it weren’t for those nightmares. I’m beginning to think something on the *Bolthole* is causing them, and that freaks me out because I haven’t found a cooler place to live. That ship has everything I’ve ever wanted.”

“I like it there, too,” I said, sidestepping a pile of vomit mixed with blood. Dreamland didn’t live in the best of places. “Except for the nightmares.”

“I guess they’ve always been around. Just seems like they’re getting more and more frequent.”

We walked on for a few more blocks, then Isobel turned and looked around. “Okay, this is the right place. Emilie should be in the first apartment.”

I looked at the sagging building in front of us. It looked like someone had hit it over the head and knocked it into a squatting position, because it bulged at the sides a little, and I had to wonder if it was going to collapse in the middle floors someday.

“Is your friend dangerous?” I asked.

“She shouldn’t be.” Isobel shrugged. “Emilie’s a decker, yes, but she’s really more into programming than she is violence. She quit running last year. Something about some sort of activist activity she used to be into, and a bunch of big-money execs who’re holding a grudge.”

“Locals?” I didn’t want to step into a turf war.

“Emilie’s from Berlin, but she moved to Hong Kong after the F-State collapsed. The *Schockwellenreiter*—the group that she worked for—was supposed to protect her, but they’ve got their own problems to deal with now. I guess she decided she’d be safer on her own.”

“F-State? I’m not up on my world politics.” That was one of the things the

old man was always harping at me about. He wanted me to be more *worldly*.

“It was an experiment in sustained institutional anarchy,” Is0bel said. “Great environment for a shadowrunner, but it ended up just like Communism did. Another pipe dream. The German government gave the corps the go-ahead to invade last year, and they forced the anarchists to retreat to the eastern part of the city. Now Berlin’s run by the corps, just like Hong Kong. I bet they wind up building a wall again. Wouldn’t put it past them.”

“Okay, so how should we handle this friend of yours?”

Is0bel shook her head. “No clue, really. I’ve never met her in meatspace.” She smiled up at me. “Just be your charming self, I guess. I’m sure everything will work out just fine.”

We stepped up to the apartment. The newest thing about it was the security door, and even that looked like a hand-me-down.

Is0bel knocked on the door in a rhythm I didn’t recognize. After a moment, the door opened, and a slightly built young woman with blue feathers in her short-cropped blonde hair answered. She and Is0bel talked for a moment, then Is0bel waved me in after her.

The interior of the apartment wasn’t a home. It was a squat, a place someone lived before they were uprooted and thrown out into the world again. There was a bed and a few crates that held a deck and a light. Mold climbed the walls in baroque patterns, and the stench was almost eye-watering.

“Hey,” Emilie said.

I nodded and smiled, making sure to keep my distance so she didn’t feel threatened in any way.

“So,” Emilie said as she looked at Is0bel, “you’re Is0bel, huh? I didn’t expect...”

“A dwarf?” Is0bel smiled. “Yeah, I get that a lot.”

“No, no,” Emilie said hastily. “I didn’t expect you to be so pretty.” Her accent was German, but it was faint. She glanced up at me and folded her arms around herself, suddenly afraid. “I should never have agreed to this, Is0bel. I should never have even responded to your message. If the oligarch swine who’ve been hunting me find out where I am—”

“Hey,” Is0bel said, putting a hand on the other woman’s arm, “they won’t find out from us. We’re not oligarch swine.” She smiled. “In fact, if you want, I can have a guy I know provide some personal sec for you for a few days. His name’s Jean McKondor. He’s a good guy, and one of the best in the biz.”



“Uh-huh.” Emilie watched me.

“This is the guy I told you about,” Is0bel said. “The one who needs the software that you developed to inhibit your cortical implant.”

“He needs *what?*” Emilie took a step back. “I don’t think I should be getting into this.”

Is0bel looked at me.

I decided to take the soft approach. This girl was already scared. Scaring her more wouldn’t help. “I need your help, Emilie.”

“I got my own problems to deal with.” The response was automatic, no real thought behind it. She used it to keep distance between herself and others. “In case you’re not up on current events, I’ve got an army of mercs and bounty hunters after me. Messing around with the headware the *Schockwellenreiter* installed in me is the *last* thing on my mind.”

I told her the truth, surprised by how easily it came out. “Look, this is important. I need the software you created so I can find out what happened to my father.”

She lifted a hand to her lips and chewed her nails. “Your father, huh? Sounds rough. Is he dead?”

“Maybe,” I said. “He’s missing, that’s for sure.”

A small, sad smile twisted her lips. “Been there—or something like there. It’s the ambiguity that’ll kill you.” She paused. “Okay, gimme a minute.”

Emilie took a seat in front of her deck, jacked into it, and sank into the Matrix. Her fingers created staccato clicks. After a few minutes, she jacked out, pulled a data stick from the deck, and handed it to me.

“Here.” She reached under the table and took out a Taser with masking tape around the handle. “You’ll need this, too. Modify the Taser with it and use it on your target. The jolt should stop the memory wipe process before it starts.”

I peeled five hundred nuyen from my pocket and held it out. “Here’s little something for the effort.”

She hesitated, but took the money. “Thanks. It’ll help.” She sighed. “I wish every problem was that easy to solve.”

She turned to Is0bel, they hugged, the dwarf gave her the bodyguard’s contact info, and we left, heading back to the MTR and—hopefully—answers about the old man.

## CHAPTER 75

### AMBUSH!

Putting the gear together didn't take long. We were efficient by now, talking in shorthand and relaxed around each other. Isobel coded the Taser, and Duncan rigged up a carry for it.

Then we headed to the maglev in the night to Shek Kip Mei for a chat with Kindly Cheng's informant.

Like the rest of Hong Kong, Sek Kip Mei was lit up, neon blazing in the darkness like a coal burning bright. Pedestrian traffic was slow but steady as people bought things they needed and hurried home.

Rain pelted the streets, but we were safe under our ponchos. Not just safe from the precipitation, but from anyone armed with less than a tank. We'd read up on Xiaozhi, and learned she was a dangerous, conniving dwarf with a long line of bodies buried behind her.

Once we reached the market building, I took the door, looked for sec cams and didn't see any, and went in. We walked up to the roof, following the directions Kindly Cheng had programmed into our GPS software. Xiaozhi's current location was in a building built on the rooftop of another building, one of many in the area.

There weren't any sec cams either, and I went inside with a pistol concealed in my fist under the poncho. Blue light lit the hallways. Duncan walked slack, and we stayed spread out in the hallway as we went. Open doors to the rooms we passed provided easy access to what was inside, but none of it was worth having. This had been a market once, but now it was a place for people down on their luck to get in out of the rain.

Except for Xiaozhi. She ran her business out of a room at the end of the hallway.

A hulking troll stood guard at the door. He looked us over and rolled a toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other. "What do you want?"

Duncan squared up with the guy, and he looked a lot stronger than the troll. "We're here to see Xiaozhi."

“About what?”

“Biz it’s better you don’t know about.”

The troll looked like he wanted to make something of it, but there were four of us and he backed down. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “She’s in the back.”

I walked toward the rear of the L-shaped room, past several computer workstations, stepped over fat electrical cables that snaked across the floor, and spotted Xiaozhi in front of a desk supporting a half-dozen screens.

The female dwarf wore a fashionable suit, but it didn’t cover the hard, mean look on her face, or the greed in her green eyes. Her short-cropped hair was artfully styled. She turned to face me as I approached, and her hand dipped into a pocket.

I figured she was trying to intimidate me with her icy stare, but she had nothing on Kindly Cheng.

“Ah, yes, the new-on-the-scene runner,” she said in a sing-song voice as she rocked in place. “My friend in Heoi said you’d be coming to see me.”

“I have a friend, too,” I said, “and she says you’re the one to see about finding Lee Tai-lung.”

Xiaozhi’s eyes widened slightly, and she hummed a tuneless melody. “Very timely intel. Very timely. I have his complete up-to-the-minute itinerary! Where he’ll be, who he’ll be with, security coverage—the deluxe package.”

I figured she’d put the arm on us for nuyen, so I wasn’t surprised. “How much?”

“Unfortunately, the deluxe package is no longer for sale.” Xiaozhi smiled. “Nor is any information about him. So sorry! I received another offer—a better offer—to take it off the market. Just before you arrived.”

“From who?” Duncan thrust his face down at the dwarf.

“Lee Tai-lung’s client. I believe you know the company.”

I didn’t know how Josephine Tsang could have found out about the meet.

Xiaozhi shrugged. “I feel really bad about this, but the offer was too good to pass up. Way too good.”

“You don’t want to work with Josephine Tsang,” I said.

“That’s just the thing,” she said, “I do. Attaching myself to her is smart. Very smart. Tsang’s big in Hong Kong, and getting bigger. She’s already on the Executive Council, and is a front-runner for the next chairperson position. All I need to do is make sure you don’t walk out of here alive.”

For the first time, I noticed how Xiaozhi's men had closed in on us. They drew their weapons.

"Ambush!" Duncan roared as he swung his shotgun up from under his poncho.

I split out from him, filling my hands with the pistols I'd brought and firing both at the nearest ganger. The bullets slammed into the man's chest, knocking him backward, but a couple found his face and he went down bloody.

Duncan fired into the ganger in front of him, growling curses and standing his ground in spite of the bullets that tore through his poncho and bounced off his armor.

A short distance away, Gobbet threw a shimmering bolt into the face of another man firing at Isobel as she ducked for cover behind a workstation. The stricken ganger went sprawling, and Gobbet hit him again before he landed. From the way he lay there, I knew his neck had been broken.

Unlimbering her submachine gun, Isobel stayed below the workstation's surface and aimed at the feet of the gangers in front of her. When she opened up, both of them went down.

The troll from the door waved a huge sword as he rushed me, ululating some weird chant. I aimed at him and squeezed both triggers, only to find out my pistols had cycled dry. With no time to reload, I dropped the suddenly useless weapons. With the wall behind me and no place to run, I bolted *at* the sword-slinging ganger, knowing that, if anything, I could take away the space he needed to swing his blade.

I went down in a baseball slide just under the sword blade, shot between his legs, and caught one of his ankles. Stopping myself, I grabbed the long tail of his coat as he tried to turn, hauled myself up, and climbed his back. As I reached his shoulders, I slipped a combat knife from my boot and slammed it home at the base of his skull. He sank without a whimper and I landed on my feet, looking at the charnel house makeover we'd just delivered.

Xiaozhi was almost to the door when Gobbet's fire spirit covered her in flames. She died screaming.

"No!" Duncan yelled, racing over to the burning corpse. "We needed to know what she knew!"

Gobbet looked mortified as she banished the spirit. "Sorry. It was called here to protect us."

"No..." Duncan said again in a softer, anguished voice.

“It’s all good,” Isobel called out.

## CHAPTER 76

### OPTIONS

The decker sat at Xiaozhi’s desk, already plugging her own deck in.

“Xiaozhi left her computer unlocked. She has the Plastic-Faced Man’s complete itinerary here. This will tell us everywhere he’s going to be for the next twenty-four hours.”

We joined her, staring at the screens and their nearly priceless information.

“Anything promising?” I asked.

“Absolutely,” Isobel answered, and a smile lit up Duncan’s face. “I just need to run some searches on these locations...see if I can get blueprints, photos.” She typed the whole time she spoke. “First, the bad news. He’s got a security detail that drives him from place to place—six corporate agents, plus the driver. Any time he’s on the move, he’s in a reinforced bulletproof limo. He’s also got a personal bodyguard with him at all times.”

“Too many moving parts,” I said.

“But there are some windows of opportunity we can take advantage of. When he’s going someplace, they drop him off and leave him in the hands of local security, if any. The bodyguard stays with him, but the other six guards stay with the driver.”

“Better,” I said.

“The detail itself is shared by a few executives, so they’ll be with someone else until his next pickup time. The convoys are on a schedule managed by the master system at Tsang HQ.” Isobel paused a moment. “Okay, I’ve got three good leads here. I think we can run an extraction on any one of them.”

“Just let me know when and where,” Duncan said.

“Number one: the parking garage at Central Plaza. He’s there for a meeting in an hour. We could grab him on the way out. It’s still secured corporate property,

so there will be resistance. But it's the weakest out of the corporate properties he visits. On the plus side, there won't be any civilians, access is limited, and he's listed as a VIP in their system."

"We can be there," Duncan said.

I shook my head. "I don't want to be in an open area like that. Too many things can go wrong. What's next?"

"Next one is a bit personal. Mr. Plastic has a mistress, visits her twice a week. Today's the day. He'll be at the Fa Yuen Tower building for two hours. It's not corporate property, but it is privately owned. The management company has a security contract on it, so it's likely we'll have a fight on our hands trying to get out of there with him in tow. It'll be less crowded than the parking garage, but the lady might complicate things."

"Interesting," Gobbet said with a snarky smile. "Who goes for a plastic-faced guy?"

"What's the last location?" I asked before anyone could get sidetracked with speculation about the Plastic-Faced Man's love life. Or any other synthetic parts he might have.

"Well, we have to grab him before he gets home tonight," Isobel replied. "Once he's there, we're screwed. He's staying in the Tsang Executive Arcology, guarded 24/7 by corporate security, *and* two blocks from the HKPF HQ. The final location we could grab him is his last stop for the evening. It's a locally owned public simsense theater. A hole in the wall that specializes in underground horror flicks. He's there for an hour and forty-five minutes, and his security detail will be all the way across town to pick someone else up. We'll probably have to deal with local police only. But this is a *public* theater. It's going to be packed with regular people just trying to take in a movie."

I thought it over as the others pitched their ideas at me. Only one of the scenarios sounded attractive to me. "Let's hit the mistress's apartment. He'll be weakest there, not to mention distracted, and if we can get inside undetected, we should only have one other person to deal with. We need to take him alive."

I looked at Duncan. Whatever arguments came, his would be the strongest.

"We only get one shot at this," he said.

"I know. This is the one we should take."

He nodded. "All right, then. Let's get it done."

## CHAPTER 77

### EXTRACTION

We got through the private sec at Fa Yuen Tower with fake identification Kindly Cheng provided through one of her assets. Of course, she told us she would take the cost out of our next paying run, but no one cared. We all had the Plastic-Faced Man on our minds. A street sam Duncan had met gave us the building's layout and vulnerable spots. Svetlana Markova impressed me as a consummate professional, and I trusted her intel.

After making online reservations for room with the fake IDs, we arrived at the tower individually, then met up on the floor where the Plastic-Faced Man's mistress lived on his nuyen.

According to our timetable, we were arriving there twenty minutes or so after the Plastic-Faced Man was set to reach his destination.

"This soon after he got here," Gobbet said, "he should be *busy*."

I stopped at the keypad and entered the passcode Is0bel had turned up on Xiaozhi's computer. The maglock cycled, then opened with a barely audible *click*. The green light was more of an indicator.

The room's floor plan was simple. Svetlana had delivered it as well. The main living room, filled with large, expensive-looking leather furniture and some equally-large vases, was straight ahead, with a bedroom to the left, and an office/study to the right.

We headed for the bedroom, but changed directions when we heard a man's voice in the office/study. Duncan followed me on the right, and I waved Gobbet and Is0bel into position in front of the closed bedroom door.

In the office/study, the Plastic-Faced Man stood in front of a large aquarium filled with brightly colored fish. He stood as though transfixed, hands clasped behind his neck.

Like he didn't have a care in the world.

Anger flooded through me then as I remembered how he'd shot the old man in cold blood. Or at least that was the way it had been made to look. I still wasn't

sure what was going on.

I took out the altered Taser and readied myself to take the shot. Even after the charge hit, Emilie had explained it would take time to shut down the Plastic-Faced Man's consciousness.

Before I could fire, the Plastic-Faced Man spun and drew a large-caliber handgun lightning-fast. The only thing I could think of was that our reflection in the aquarium had to have given Duncan and me away.

Duncan cursed and opened fire, aiming for the Plastic-Faced Man's chest, trusting the armor there would hold him. I stepped in and steadied the Taser, then fired. The prongs leaped forward and bit into the man's cheek and I pressed the button, firing current through him.

Almost calmly, the Plastic-Faced Man ripped the prongs from his synthetic face and fired at us. He was good. His bullets peppered us with killing shots, but our armor saved us. Then he shifted his arm, adjusting his aim, going for headshots.

Duncan lowered his shotgun and fired into the Plastic-Faced Man's legs, knocking them out from under him. I shot forward and threw myself on him, grabbing his left arm and jacking it up between his shoulder blades. I knew it had to have hurt, but he didn't say a word.

Out in the other room, Gobbet and Isobel suddenly had their hands full with the girlfriend, who was a troll. An actual troll. Evidently the Plastic-Faced Man liked his playmates extra-large.

Duncan stepped on the Plastic-Faced Man's arm and ripped the pistol away. He placed a knee in the man's back and held him down while he put handcuffs on him. By the time he was finished, our prisoner collapsed into unconsciousness.

"Is he alive?" Duncan asked.

I put my fingers to the Plastic-Faced Man's neck and felt a pulse. I nodded. "He's fine. Just out."

"Hey," Gobbet called. She stood over the body of the girlfriend who lay in the middle of the floor. "We've got problems. Security just arrived in the hallway." She pointed at the monitor over the door.

Onscreen, four guys in sec uniforms took up a standard two-by-two formation like they'd been doing it for years.

I took out a trunk gun and got ready. "We can't wait them out. We've got to move."

"I got Sleeping Beauty," Duncan said as he lifted the Plastic-Faced Man to



his shoulder.

“Don’t kill him,” I said.

“Not till after we find out where Raymond is,” he agreed. “After that, I’m doing what needs doing.”

I didn’t argue. Gobbet and Isobel drew trunk guns as well, and Gobbet nodded.

I opened the door and Gobbet threw a shimmer into the group of men. She’d explained that she could put some, maybe all of them to sleep, but she couldn’t guarantee it.

Two guards stumbled and fell as I leaned out and shot a guy who looked dazed. Gobbet took out the remaining one, and they were all asleep when we passed by.

We took the service elevator down, already hacked by Isobel, and headed out to the van parked in the alley. I took the driver’s seat and pulled out into traffic.

## **CHAPTER 78**

### **THE PROSPERITY PROJECT**

We found a nice, quiet spot on a rooftop that Racter and Gaichu had secured. Both of them waited while we prepared for the interrogation. The Russian looked pleased, like he was happy for us. Gaichu’s pale face was expressionless. For all I knew he could be thinking of eating what was left of the Plastic-Faced Man’s brain.

“We clear?” I couldn’t help asking.

“Of course, my friend,” Racter said.

Gaichu nodded.

The Plastic-Faced Man’s face wasn’t exactly plastic, just as Kindly Cheng had told us. Overlapping silver and bronze wafers embedded in the synthetic material caught the light and winked as Isobel moved his head so she could jack into the port surgically implanted in the back of his skull.

“You ready for me to bring him back online?” Isobel asked.

I looked at the zip ties encircling our prisoner’s arms and legs, thinking there was no way he could escape. I nodded.

“Once I do this,” Isobel said, “be aware that we’re on a timer. I can’t prevent his memories from erasing. I can only slow the process down.”

“Do it,” I said. “It’s time we got some answers.”

She tapped her keyboard, and almost immediately the Plastic-Faced Man’s eyes blinked open. He looked at the zip ties, then at everyone standing around him, and he smiled.

“Well, this is interesting,” he said in a well-modulated voice. Kindly Cheng had said it was synthetic too, and could be altered. “I don’t recall ever having been in this situation before. Usually I simply awaken to find myself in a strange new environment, wondering what happened.”

“It’s an odd way to live, don’t you think, Mr. Lee?” I asked.

His smile grew larger. “You know my name, too. Very impressive.” He flicked his eyes over us again. “Looking at the lot of you, I think it’s safe to assume that a violent extraction of information is the next order of business?”

“Oh, you can bank on that, asshole,” Duncan said.

“So you chose to grab me in an intimate moment. I suppose that’s wise. Only moderate resistance...but the girl paid for it, didn’t she?”

“She’s sleeping off a troll-sized headache,” Gobbet said.

“We have a problem,” Isobel said as she looked down at her deck.

“Dreamland’s neural inhibitor software isn’t interacting with this guy’s cortical implant the same way it worked with her own. The memory loss is coming on sooner.”

“Is there anything you can do?”

“To stop it?” She shook her head. “Nothing. This is way beyond me. We’re talking about software I didn’t write interacting with two different pieces of headware I’ve never seen before. We’re lucky if this works at all.” She tapped her keyboard. “I’ll try and key in some buffering routines or something to slow it down as much as I can, but I wouldn’t put money on it. Start asking your questions.”

“Tense,” the Plastic-Faced Man said. “Very tense.” He smiled again. “I guess I’ll answer your questions...rather...slowly.”

“I wonder what’s under that mask of yours?” I looked at Racter. “I suppose Koschei can remove the synthetic.”

“Koschei is a wonder,” Racter said as he patted his drone.

One of Koschei’s arms lifted and a surgical blade slid out of a housing.

“I was joking,” the Plastic-Faced Man said. “Of course I’m going to give you what you want. My clients know I’m a professional, and that I take extraordinary precautions to protect their secrets. If those precautions were compromised, it was due to an extreme circumstance. You can ask your questions. I’ll answer them as efficiently as I can. When we’re done, I’ll shake hands with a stranger and walk away wondering what just happened.”

“Why is Josephine Tsang trying to kill us?” I asked.

“She believes you’re here to destroy one of her special projects.”

“Prosperity?”

“Yes, although technically there’s more than one prosperity. Prosperity Tower is Tsang Mechanical Engineering’s corporate headquarters. *Prosperity* is also one of Josephine Tsang’s pet projects. Which one do you want to know about first?” The Plastic-Faced Man smiled. “Tick-tock.”

“I want to hear about the Prosperity Project.”

“Well, that’s going to be challenging. You see, the Prosperity Project is Josephine Tsang’s best-kept secret. And the best way to *keep* secrets is to not tell anyone. Even someone whose memory can be wiped. All I know is that Prosperity is something built deep inside Kowloon Walled City. Some kind of experiment her son was working on.”

Duncan looked like he’d just been punched in the face. I knew he was still hoping the old man’s hands weren’t as dirty as the rest of the Tsang family’s hands were. His voice sounded savage when he spoke. “Is Edward Tsang still alive?”

The Plastic-Faced Man looked up at Duncan and those synthetic features suddenly twitched.

“Guys,” Isobel said, “a status bar just popped up. It isn’t moving yet, but you never know when it might take a jump.” She stared at her screen. “It’s stuck at zero right now, but the wiping process is starting and there’s nothing I can do to stop it.”

“Give me your deck,” the Plastic-Faced Man said. “I’ll show you something.”

Isobel glanced up at me.

“This is a calculated gamble,” the Plastic-Faced Man said. “You’re running out of time and holding all the guns. I have information you want and am betting that if I share it with you, you won’t kill me when this is over. The person I will

be afterward is completely innocent of whatever I have done to you. I don't believe you will kill an innocent man."

I didn't have a choice. Not really. "Go on. Let him have it." I leaned down and cut his arms free up to the elbows.

## CHAPTER 79

### MOTHER AND SON

The Plastic-Faced Man took the deck and focused on it, then his eyes unfocused, and I knew he'd jacked in. The trid function built into the deck came online, and images formed in the air a few centimeters above it.

The image showed a small weathered man, possibly in his seventies, strapped into a high-tech chair. Electrical cables connected him to a bank of computers and equipment behind him.

"Dad..." Duncan whispered, confirming what I was already thinking. It hurt me to see how *old* he looked in that chair, and how helpless he was.

"This is from when I first brought the asset to Prosperity Tower," the Plastic-Faced Man said in a distant voice. "After I took him from the teahouse on the dock."

The view shifted, swinging around and letting me know we were seeing what the Plastic-Faced Man had seen.

An older woman in expensive clothing stepped into view and spoke, but the audio didn't quite pick up her words. As she came out of the shadows, I recognized her.

Josephine Tsang said, "*I wanted you to be gentle with him, Mr. Lee.*" She actually looked concerned. "*He looks as if someone Tased him.*"

"*I assure you, Mrs. Tsang, I was gentle. He walked out of the teahouse under his own power.*"

The old man moved his lips a couple times before he got any words out. It was painful to watch. I'd never seen him when he was infirm.

*“May I have some water, Mother? My throat feels like it’s on fire.”*

*“Yes, of course, Edward.”* Josephine Tsang patted the old man’s cheek. *“I’ll have someone bring you some ice chips.”*

*“Your son has apparently been through some sort of ordeal,”* the Plastic-Faced Man said in the recording. *“He appeared demented at times. And he’s been mumbling about stopping something. Prosperity, I think.”*

Standing straighter, Josephine Tsang grimaced. *“Yes, well that won’t be happening.”* She looked back at the old man. *“We won’t be stopping Prosperity, Edward. I want you to get that out of your mind. Do you understand?”*

*“I understand perfectly well, Mother,”* the old man said. *“There’s no need to shout. But I won’t give up. Prosperity must be stopped. All those poor people…”*

*“I know, Edward, I know.”* Josephine Tsang sighed. *“Those poor people. I’ve done a lot of good to make up for it since you left. Shelters, hospitals, all sorts of good work. And now it’s time to do something for you. Something I should have done a long time ago, perhaps.”*

A man in a white lab coat walked over to the old man. Josephine Tsang nodded to the doctor and he placed a chrome apparatus on the old man’s head.

*“What is this, Momma?”* the old man asked. *“What are you doing to me?”*

*“I’m fixing you, Edward.”* Josephine Tsang walked over to the old man, smoothed his hair, and leaned down to kiss his forehead. *“All you can see is failure. You’re incapable of seeing the good in what you’ve done.”*

The guy in the white lab coat pressed a button on the chair and a mechanical arm swung out to wrap around the old man’s head, holding it in place. The arm glowed cobalt blue and a high-definition, three-dimensional image of a brain appeared on the wall behind him.

*“I’ve been inspired by Mr. Lee here,”* Josephine Tsang said. *“We’re going to do some editing of your memories. To relieve you of your burden.”*

*“No, Momma,”* the old man said weakly as his voice started failing him. *“Wait! I’ve figured out what to do—”* His eyes closed, and his mouth hung open.

Josephine Tsang turned to face the cam head on, looking into the Plastic-Faced Man’s face. *“Your payment will be made according to our agreement. Once the rest of them are dead.”*

The Plastic-Faced Man looked up at us, once more in control of his body. *“I’ve taken a big risk showing you that.”*

*“I don’t give a rat’s ass,”* Duncan exploded. Then he turned to look at me. *“You see? I knew it! I told you Raymond’s alive! Tsang’s holding him at*

Prosperity Tower.”

“I know,” I said. “We’ll get him. Stay focused.”

“He may be alive,” Gobbet said, “but it looks like his mom’s gonna erase part of his memory. Just like Johnny Plastic here. She’s gonna try to *fix* him.”

“What kind of mother would do that?” Isobel asked. Then she looked at her deck. “Shit, shit, shit!” She clacked keys on the keyboard. “That’s it. He’s wiping.”

The Plastic-Faced Man’s head dropped for an instant, then he looked back up in surprise. “Oh, hello.” He glanced down at his bonds. “Well...isn’t *this* awkward.”

“What do you want to do with this guy?” Duncan asked in a hard voice. “He’s got no memory, so it’s probably safe to let him go, but Auntie said he should take a dirt nap.” He drew his sidearm. “All the same to me.”

I shook my head, knowing that it wasn’t all the same to Duncan. The Plastic-Faced Man was responsible for the old man being in Josephine Tsang’s hands.

But I couldn’t get the idea out of my head that with his memory wiped, the Plastic-Faced Man wasn’t the same person he had been just a few moments ago.

When I’d been in lockdown, I’d wanted a second chance. Didn’t everyone deserve one? That was what the shadows were all about.

I shook my head. “Let him go. I think we’re safe.”

Duncan looked at me for a long moment, then shrugged, realizing his heart wasn’t in killing the guy, holstered his pistol, and walked away.

I used my knife and cut our prisoner free, then helped him to stand.

“I do appreciate it,” the Plastic-Faced Man said. “Whoever you are.” He hesitated for just a moment, then shoved his hands in his pockets and walked away like he had no particular place to go. I wondered how much of the last few hours would be his to remember.

“What are you going to tell Kindly?” Gobbet looked nervous. “She said to kill him.”

“I’ll tell her the truth,” I said. Now that we were finally getting the lies out of the way, I didn’t want to start them up again.

## CHAPTER 80

### THE DARKNESS IN THE SOUL

Some force or thing came for me on the MTR ride back to Heoi. It came for all of us, actually. I just didn't know that at the time.

We sat spread out in the train car, all of us tired from the last few hours, deep into our thoughts about how things had gone with the Plastic-Faced Man and what we now faced, and no one wanted to talk. Duncan tried to engage me, but it was a half-hearted effort at best, one I had no part of, and he quickly gave up. I didn't think he really wanted to talk, either.

Thoughts of the old man stirred in my mind, and I felt conflicted. When I'd been a kid, I'd grown to resent how he'd stepped in and changed my life and Duncan's. Every kid out on the street dreamed of such a thing, but none of us really believed it would ever happen.

Except maybe Duncan did. He had no problem believing in the old man, and that was what eventually created the rift between us. I *couldn't* believe in the old man.

In the long run, I suppose both of us had turned out to be right. Duncan got the old man for years. Raymond—or Edward, I guess—had stayed there and taken care of him.

But in the end, he had cut and run, coming back to Hong Kong and all the trouble waiting for him there. He'd run, and deserted Duncan. Worse than that, the old man had drawn Duncan and me into the whole shit storm, dunked us in past our eyeballs, and disappeared.

That wasn't entirely fair, and I knew it. The old man had asked for help, and he'd figured we'd be able to help him do whatever it was he'd decided to do. He just hadn't counted on how evil and treacherous his mother could be.

The old man had fled Seattle, chased by his own demons. He'd lived with them until he couldn't ignore that insistent siren call any longer.

The weird thing was that I understood why he'd done it. Why he'd run. I hadn't been able to leave my demons behind, either.

Me and the old man, we were more alike than I'd thought. Seeing that weakness in him had turned Duncan away, but I was drawn to saving him even more.

As the car jerked and vibrated, I leaned my head against the window and stared at the concrete tunnel rushing by in the soft glow of the train's subdued lighting. I breathed out and fog covered the transplas.

I went away—

—and I stood out on the street in the thick humidity. A thick layer of clouds filled the sky, stirring sluggishly as the storm above threatened to reach down and smite the sprawl. An ozone stench hung around me. Amber light flared to life in the black clouds.

The thick air laid a quieting hand over the street noises, and made me feel alone in spite of the shadows growing around me. A strange *thumping* arose, and it took me a second to recognize my own heartbeat.

I got my bearings, not even wondering where the others were, and headed toward home. I wanted to return to the *Bolthole*. I thought the team would be waiting for me there.

Before I'd taken a dozen steps, vertigo twisted my head up and it was everything I could do to simply stand there. My heart struggled to beat, like my chest was closing in on it. Everything around me grayed out until I couldn't see anything.

I concentrated on taking my next breath and slowly drew it in.

The first breath was hard, but it got easier after that. Panic fired every nerve in my body. Fight or flight. That basic response hardwired into my system and honed in the Barrens. I was at the mercy of my own fear, but something else was pushing the buttons.

I forced myself to take a step, then another and another, till the feeling passed and I was moving again. Before I knew it—

—I was back in the Walled City. The stench of mildew and plaster and wet dog filled my nostrils and coated my tongue with sticky fur.

I told myself it was just a dream. A nightmare that had risen from the events of the last few days. I tried to shake my head and wake up. I closed my eyes, thinking I'd wake up on the train.



But when I opened my eyes again, I was still there in the murky, lethal darkness of the Walled City. Standing in an intersection, I looked around, trying to figure out where I was, looking for the way home.

Instead, the tenement buildings leaned toward each other, like trees bending in a strong wind. They blocked all the streets but one, and I followed it because I knew just standing there wasn't safe.

The way felt familiar, but I didn't recognize the area other than it looked like so much of the Walled City I'd already seen. Claustrophobia and an impending sense of doom shivered inside me. I wanted to run, but I couldn't. The street looked like a long, dark tunnel, and I kept waiting for something to jump out of the darkness, knowing I would be defenseless before it. The wind blew cold through the decaying neighborhood, but sweat still covered me.

The low rumble of giant gears meshing rose around me, drowning out the beating of my heart. The street shook beneath my feet. Within a couple steps, I felt like I'd been stripped hollow, squeezed dry of everything inside me. Hunger dawned inside me, spreading like a slum fire.

I continued walking only because I knew that if I stopped, I'd die.

Ahead, a silhouette stepped out into the street. In the flickering lightning, I could barely make it out—tall and slender, like something stitched together from a fever dream and assembled wrong—and I got the strong impression it was female.

A crowd of emaciated people crawled and stumbled from the shadows, all of them hollow-eyed and slow-moving, like they were reduced to skin and bones and fired by whatever past desires they'd once had. Dirty rags barely covered them, revealing ravaged flesh and running sores.

One of the nearest men kneeling in the street looked back at me. I didn't know if he could see me or not, because rancid fluid filled both his eye sockets. He opened his mouth as if to say something, and I saw only bloody gums there, no teeth. His tongue slid out languorously, like it had a mind of its own, like it had become some diseased parasite, swollen and twisted as it gloried in the flowing blood.

The man's mouth twitched up in an obscene smile.

I started walking again, drawn to the figure in the distance.

To *her*.

Suddenly the chill was gone from the air. Tropical heat surrounded me, parching me, threatening to leave me desiccated and powerless. My stomach clenched, but there was nothing there for it to void.

I stared above *her*, at the building behind *her*, where I could hear the gears steadily grinding away, surely destroying something. A hatch stood out in the darkness, and I remembered it from the nightmares I'd been having. I could see the markings on the door now, inscribed in faded yellow paint. Another step and I could read the characters.

*Prosperity.*

A chill thrilled through me. I blinked, and *she* stood before me, towering over me. The sprawl changed around me, becoming an enormous gaping maw and the tenement buildings became crooked teeth.

The Walled City was going to devour me.

*She* reached into my mouth, using both powerful hands to break my jaw apart and splinter my teeth. I tried to scream—

—and found myself falling backward, pulled by a powerful hand. A foot swept my feet out from under me, and I hit the ground hard just as a train rumbled by in front of me, its thunder echoing inside the station.

“What’s wrong with you?” a familiar voice demanded.

Trembling, gasping for breath, I looked up.

Strangler Bao, clad in armor and weapons, stood there. The other people on the platform drew back from us, but the way they were watching, I knew they were more afraid of me than of him.

I shook my head.

“Auntie Cheng’s lost too many runners already,” Bao said. “Besides, there are cleaner ways to end your life than jumping in front of a train.”

“I was just in the Walled City,” I told him in a weak voice. “There was this... thing—”

Bao held up a hand, cutting me off. “You were hallucinating. And you almost just got yourself killed. Now get up and get back to that floating wreck that you sleep in. You don’t get to die here unless Mrs. Cheng says you do.”

I pushed myself to my feet and looked around. “Where are the others?”

“We found them.” Bao shook his head. “I sent them on to your ship. All of you were wandering around like you’d been brain-fried.”

“No,” I said. “We were—attacked.” I didn’t like the way that sounded when I said it, and I knew the big killer standing in front of me wasn’t buying it.

Bao laughed. “Bet you guys got whacked on something while taking out the Plastic-Faced Man. It happens. Probably hit you with a low dose of some suicide-inducing narcotic. You’re lucky Mrs. Cheng had us come looking for you.”

I ignored him and started walking. I wanted to return the *Bolthole* and make sure the others were okay.

“Tell Kindly Cheng I’ll be by to talk to her tomorrow.”

Back at the ship, I wandered to the other berths, checking on Duncan, Gobbet, and Isobel. All of them were asleep, like they’d been put out.

I watched them for a moment, making sure I was seeing what I thought I was seeing, and I went to bed fully armed. I passed out as soon as my head hit the pillow.

The nightmares were waiting for me.

## **CHAPTER 81**

### **“HOW DO WE MAKE OUR APPROACH?”**

Kindly Cheng called several times before we got up to see her. None of us felt especially social. Duncan and I went out for breakfast and brought it back for the others. We ate in silence, then armored up, restocked our weapons, and when we were as ready as we were going to get, went heavy to the mahjong parlor.

Our reception there was less than optimum. Kindly Cheng glowered at us, smoke curling up into her right eye. Bao stood at her side, and I wondered why she hadn’t sent him and his troops after us. Or maybe she’d known if anyone had tried that, whoever it was would have been shot.

Or maybe she wanted to make sure our heads were clear when we talked.

“There you are,” she snarled when we joined her. “Isobel texted me that you were able to locate and interrogate the Plastic-Faced Man.”

The dwarf shot me a guilty look and shrugged.

“She hasn’t,” Kindly Cheng went on, “told me his current disposition, however. I assume everything went as instructed.”

I returned her hard gaze full measure. “After we questioned him, I let him walk away.”

The possibility that she might order Bao to kill me on the spot crossed my mind. I had a pistol in my pocket just in case it turned out that way, because I wasn’t going to go easy. Duncan took a step away, spreading us out so we wouldn’t be taken together. Bao noticed that, and didn’t move. He’d be the first one we killed.

I wanted to send Kindly Cheng a message. We were the ones risking our lives out there, and we were going to decide how we did that.

For a long moment, Kindly Cheng didn’t say anything. She just stared through her cigar smoke. Then she spoke in a surprisingly calm voice.

“I thought I was clear that I wanted him dead.”

“You were clear, Auntie,” I said. “But he was accommodating, and I chose to reward him for it.”

“Your actions don’t send a strong message to Josephine Tsang,” she accused.

“We’re not done with Josephine Tsang yet,” I told her.

Her right eyebrow shot up and she reconsidered what she’d been about to say. “When I tell you I want somebody dead, I prefer that they become dead.

*I do the strategy. You execute the strategy.*” She ran her gaze over the team.

“Shadowrunners who wish to remain under my protection must remember their places.”

We also knew that we were doing a lot of work she couldn’t do on her own now. We had the tie to the old man, and we knew more about what was going on than she did.

Still, to keep the peace, we didn’t say anything.

“That said,” she continued, “you succeeded in removing one of Tsang’s pieces from the board. So let’s move on.” She picked up an egg pastry and popped it into her mouth, chewed and swallowed. “I trust you got something useful out of the Plastic-Faced Man before you—let him go?”

“We got plenty,” Duncan said. “He gave us a data dump on everything he knew about Prosperity Tower.”

Surprise smoothed Kindly Cheng’s glare. “Josephine’s headquarters? That could be useful, I suppose. What do you intend to do with it?”

“We’re gonna rescue Raymond,” Duncan told her. “He’s alive, Auntie, just like I said he was. Josephine’s holding him in there. She’s doing something to his brain.”

“Something to his *brain*?” Keen interest lighted Kindly Cheng’s eyes. “What is that old bitch up to now?”

“Based on the memory Mr. Plastic showed us,” Isobel said, “it looks like she’s trying to rewrite her son’s memories, using something called ASIST.” She glanced at me. “I researched it this morning. It’s an acronym for Artificial Sensory Induction Systems Technology. It allows the user to record, process, and feed synthetic sensory input to the brain.”

Kindly Cheng nodded. “Like a simsense chip?”

“Yes, Auntie,” Isobel said. “It’s the technology that *led* to simsense. It’s also what allows deckers to enter the Matrix, and grants riggers a neural connection to their drones. An expert ASIST technician could alter someone’s personality, memory...even their identity.”

“I’m guessing experts like that don’t grow on trees,” I said.

She smiled. “Definitely not. Changing someone’s memories requires a world-class expert in ASIST and a massive amount of computing power. I’m not sure exactly what they’re doing to him, but I’m guessing his mom wants him to forget something...or to remember it differently, maybe.”

“And we have no idea what that memory is?” Duncan asked. He sounded colder than he had before, more distant from his concern over the old man.

“Not really. Sorry.”

“That means a run on Prosperity Tower,” Duncan said. “I’ve studied the data the Plastic-Faced Man gave us about the layout. Lots of good intel there.”

“Do you know where the old man is?” I asked.

“All I’ve been able to find out is that an ASIST device is located in ‘Lab Twelve.’ It’s the only one in the building. Now I doubt *Grandma* will just hand over the passcodes to her system, even if we asked nicely.” Duncan smiled coldly. “So we’re going to have to *ask* in a way they can’t refuse.”

I nodded, in total agreement with him now. We wouldn’t get another chance at this. “How do we make our approach?”

“Fortunately, Prosperity Tower is one of Tsang’s lower security locations. It’s mostly administrative, marketing, that sort of thing. Those places are always open to people cycling through there.”

“That’s good.” Kindly Cheng nodded happily. “Mr. Bao, give the runners

those old Tsang security passes you used on that hijacking last year.”

“Yes, Mrs. Cheng,” Bao said. “They’ll get them.”

“*Old?*” I asked.

She shrugged. “Old ones will be better than anything you can get in less than a week. Do you want to wait a week?”

“No.”

She smiled. “I thought not. This is the best I can do at the moment, and you should be thankful I still have them.”

“We are, Auntie,” Gobbet said.

“Those passes should get you through the lobby,” Kindly Cheng said. “You’ll still have to explain your presence, so don’t expect to just walk on through.”

“The key to this operation are the three security stations located on different floors,” Duncan said. “The Matrix systems in these security stations are the command and control hubs for the entire building’s security. As such, they’re the best place to find out where Raymond is being held, and to hide us while we’re there. The problem is that the only way into a security station is with a keycard. Guards on each floor carry a keycard to the computer station on that floor.”

“It’s going to be difficult,” I said, “but doable.”

No one argued with me, but I knew no one was happy about the situation. However, we were all committed in our own way to striking back at Josephine Tsang.

“I do have something that may help.” Kindly Cheng smiled and looked a little hesitant. “A way for you to get some inside help. There is a man I’ve been cultivating inside Tsang Mechanical Services. A Mr. Jiang. He is not particularly enamored of the way the corporation is being run. He has put the word out for a team of shadowrunners, but he’s not willing to help infiltrate building security. Once you’re inside, though, he will be able to provide assistance.”

“You’re just mentioning this now?” I asked.

“Jobs like these are very dangerous,” Kindly Cheng said. “Normally, I would turn them down. In fact, I have turned this one down. Twice. But we find ourselves in dire straits.” She grimaced. “And Mr. Jiang wants this done cheaply. Very cheaply. He’s not a man who inspires trust.”

“We don’t have to trust him,” Duncan said. “We just need to use him for a little while.”

“Agreed.”

I took down the information she provided.

“One more thing,” Kindly Cheng said. “While you’re in that bitch’s headquarters, make sure you look for anything we can use to incriminate or embarrass her. I want dirt. Something I can feed to...an acquaintance...on the Executive Council. Someone who stands to gain from it.”

Duncan gave her a hard look. “Right after I rescue my father.”

Kindly Cheng blinked and held a hand up to hold Bao back. She looked innocent and understanding—for the moment. “Of course, my sweet. Of course.”

Bao got us the passes, and we left to recon Prosperity Tower.

## **CHAPTER 82**

### **SPECIAL DELIVERY FOR MR. JIANG**

After hours of watching the shift changes at Prosperity Tower, finding out that everything Duncan had sussed out about the setup was correct—and trying not to think of what was going on with the old man while we were sitting outside—we waited till nightfall and entered the building. The corp, like all the other big ones, ran 24/7.

The interior, like the exterior, advertised the presence of wealth. The architecture was similar to all the other high-rises around it. Everybody who had real estate on Ap Lei Chau Island was rich and powerful.

The passes Bao had given us got us through the door without a problem. The receptionist at the big desk in front of two elevators guarded by sec men was a little more tricky. But I’d gotten good at social engineering even before I’d been locked down, and like I said earlier, prison is a school and world with rules and codes all its own. Finally, of course, the refresher I’d undergone since arriving in Hong Kong had only sharpened my skills even further.

Casual sitting areas arranged around the main desk sat empty, but the furnishings were expensive, designed to be intimidating. The scent of burning lavender filled the lobby, but I felt more naked and defenseless walking into that building than I did in the alleys of the Walled City.

The receptionist kept her attention on her computer, but the guards at the elevators kept close watch on us. I stopped in front of her, tapped my fingers on the desk, and—when she looked up—gave her my most brilliant smile.

“Welcome to Tsang Mechanical Services,” she said, eyeing me from head to toe. She didn’t look exactly overwhelmed by me. “How can I be of service?”

“I’m here to make a delivery.” I held up the large box of what Isobel told me was bleeding-edge tech gear that would fool everybody but an expert. Since this was sales and acquisition, I figured we were safe until we hit the lab guys.

“Who is the delivery for?”

I flashed the Tsang security pass. “I’m afraid that’s confidential. You know how it is—there’s a rule for everything these days. Is it all right with you if I make my delivery and come right back?” Orders were not to give up Jiang’s name unless we were unable to get into the building.

She scanned the security passes, waited for the system to accept it while I tried to not hold my breath, and waved us on. “Please proceed to the elevators.”

I kept a punching dagger concealed in my fist, blade upturned along my wrist as I passed the guards. They looked us over, but didn’t say anything. When the elevator doors closed behind us, I let out a tense breath.

The elevator buttons didn’t have any labeling on them, but I knew from the Plastic-Faced Man’s info which floors held the security stations. I punched Floor 26: Sales and Acquisitions, figuring that one would go easiest.

As the cage jumped into motion, Duncan opened up about what had been bothering him since we’d left the mahjong parlor. “You know it might already be too late to save Raymond.”

I knew that, but I didn’t want to say anything.

“Hell, he’s not even who we thought he was.”

No. The old man was a guy like me—a guy who ran because he didn’t trust the system.

“So, if that’s the case, if Raymond’s already gone, what are we gonna do?” he asked, and he sounded exactly like that little boy I’d found and taken in all those years ago.

“We wait and see, Duncan,” I told him in a tight voice. “Just like always. We wait and see. And if there’s anything left of the old man, we save him.” I gritted my teeth and sucked in a breath. “And if nothing’s left, we burn Josephine Tsang’s house down.”



On the twenty-sixth floor, we stepped out into a small lobby where another receptionist waited behind a small desk. She smiled at us while the guard at the large, open doorway behind her came to attention.

“Excuse me, sir,” she said. “The Tsang employees on this floor may only be seen through a pre-approved appointment. Do you have an appointment?”

“I’m making a delivery.” I held up the box to show her. “For Mr. Jiang.”

She checked my security pass against a list on her computer, and her eyes went wide. “Y-you’d better leave right now, or...or I’m calling security!” She glanced over her shoulder at the man, who looked like he was about to come at us.

I started to bring out the trunk gun from my pocket, figuring things were going to get ugly quickly.

When she reached up to her headset, I almost shot her. She listened to somebody at the other end of the connection and I held up, thinking I needed to know more about what we were about to face. Then she relaxed and smiled at me.

“Mr. Jiang said he is expecting a delivery today after all. He just forgot to note it. That’s why your security passes bounced for this floor. I’ve updated them.” She returned the passes to me.

“Thanks.” I nodded to the guard and turned left, heading for Jiang’s office, wondering what he had in mind for us. Kindly Cheng hadn’t even known that, other than it was an inside job. For all we knew, Jiang intended to double-cross us. There could be a small army of sec men waiting in his office, with the corp man overseeing the betrayal and cashing in on the bounty being offered for us.

But like with so much else that had gone down in the past few days, we didn’t have a choice.

## **CHAPTER 83**

### **INSIDE JOB**

The sec guard standing in front of Jiang's office looked like he wanted to stop us, but Jiang had evidently called him off. A second later, the office door slid open.

Trying to believe that I wasn't leading my team into a trap, focusing on saving the old man, I stepped into the room.

Jiang stood at attention in front of his massive desk and smiled, but he looked a little nervous, too. He was middle-aged and balding, a short fringe clinging to the sides of his head. He looked like every corp drone I'd ever seen, except for that steady flicker of greed in his flat brown eyes. "Welcome to Prosperity Tower."

I glanced at the sec guard standing within earshot of the door. "I thought this biz was private."

"It is." Jiang looked a little more nervous as he took out a remote control and thumbed it.

The door slid closed behind us. I felt better knowing *all* of us were now trapped in the office. From the loss of color in Jiang's face, I guessed that he was feeling just the opposite.

"Just think of me as a...*business* partner."

"Sure. We were told you could get us a keycard to the sec office on this floor."

"I can. Of course I can." Jiang fidgeted, his bald head gleaming under the lights. "But first you must do what I need done." He looked at us. "Can I ask why you need the keycard?"

"Sure," Duncan growled, folding his arms across his broad chest. "Ask all you want."

Jiang didn't, realizing at once that no answers would be forthcoming.

"Different biz," I said. "Different partners."

He swallowed, calmed his own fears, and started talking either because he was greedy or because he was hanging on at the corp by his fingertips. It didn't matter which.

"Josephine Tsang is running the corporation into the ground," Jiang said. "Much like the way you're undermining her efforts here today, I trust that's what is going on, because I can think of no other reason for you to be here."

No one answered.

"I, too, am preparing to make a move against her." Now that he was committed and had stated his betrayal out loud, Jiang stood a little straighter.

“And therein lies the beauty of our situation—we’re in a position to help each other.”

“What do you need done?” I asked.

“It’s simple.” He smiled, and there was a bit more hope in his expression now.

I was feeling more relaxed as well, but I knew I wouldn’t have taken a run like this if it hadn’t been for the old man being in lockdown somewhere in this building. I tried to keep that in the back of my mind, but the thought of what he might even now be going through kept banging away inside my skull.

“I give you access to Tsang’s core system,” Jiang said, “and while inside it, you retrieve some data for me. It’s listed under ‘Foreign Accounts.’”

“Won’t the break-in from your terminal look bad on your access history?” Is0bel asked.

“A little trideo editing, and some creative violence on my guards’ part, and we’ll claim you assaulted us and entered the Matrix by force.” Jiang’s smile grew. “Your invasion of our direct system will only bolster our impending strike against Josephine.”

I let him dangle, giving the impression I was thinking it over. “Call your guard into the office.”

“Why?” Jiang asked.

“Because now he’s part of the plan.” I nodded to Duncan, who stepped to one side of the door.

Jiang did as he was told and summoned the guard into the office. The big man glanced around warily at us, then focused on Jiang as the door closed behind him.

Duncan slammed a big fist into the back of the guard’s skull, knocking him forward as Gobbet tripped him. As the big man came down, reaching for his pistol, I delivered a spinning back kick to his face that sprawled him unconscious on the floor with a dislocated jaw. Is0bel took out a trunk gun and shot him in the throat, guaranteeing a few hours of unconsciousness.

“There,” Duncan said with a callous grin. “Looks like your guy has been assaulted.”

I looked at Jiang. “Now give me that keycard and access to the core system.”

Shaking, the executive produced the keycard and gave Is0bel access to his private terminal. I pocketed the card and watched as she jacked into the computer.

“I need you to contact your receptionist and tell her you’re going to be

indisposed for a while,” I told Jiang.

“*Indisposed?*” Jiang hooked a finger inside his collar as if it had suddenly gotten tight.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “Let her know you’ll be in touch when you’re available again.”

“Indisposed is a temporary thing,” Duncan said. “If we have to, we can *dispose* of you. That’s more permanent.”

Hesitation froze the man for a moment, then he called his receptionist and gave her the message. As he looked at me, smiling nervously, I hit him in the throat hard enough to prevent him from crying out, then grabbed the back of his head and smashed him facefirst into his desk.

Blood spurted from his broken nose and crushed lips. Unconscious, he sagged to the floor, falling down next to the guard. I rolled him onto his side so blood wouldn’t run down into his lungs, then tranked him.

I glanced up at Duncan. “He look indisposed to you?”

He laughed, and we waited on Isobel to return to us, hoping Jiang didn’t have any appointments coming any time soon. And hoping our luck held long enough to see us clear of the building. *With* the old man.

## CHAPTER 84

### SHAKEN FAITH

“Security was tight,” Isobel said as she stood up from the terminal. “Lots of system trace software and destroyer ice. Definitely not for amateurs.”

“Did you get what Jiang wanted?” I asked.

She nodded. “I found the Foreign Accounts file. A bunch of recent transactions that looked pretty standard. Until I spotted a pattern. Some of the deals were encoded to prevent them from appearing in the corp’s standard financial logs. Most of them had to do with bribery.” She smiled. “There’s a chunk of clean nuyen no one will miss in there.” She looked at Jiang, still unconscious

on the floor. “That’s what he wanted.”

“You got it?” Duncan asked.

“Yep.” Isobel held up a datachip. “All on here. Along with the evidence against Josephine.”

Gobbet smiled. “Are we rich?”

Before Isobel could reply, I shook my head. “We leave the datachip with Jiang. Put it in his computer. If he’s smart, he’ll pocket the cred and keep his word. If he tries to rat us out, he’ll still have dirt on his hands when they put him under the microscope.”

Gobbet sighed.

“We’re here for the old man,” I said.

“I know. It’s just a shame we can’t have it all.”

“Doing it this way gives us a layer of security,” Isobel said.

“I know, I know.”

Isobel turned to me and smiled bigger. “I also found something Kindly Cheng will be happy to have. I pushed the files on to your PDA. Take a look.”

“Later,” I said.

“Some of it has to do with Raymond Black.”

I knew we should be moving, but the chance to learn more about the old man and what we were facing was too important. We’d been operating in the dark for far too long.

I pulled up the files on my PDA, and Duncan peered over my shoulder. Tension radiated off him.

Document Cluster A01-WCP-003-Secure.11/Final

WALLED CITY LOW INCOME HOUSING PROJECT FINANCIAL  
RECORDS AND REPORTING—FINAL  
MATERIAL CLASS 11—GRANTED ACCESS ONLY

I scanned the document. The Executive Council had brokered 950 million nuyen to Tsang Mechanical Services from other international corporations. Those monies were used to construct the Walled City.

“Josephine Tsang was embezzling from the project?” I asked, barely understanding the accounting in the file.

Isobel nodded. “About thirty-five percent of everything they took in. She was undercutting the construction, but she kept up appearances. When I eyeballed it, I

could tell she was struggling to maintain the percentage.”

“But she was greedy,” Duncan said in disgust.

“Bingo. You’d have to be a forensic accountant to suss it all out, but I’m pretty good with stuff like this. Take a look at the utility allocations.”

I flipped through the screens till I found it. The organizational hierarchy forms and system charts were almost incomprehensible to me, but I saw a familiar name at the top.

“Edward Tsang,” Duncan breathed in my ear. “Vice President of Special Projects.” He shook his head. “No way. No way would Raymond be involved in something like this. Josephine Tsang did this behind his back. He found out about it. That’s why he left Hong Kong.”

I wanted to believe him, and that need to know that much about the old man surprised me. But people didn’t always turn out the way you wanted them to.

“There was a folder listing Prosperity in there, too,” Isobel said. “It had been cleaned out.”

I closed the PDA.

Duncan put a hand on my shoulder. “Raymond wouldn’t have been involved in something like this.” His eyes met mine, and I could see he was struggling with his faith in the old man.

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter. We’re here to save him, and we’re going to do that. No matter what else happened. Kindly Cheng will use those files to hit Josephine Tsang where it hurts.”

I took the sec center keycard from my pocket. “Let’s go.”

## **CHAPTER 85**

### **PASSCODES**

We walked to the back of the floor and found the security command center without a problem. The difficulty would be in handling the guards inside. They’d have to go down quick or we’d be up to our armpits in Tsang security.

“We do this fast,” I told the others. “Anybody still standing after Gobbet hits them, we dart until they fall. And we shoot the ones that go down, too.”

At my side, Gobbet nodded, gathered astral energy shimmering in her hands. I swiped the keycard across the reader and the door opened. The second it did, Gobbet sent a wave of shimmering force into the room, then I swept her out of the way and took up a firing position.

The two guards in the back collapsed, but the big troll standing just inside the doorway just stumbled before planting his combat boots under himself again. He reached for his pistol and an alarm button on the wall at the same time.

I raced forward and caught his gun wrist in my left hand. It felt like trying to push a tree limb around. Throwing my shoulder in his gut to knock him backward, I shoved the trunk gun up to the general location of his carotid artery and fired three times. Trolls were notoriously tough to put down, and I wasn't taking any chances.

He fell hard, crashing into the floor as the others rushed into the room. Duncan closed the door while Isobel streaked for the computer terminal.

“Back in a sec,” she said as she jacked in.

Duncan and I tranked the other two guards, too. Then we settled in to wait.

Isobel took longer to come back this time, and she looked frazzled. “Raymond Black is locked in an area called Lab Twelve. That's where the ASIST tech is.”

“Good,” Duncan said. “Let's go get him.”

“We can't,” Isobel said. “Not yet. Getting to that lab takes *two* codes. I got one of them from this computer. They've compartmentalized security for that section of the building. The other number is on two separate floors.”

Duncan growled a curse.

I took a breath. I'd known this was going to be difficult. Josephine Tsang had been covering her tracks regarding Prosperity and the old man for decades.

“We only have to get through one of them,” I said. “One thing at a time.” I looked at Isobel. “Which floors we can find the numbers on?”

“There's a sub-basement and a magical research lab. Personally, I want to stay away from magic.”

I nodded. “Agreed.”

“Also, there are some job openings for maintenance crew on that sub-basement floor. Our security passes should get us that far.”

“All right.”

“While I was in there,” Is0bel went on, “I took the liberty of tripping security alarms on several different floors. Security’s gonna be chasing themselves for a while. If we move slow and if Kindly Cheng’s passes stand up to scrutiny, we should be fine.”

I checked the sec cam, found no one was standing in front of the door, then opened it and went through. The others followed. Is0bel took a moment longer to scramble the maglock, making it impossible to get in easily. The guards would be sleeping for more than an hour.

Either we’d be out by that time, or we’d be dead.

## **CHAPTER 86**

### **SYSTEM MALFUNCTION**

I was sweating by the time we reached the basement. We’d passed several sec guards trotting through the halls. Some of them even bothered to check our security passes. Most of them were swearing at the computer systems, convinced they were on the fritz because of the several false alarms sounding throughout the building. It would make security tighter on the mysterious Lab Twelve, but we’d deal with that when the time came.

Right now we just needed to keep moving.

A guard confronted us when we stepped out of the elevator on the basement level. He was anxious, and for a moment I thought maybe he’d made us.

“Halt,” he called out. “This area is off limits. Only select personnel are allowed in here. Do you have identification?”

I guessed he was new at his job, or at the position. Everything he said sounded rehearsed and unnatural. For a moment, I wondered if we’d walked in on another group of shadowrunners.



I showed him my ID. “Front desk sent me here for new employee orientation.”

While in the core terminal, Isobel had also entered us as new hires.

The guard took our passes and checked them over, trying to look older and more experienced than he was. “Welcome aboard. I’m pretty new myself. Just finished up orientation a month ago. Go on ahead to the end of the room. Stay to your right, then take a left at the corner. Maintenance manager’s office is right there. You can’t miss it.”

I thanked him, and we continued on, following his directions. I couldn’t help feeling like we’d been swallowed by a snake, and were just waiting to be digested.

The manager’s door stood open when we got there. Inside, a dwarf sat in a chair with her feet on the desk as she leafed through an old paper book with a bare-chested man and a long-haired woman embracing on it. When she didn’t look up, I rapped my knuckles on the open door.

Not looking at me, she held a finger to her lips, read a little longer, and dog-eared her page. Then she glowered at me, obviously not pleased at the interruption.

Corporate efficiency. You had to love it.

“Yes?” She drummed her fingers on the desk to underscore her irritation. Just in case I’d missed the glower.

I smiled at her, turning on charm I definitely wasn’t feeling. “We’re new hires. HR assigned us to this department.”

Slightly mollified, she put her feet down and turned toward us. “Before you do anything around here, you’ve gotta change out of those street clothes. Hit the locker room and grab a uniform.”

She gave us the locker code, and off we went.

In the locker room, just past the locked security room we needed to get access to, we avoided the other employees and dug out mottled green maintenance uniforms. We had to be careful transferring our weapons to the new clothing.

Then we reported back to our “boss.”

“Much better,” she said. “Should I assume that this is your new sector?”

“That’s what they told us,” I said.

“About time I got some help down here.”

Duncan snorted, but thankfully the little woman didn't hear him.

“I've got a task to break you in fast,” the maintenance manager said. “The autocoupler on the main terminal is out. Flow regulators need a restart. Engage its airflow mixers, then report back to me.”

“Sure,” I said.

She gave us directions and we went back out into the main room. She didn't ask why it would take all four of us to get the job done.

The maintenance terminal stood against one wall. We all stood back and watched as Isobel worked the keyboard. She went through the protocol almost too fast for me to follow.

“I found a work order here,” Isobel said. “Somebody wants that turbine fixed.”

In front of her, behind a thick wall of transplas, an inert turbine sat silent. The engine was at least ten meters across.

“You're thinking of repairing it?” Gobbet asked in disbelief.

“On the contrary.” Isobel grinned. “I'm thinking it could be a good diversion for us. Give us time to get into the security command center.”

“How big a diversion can you arrange?” I asked.

“You want fire and smoke? Some earthquake-like tremors?” Isobel hit the keypad. “You want it to seem like the apocalypse is starting right here in this room? I can do that.”

“Get it done,” I said.

As soon as she hit the last key, a gout of flame twenty meters tall jetted up from the turbine. It would have gone higher, but it spread across the ceiling, like a gravity-defying pool of fire.

Alarm klaxons shrilled through the room and the dwarven maintenance manager galloped out of her office like she was the one on fire. She cursed a blue streak as she stared at the flaming turbine. “*What did you do?*”

“I'm not sure,” Isobel said. “Isn't it supposed to shoot fire?”

“Damn it!” Our “boss” threw herself at the keyboard and started entering commands. “Get your asses over to security. They're going to want a statement. And you might want to hope another job comes through.”

We walked back to the sec command center and found the door open. A guy wearing captain's bars stood in the doorway. “What's going on?”

“The turbine caught fire,” I said. “The maintenance manager said we had to

make a statement about the accident?”

“Is it going to blow up?”

“I don’t know. It looks really bad.”

Cursing, the captain stuck his head back inside the door. “Hsu!”

“Sir?” A young lieutenant came to attention inside the office.

“Have them fill out the property-damage forms on our terminal.”

“Yes sir.” The lieutenant walked forward.

“I’m going to go see how bad this is.”

“Yes sir.”

When the captain disappeared around the corner, I followed the lieutenant into the room and tranked him, catching his body before it hit the floor.

“Find the terminal,” I told Isobel.

She nodded.

Duncan grabbed the lieutenant’s other arm and helped me position the unconscious man in the chair behind the desk. We slumped him forward, like he’d decided to take a nap.

The terminal was in the second room back. I watched Isobel through the open doors as she sat in front of the keyboard. Duncan stood over the cam console and watched all the activity taking place around us and on some of the other floors. Evidently Isobel’s spoofware was still up and moving like a will o’ the wisp.

“She does good work,” he commented.

“Yeah.”

“If we get out of here alive, it’s gonna be hard to think about moving on from those two.”

Before I had time to think about that, Isobel and Gobbet rejoined us.

“Okay,” the dwarven decker said, “I got the other passcode and launched another wave of spoofs. Tsang’s mainframe is twice as infected now. We’re good to go.”

Everyone was watching the flaming turbine and our still-cursing “boss” struggle to shut it down as we walked to the elevators. No one saw us go.

On the elevator, Isobel looked at me. “Ready?”

I checked the team. We were all nervous, mainlining adrenaline. “There’s no way out now but through.”

Duncan nodded.

“Let’s do it,” Gobbet said.

IsObel entered the codes, and the elevator rose.

## CHAPTER 87

### ASIST

We drew our real pistols as we watched the floors click by. Everyone knew we were going to get bloody from this point on. The elevator slowed and I stood in the doorway with my pistol tucked behind me

When the doors opened, three guards stood before us in the small sec checkpoint. All of them were on edge.

“This is a restricted area,” the sergeant said. “I’ll need to see your ID.”

I didn’t hesitate, just stepped forward, lifted my pistol, and fired three rounds into his face as his eyes widened, becoming bigger targets. I had no mercy for these people. They were holding the old man, and I remembered how he’d looked in the Plastic-Faced Man’s vid.

The sergeant went down, dead before he hit the floor. Duncan took out another with a steady stream of fire, and Gobbet threw a wave of force that picked up the last man and hurled him into a wall.

I was moving before the final man hit the floor, running my hands over the sergeant’s uniform till I found his keycard. We took their rifles. Then I followed the hallway forward. It only went in one direction, no offshoots, and ended at a massive sec door.

My heart pounded as I slid the keycard through the maglock’s reader. I didn’t know what we were going to find. I didn’t know if there was going to be anything left of Raymond Black. Maybe he would only be Edward Tsang now, a man Duncan and I had never known.

The door slid to one side.

At the other end of the room, a mass of electronics fed into a large coffin-shaped container with thick transplas windows. Inside the contraption, I could just make out a human figure.

“Raymond,” Duncan breathed, and pain filled his voice as he pushed past me.

I followed woodenly, telling myself I should be on guard, but all I could concentrate on in that moment was that small person inside that huge machine. Ozone filled the air. The security lights bathed everything in blue. The whole world felt surreal.

As I got closer, I made out the old man, recognized him at once. Duncan had his hands on the transplas, calling the old man’s name again and again. If he wasn’t the same man we’d known growing up, I knew Duncan wouldn’t ever be the same again either.

From the machines surrounding him, I knew the old man was still alive. He reclined on what looked like a surgical couch. Cables snaked into his head.

“Impressive setup.” Is0bel stood beside me and seemed in awe of the computer hardware. “Josephine Tsang must’ve spent a fortune on this.”

“With all the money she stole from Prosperity,” I growled, “she certainly had it to spend.”

“Help me,” Duncan pleaded. “Help me get him out of there.”

I just looked at him, not knowing what to do. I hadn’t ever felt that helpless, not on the streets, not even in lockdown.

“Hey,” Gobbet called from another computer terminal. “I’ve got some kind of instructions here for setting up a disconnect.”

Is0bel joined her, then shoved her out of the way. She flicked through the screens in rapid succession. After a couple of minutes, she shook her head.

“This is hopeless.”

“Don’t tell me that,” Duncan said.

A look of guilt covered Is0bel’s face. “We can’t shut this thing down according to the normal specs. We don’t have the time, or the clearance, or the personnel. *Maybe* if we had a week, Echelon security clearance, and an army of lab techs...but we don’t. We’re gonna have to improvise.”

“You’re talking about *improvising* with his brain,” Duncan protested.

“We. Don’t. Have. A. Choice,” Is0bel said. “Either we come up with something else right now, or we leave him here.”

I looked at Duncan and put a hand on his shoulder. “We can’t leave him. Not if there’s a chance to save him. Josephine Tsang will tighten security even more. We won’t have a chance to do this again.”

Duncan breathed out and nodded.

Is0bel kept flipping through screens. Her eyes widened in excitement. “Wait. I may have something.”

Duncan stared at her.

“According to this,” Is0bel tapped the screen, “I *might* be able to hack in and manually reprogram Raymond Black’s memories.”

“You mean—go into his mind?” Duncan asked.

“More or less, yes.”

“Have you ever done that?”

“No.”

Duncan clenched his hands into fists again and again. “You could mess him up.”

“Duncan,” I said gently, “he might already be messed up. Let her do what she can.”

“What *we* can.” Is0bel gazed at me. “I’m not going in there alone. I don’t know Raymond Black that well. I won’t know any of his memories.”

“I can go,” Duncan said.

Is0bel looked at him, then at me. “I need someone with a cool head,” she said. “Whatever Raymond Black’s locked under, it’s going to be covered in ice. I can’t go in there and be distracted.”

“Duncan,” I said, “she’s right.”

He took a deep breath and let it out, and I knew he was barely holding himself back from arguing. For a second, he hung in the balance, unable to answer.

“If this goes wrong,” Is0bel said, “Raymond Black could be lost forever. He’ll either be a vegetable. Or he’ll die.” She paused. “But this is the only chance we have to get him.”

Duncan cursed, but he nodded and put his hands on my shoulders. “Bring him back.”

“I will.” I sat down beside Is0bel, and she jacked us both into the Matrix.

# CHAPTER 88

## MEMORIES

The Matrix presented itself in gold and sandal brown this time, and everything gleamed under soft amber lighting. Facsimile temples stood in rows across the grid. Tracked overlays showed the routes of Watcher ice.

“We’re gonna go slow,” Is0bel said. “If you see something I miss, let me know right away. Once things go wrong inside here, they’ll go wrong fast.”

“Okay.”

Is0bel moved like a skater, slow and smooth. Watcher ice that looked like floating jellyfish zipped along, covering the area. When she couldn’t avoid them, she hit them with spoofing software, then glided by.

Once through the temples, she stopped in front of a giant, sloping gate that glowed bright orange-gold. Two massive Chinese dragons or lions—it was hard to tell which—stood on either side of it.

Is0bel hacked in, spinning through presented sequences. I wanted to help, but she was so much faster and more competent at it. In seconds, the ice blew apart and faded away.

We went through to the next area and found a machine standing in front of what seemed to be four access points to different sections of the Matrix.

“What are those?” I asked.

“It looks like Raymond’s brain has been dumped into four different repositories.” Is0bel looked at the machine in front. “This is an engram coder. We have to figure out the sequence of those memories and input them in the correct order to bring Raymond Black back.”

“How do we know which is which?”

“We’ll have to go into those nodes to find out.”

“You’ve got to hack four more sites?”

“*We* have to hack them,” she told me. Then she sped off to the first one.

Is0bel jacked into the node, and we crept through overlapping fields of watcher ice. I sat in the back of her mind like a navigator in the back of a fighter craft. I wasn’t sure what Is0bel did, or all the spoofware and malware she used, but she moved through them all, relentless.

When she unlocked the Blocker ice in the first node and accessed the file, blurry images took shape in sparkling light. A small boy hunkered down on the bank of a small pond. I saw his reflection in the water because I was inside the

boy's mind.

A single tear dropped onto the pond's surface and sent ripples eddying out, fracturing the boy's image. He reached out and traced a Pinyin character on the water, one I recognized easily.

*Father.*

"Raymond lost his father early," I said, and that made me remember how I'd never known my parents. "He never got over it."

Retreating to the node with the engram machine, Is0bel took us into the second. More ice protected the area, and this time she didn't catch them all. We got flagged by one of the Watcher ice programs.

Is0bel cursed as she hit it with a lethal program that dissipated it.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"We got noticed," she said. "If we get too loaded up with their snoopeware, the Matrix will bounce us out."

I stayed quiet then, knowing that it was likely we wouldn't get another chance to rescue the old man.

Behind the Blocker ice protecting the second engram of memories was a gymnastics studio. Before us, a twelve-year-old boy stood in a *gi*, hands clenched in a defensive posture.

"*You better know kung fu, mister,*" the boy said.

"*I know lots of things.*" The voice was Raymond's, and I'd heard him tell me that several times throughout our years together. He'd always been patient and firm. "*Are you smart enough to hear them?*"

"This was his studio in Seattle," I told Is0bel. "It was where he worked with homeless kids and made sure they were taken care of."

"Sounds like a good man," Is0bel said.

"He was—" Damn it. "He *is* a good man."

In the third node, I woke up in a sweat-soaked bed in a tiny room. For a second, I thought I was back on the *Bolthole*. I struggled up out of the sheets and stumbled into the bathroom. When I looked in the mirror, I saw Raymond's face looking back at me.

He looked a lot older than when I'd left home. His hair was gray and his skin was sallow. He looked terrified.

"This must have been right before Raymond left Seattle to come to Hong Kong," Is0bel said.

"Yeah, I think you're right."



She took us on to the fourth node, banging through the various types of ice till we reached the last series of engrams.

We walked through a long hallway. On either side of us, men and women in black businesswear so similar they looked like uniforms, watched through glass walls as we passed.

A door blocked the hallway, and I knew an office lay beyond. A brass nameplate shone mirror-bright on the big wooden door.

Edward Tsang  
Vice President of Special Projects

“These memories are from when Raymond worked with his mother,” I said. “Back when he was overseeing the Prosperity Project.”

“That’s the last of them,” Isobel said. “You ready to do this?”

“Yeah.” My mouth felt dry, which was weird because while I was there, I didn’t have a mouth.

Back at the engram machine, we entered in the memories, moving from oldest to newest. Then Isobel triggered the integration process.

## **CHAPTER 89**

### **WHAT WAITS IN DARKNESS**

*“Dad!”*

I opened my eyes, back in the ASIST room now. Feeling woozy and sluggish, I forced myself to my feet.

Duncan stood over the capsule holding Raymond. He stared at me. “Did you do it? Did you save him?”

I couldn’t answer. There had been no indication inside the Matrix. Raymond’s thin chest rose and fell, so I knew he was still alive. I joined Duncan at the capsule.

He returned his attention to the old man. “Dad?” he said in a louder voice. Inside the capsule, Raymond’s eyes flickered open. His voice was hoarse when he spoke. “...Duncan?”

“I’m here, yeah.” Tears ran down Duncan’s face.

My own eyes stung, and my vision blurred.

Raymond looked at me too, and called my name. He smiled. “Good...to see you both.” He reached toward us, but the transplas prevented him.

I found the latches and released them. Duncan gathered Raymond up in his arms and cradled him.

Isobel spoke in a small voice. “No time to catch up, guys, sorry. We gotta move.”

Gun in hand, I walked back to the door, checked the sec cam, saw no one, and led everyone out. We headed to the elevator and hit the button to the basement, where we’d planned our exfil.

Alarms hooted behind us, muting as the elevator doors closed and we began the long descent.

By the time we reached the MTR station, Raymond was walking successfully under his own power. He breathed raggedly, but regularly, and I took that as a good sign.

I called Racter and Gaichu, found them both at the *Bolthole*, and asked them to meet us at the subway station in Heoi. And to come heavily armed.

On the train, we surrounded Raymond and watched the other passengers. All of them avoided us, and most of them didn’t even look at us. They could smell the blood and death on us.

At Heoi, Racter and Gaichu were waiting. In a back corner of the subway platform in front of a closed gift shop where the shadows were most dense, they passed out the extra weapons they’d brought.

“Raymond,” Duncan said in a gentle voice. “Are you all right?”

The old man smiled up at him. “I fought...against the reprogramming. I didn’t...lose myself.” Dark circles had formed around his eyes. “I know you have a lot of questions. I’d planned to explain it all when you arrived in Hong Kong.”

“We’re here now, Ray,” Duncan said.

“You are here.” Raymond smiled up at Duncan and clapped him on the

shoulder. “And I am grateful for all you’ve done for me.” For a moment, I thought he was going to pass out, then he took a breath and straightened up again. “My real name is Edward Tsang. I’m the only son of Josephine Tsang, the CEO of Tsang Mechanical Services, and the heir to the corp. Before I left Hong Kong, I was the Vice President of Special Projects. The up-and-coming star of the company.”

“If you were the golden boy,” Isobel asked, “why’d you leave?” Her tone carried a little harshness, and I knew she faulted Raymond for some of the way her world was.

Raymond frowned. “My division was shut down. Disbanded. One of my projects...failed.”

That was a surprise. Raymond had never failed at anything I knew of.

“Prosperity?” Duncan asked.

Sickness twisted Raymond’s face and he looked like he was about to pass out. “You’ve heard of it, I see,” he said finally. “I was part of the project my mother envisioned...to rebuild Kowloon Walled City. A walking neighborhood for underprivileged citizens. It was supposed to be fully integrated, with job training programs, co-op childcare, drug counseling centers. It was a new approach to low-income housing in the East. The *springboard to prosperity* for hundreds of thousands.”

“Yeah,” Isobel said, shaking her head, “that doesn’t sound like the place I grew up in.”

“Mother personally oversaw every aspect of the project,” Raymond said, “to ensure every detail was executed properly. Chose each project manager herself, chaired regular status meetings with architects, builders, visited the worksite for surprise inspections. She was driven to make her renewed, revitalized Walled City a success.”

“So that was Prosperity?” I asked. “Another low-income housing project?”

“No.” Raymond shook his head. “The Walled City wasn’t the Prosperity Project.” He closed his eyes for just a moment. “Prosperity was something I built at the *center* of the Walled City.” His eyes suddenly rolled back into his head.

At the same instant, a giant hand pressed down on my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs. I tried to suck in a breath and couldn’t. I tried to move, but I was frozen in place. Gray spots blurred my vision, then expanded till I couldn’t see anything else. I felt like I was back in the Matrix, back in the dream with the sprawl closing in on me. Panic screamed inside me, demanding release.

A predator closed in. I smelled the fetid stink of its breath, felt the heat of its body, glimpsed the rush of coiled muscle.

Then there was silence.

When I opened my eyes, I was in the Walled City.

## CHAPTER 90

### THE QUEEN WITH A THOUSAND TEETH

I stared at the tenement buildings, rotting where they stood, filled with pain and loss, agony and despair, anger and self-loathing. All of those feelings mixed into a lethal concoction that bruised me just standing there.

Then *She* stood in front of me again, tall and imposing, made even bigger by the flowing gown she wore. I peered at her, but I still couldn't see her features. Her horns, though, I could see those, and I knew her face—if I could have seen it—would have been a terrible thing.

*She* stretched out a long-taloned hand toward me, and her nails were so sharp they slashed the darkness apart.

Her hunger, brutal and unforgiving, lashed me, turned my stomach and emptied me out.

The whole world turned black.

When I woke, I was on the subway platform floor. My sickness, sour and gritty, coated my mouth and tongue and pooled on the dusty concrete. My stomach cramped and heaved, trying to spew more from within me, but there was nothing left to give up. My throat felt like it had been set on fire.

For a moment, I couldn't focus. When I could see well enough, I saw the others lying around me. I looked instantly for Raymond, thinking this had been a ploy by Josephine Tsang to recapture him. But he was still with us.

Gobbet pulled herself up and looked down at her rats lying on the floor, looking just as sick as she was. Isobel was on her hands and knees, still retching violently. Racter clung to Koschei, and the drone was the only one among us who had not been affected. Even Gaichu, as dead as he was, was hunkered down by the assault.

Beside me, Duncan shoved himself to his feet. “That wasn’t a dream,” he said hoarsely. “That was something *else*.”

“It was a vision,” Gobbet said as she picked up her furry friends and tended to them.

“I saw...some sort of...*machine* inside the Walled City,” Isobel said. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “It was *churning* something. It felt... wrong...impossible. I think it was ripping...something...” She shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Reality,” Gobbet said. “It was ripping a hole in reality.”

Racter straightened and looked around. “Something is here, my friends. Something has...arrived.”

“I believe we have just fallen in over our heads.” Gaichu stood and tested his blades in their scabbards.

Duncan turned to Raymond. “What the hell *was* that?”

Sitting in the floor, Raymond shuddered and wept, looking older and more frail than I’d ever seen him. Than I ever wanted to see him. “She’s here,” he whispered in a fearful voice.

I crossed to him and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Breathe, Raymond, just breathe.” It was one of the first things he’d thought me to do.

“The Queen,” he whispered, “with a Thousand Teeth.”

A chill swept over me. Duncan was affected, too. He pulled out a pistol and stepped closer to Raymond, watching the darkness all around us.

“I left Prosperity in there,” Raymond said in a thin sing-song. “I left Prosperity in there. I left Prosperity in there.”

I squeezed his shoulder again and knelt beside him. “Edward, can you hear me?”

He looked up at me, tears still running down his withered cheeks. “I prefer Raymond.”

“Raymond,” I said.

“Are we still in the subway?” He gazed around in astonishment. “Something bad is happening. It began a long time ago. And I’m responsible.” He paused to

draw a shaky breath. “The Queen...Prosperity...”

“The Queen With a Thousand Teeth,” I said. “These dreams, visions. They’ve been coming to you for a long time, haven’t they?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Oh yes. I’ve been plagued by the nightmares for a long, long time.” His lips trembled. “They began years ago...sporadically at first. Vague dreams. Wrapped tight with guilt. With shame.” He closed his eyes. “Until this last year, when the *frequency* began to increase. Then the imagery clarified, started to repeat. Teeth. Thousands and thousands of teeth. And the sound...the sounds of suffering...began to drown out...even my waking thoughts. That’s when I knew I had to come back.”

“To do what?” I asked.

Raymond opened his eyes and put a hand on Duncan’s arm to steady himself as he stood. “To correct a mistake I’d made a long time ago. My fault... Prosperity...all those people...those poor, poor people.” He choked out a cry of anguish.

“The Prosperity Project?” I asked, trying to anchor his mind.

Shame pursed Raymond’s lips. “You know...about Prosperity?”

“Sort of,” Duncan said. “We already covered this, Raymond. We know that it’s in the center of the Walled City. And that Edward Tsang built it.”

“Why don’t you start at the beginning, Raymond?” I asked. “Tell us what this is all about.”

“The beginning...” Raymond’s voice softened for a moment, then he nodded. “Sometime in the ’20s, my mother was awarded the contract to rebuild the housing development. The Walled City. Prosperity was the *Fortune Engine* I built at the *center* of the Walled City. My special project.”

“Fortune Engine?” Duncan said. “What are you talking about? You can’t create fortune.”

“You kinda can, Gun Show,” Gobbet said. “Some practitioners of feng shui believe they can do it. Ever heard of the Begua of the Eight Aspirations?”

“No. I must’ve missed school that day.”

“Keep going, Gobbet,” I said. “I want to hear this.”

“It’s neo-feng shui,” Gobbet said. “The Masters of the craft can map the flow of *qi* and how it corresponds to different aspects in someone’s life. Fame, relationships, creativity, inner knowledge, health...and fortune.”

“That’s six,” Duncan said. “I thought you said there were eight aspects.”

Gobbet shot him a scathing look. “I don’t remember the other two. But one

of 'em was definitely fortune.” She looked at Raymond. “So what does your Fortune Engine do?”

## CHAPTER 91

### THE FORTUNE ENGINE

“The Fortune Engine was designed to improve the balance of *qi* in a negative-*qi* environment,” Raymond said.

Duncan shook his head. “A negative-*qi* environment?”

“Somewhere shitty,” Isobel said. “Like a slum.”

“Like a low income housing project,” Raymond corrected gently. “I believed that with the Fortune Engine, the rebuilt Walled City might never *become* a slum.” He paused for a minute, and I knew he wasn’t in the subway with us. “But the machine...malfunctioned.”

“How do you know how to create magic machines, Ray?” Duncan asked. “I thought you were an industrial engineer.”

“I am.” He nodded. “I also have several advanced degrees. Doctorates in Physics, Taoist Alchemy.” He shrugged. “My mother pushed me...hard...to reach my potential.”

I thought about everything Josephine Tsang must have put Raymond through, and I marveled at how he had ever become the man I had known. The man I’d hurt when I left.

“How did the machine malfunction?” Isobel asked.

“The mechanism I created to circulate negative *qi* in the Walled City got stuck,” Raymond answered.

“Stuck on what?” Racter asked. I realized then that he would be just as fascinated by machines as Isobel.

“Think of the Fortune Engine as a sort of propeller blade moving through astral space, circulating *qi*, keeping it fresh,” Raymond said. “When *qi* flows, when the rhythm is right, the results are positive. Fortuitous.” He paused. “When I

brought my Fortune Engine design to my mother, she *embraced* it. She more than embraced it. She bankrolled it. Put an entire *division* of Tsang Mechanical under me to develop it.”

I knew then where that missing thirty-five percent of the funding had gone.

“It was the biggest thing my mother had ever attempted in her career,” Raymond went on. “She said that if the machine could bring fortune to the *less* fortunate, it would prove my theory.”

“And if it could help the poor,” Isobel said disgustedly, “imagine what a Fortune Engine could do for Josephine Tsang.”

“But the people in the Walled City *didn't* benefit from your Fortune Engine, did they?” Duncan asked.

Raymond bowed his head in shame. “Something in astral space went wrong. I wasn't sure what. The machine started *pooling* negative *qi*, and the Walled City started to *fill* with it. Fortunes turned bad. Eventually the enormous pool of negative *qi* became...*toxic*. Fortunes turned from bad to worse. Much worse. Mother's vision for a rebuilt, revitalized Walled City fell to ruin. It only took a few years for the trapped toxic *qi* to turn a brand new housing development into a hellish slum.”

“Why didn't you turn it off?” I asked.

“I couldn't. Something happened. Part of the malfunction. We couldn't turn it off.”

“Then why didn't you wrap it in C6 and turn it into a scrap heap?” Duncan asked. “Just blow it up?”

“Mother refused.” Raymond's shoulders slumped.

“Why?”

“I never found out. She wouldn't tell me. She would only say that it wasn't worth spending the additional resources to figure out how to fix it. Or even how to turn it off.” Raymond took a shaky breath. “She sealed off the maintenance room. Our engineers poured a *sarcophagus* of thick concrete around it so no one would ever find it. Or ever find out what we had done.”

“Then she wrote the project off as a business loss,” Isobel said, “and moved on like nothing had ever happened. Right?”

“Yes.” Raymond touched the bandages on his head. “After that, I left Hong Kong. I started a new life in Seattle.” He looked at Duncan and me. “Found you two.”

“You should have stayed,” Duncan growled. “Tried to *do* something about



it.” Disappointment showed on his face. “You were a coward, Raymond.”

“Easy,” I said. I knew that Duncan was mad at both of us. I’d left him, too. “Sometimes when you’re in the middle of something, you don’t know if it’s better to run or stay. Cut him some slack.”

“No, Duncan’s right.” Raymond faced up to Duncan. “I *was* a coward. And the guilt, the burden of my cowardice, gripped me like a vise that never loosened. It’s eaten me from the inside for twenty years.” He licked his lips and sucked in a breath. “And then the nightmares began. Still, I kept working on the problem, night and day.”

“That’s the work that kept you in your study until all hours of the morning,” I said, but I mentioned it more for Duncan, so he’d remember that Raymond had been trying.

“It took me years even after you left,” Raymond said to me, “to make the connections, find out what to do. But I did. I figured it out.” Hope gleamed in his rheumy eyes. “And still the nightmares intensified, until they became unbearable. I knew I had to come back. Fix what I had done. That’s why I contacted you. To help me see it through.”

“What’s causing the visions we’re all having?” I asked.

“When the machine malfunctioned,” Raymond said, “when the circulator became stuck in astral space, it lodged in another domain.” His lips trembled. “And *something* lived there. After twenty years of constant force, the circulator finally began tearing astral space and created a rupture in *her* domain. And now she’s pushing through.”

“Yeah, she’s pushing through,” Duncan snapped. “The Queen With a Thousand *fucking* Teeth! A thing *you* brought here, Raymond!”

“Duncan!” I spoke sharply, in that tone I’d used back when we were running the shadows together, barely surviving from one day to the next.

He blinked at me and backed down, almost ashamed of himself. But he was hurt, too. Raymond hadn’t turned out to be as perfect as he’d always believed.

“I understand that,” Raymond said. “That’s why I came *back*! I believe she is only *partially* here! She hasn’t pushed all the way through yet!” I placed a hand on his thin shoulder and he calmed himself. “She’s probing her potential new hunting ground.” He sucked in a ragged breath. “I know what to do now. How to extract the circulator and shut the machine down. Before she can fully manifest.”

Considering all the effect *she*’d already had on the sprawl, and she wasn’t even really here yet, I could only imagine the horror that lay ahead if she ever

made it into our world.

“Just get me to the center of the Walled City,” Raymond said. “To the Fortune Engine. I will do the rest.” He took Duncan’s big hands in his. “Please. Help me. Help *them*.”

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then I said, “That machine has caused unspeakable misery. It needs to be shut down.”

“Whatever misery the machine’s caused is nothing compared to what’s gonna happen now,” Isobel said. “It’s not just a *thing* in there. It’s a Yama King. A demon goddess.” She swallowed. “I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t know if—”

Gobbet turned to her friend and put an arm around her shoulders. “We’re trapped, Izz. We can’t run, and believe me, I *want* to. It’s all I’ve been thinking of. But the APB is still out on us, and those visions...I got a feeling they’re not gonna stop unless we *make* ’em stop. And that fragile old man’s the only way to do it. We gotta take him in there. We gotta help him fix this.”

“I, for one, wish to see this Fortune Engine,” Racter said. “I am intrigued. I will go willingly.”

Gaichu looked at us, his face as somber as always. “I have the opportunity to kill a god. I cannot allow it to pass unanswered.”

Duncan was silent for a moment. “I hate this country. I hate this life.” He looked at Raymond. “But I owe you, and I’m not walking away from that. I’ll help you fix your mess, or die trying.”

The tension broke, and I looked around at the group. “We’ll need reinforcements if we’re going in there. And there’s only one place I know to get them.”

“Man,” Isobel said, “I *really* want to hear you sell this one to Auntie.”

## CHAPTER 92

“THIS WHOLE PLACE IS IN HARM’S WAY!”

My call to Kindly Cheng didn't go through at first. Bao said she was busy with something and would get back to me. I thought it was just her annoyance at us not reporting in on her schedule. So we stood outside the Walled City, waiting in the heavy rain. The *wrongness* trapped on the other side of the gate was even stronger now, a magnet for the dark storm gathering overhead. Wind gusted through the streets with feral howls. Most of the store owners had closed down, battening their hatches to ride out the night.

Raymond looked a little stronger as he stood next to me. Duncan had gotten him some sticky buns from a street vendor crazy enough to brave the weather, and the old man stood under the small respite offered by a fluttering canopy in front of a closed store while eating them.

"You look like you have something on your mind," he said to me.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked.

He waited a bit before answering. "I don't think so. No. I am the product of an aborted brain surgery. That, combined with all that has happened, I doubt I will ever be okay again. I have no idea when I will...break."

I was sorry I'd asked. It was a kid's question, brought up when a seemingly indestructible parent got sick.

"Although I'm relieved that you rescued me before my memory was wiped," Raymond went on, "part of me grieves at the thought I could have been free from all of this."

"None of us are free of this until we destroy that engine," I said.

When Kindly Cheng called back, the conversation with her went surprisingly quick. She told me she was sending a support team.

Less than twenty minutes later, a group of gangers showed up. Street people and vendors immediately cleared the area.

The leader was young, an elf with a professional demeanor and an arsenal to back it up. He called my name and I responded, stepping out to meet him.

"Mrs. Cheng sends her regards," he said. "I hear you're going into the Walled City tonight."

"I am."

"You know you're just asking to get slotted in there."

“I’m not planning on letting things go that way.”

He spat a curse. “Mrs. Cheng told us to go with you, so I hope you have some really good plans.”

“We’ll need all the guns we can get.”

He nodded. “This is our shot at distinguishing ourselves. Show Auntie that we have what it takes to rise in the organization. It may be our best chance to provide for our families.”

I knew some of them wouldn’t be going back to those families after tonight. I pushed away my guilt over that. If we didn’t do this, a lot more families were going to be lost.

As we approached the gates to the Walled City, a fetid blast of foul air hit us. If I hadn’t already gotten sick back at the subway, I would have been emptying my stomach now. The stench tonight was worse than the last time I’d been inside.

“Do you feel that?” Gobbet comforted her pets as they squeaked in protest. “It’s like the Walled City’s *bad breath* or something. It’s disgusting.”

Isobel looked up at the gate. “I feel, I don’t know, *unclean* just looking at the place. Like life has no value or something. Like there’s just no point to *anything*.”

“That’s the toxic *qi*,” Raymond told her. “And it is exactly the point. We need to get rid of it. Fix it at the source. If I can.”

“I’ll drop a marker in the center of the Walled City on everyone’s PDA,” Isobel said. “We should be able to weave our way through it to the machine.”

“Raymond’s the key to the whole thing,” I said. “I want him protected.”

“I’ll put some body armor under his clothing,” Duncan said. “It’ll stop a .45 at close range.”

“We can also take advantage of the chaos,” Isobel pointed out. “It may cover our approach in case someone is trying to stop us.”

Josephine Tsang hadn’t been far from my mind, either.

“Good idea.” Duncan finished making the adjustments to the body armor he’d wrapped Raymond in. “We should split up, too. Keep Raymond back. Out of harm’s way.”

Gobbet snorted. “Look around, Gun Show. This *whole place* is in harm’s way.”

“It’ll be safe if we split up,” Duncan insisted. “Some of us can clear the way

to the machine. Auntie's men can follow with the rest of us and escort Raymond once the way is secure."

"I agree," I said.

Duncan and I said our goodbyes to Raymond, then with Gobbet and Isobel at our heels, we went forward to clear a path to the dark goddess who wanted to destroy us all.

## CHAPTER 93

### MADNESS

Gale-force winds and the hard, driving rain hammered the sprawl as soon as we stepped through the gate into the Walled City. I knew the Queen With a Thousand Teeth was probably behind it, and the show of power was intimidating. She meant it that way.

But we ran through the shadows, loaded with weapons and barely in control of the fear filling us. If we'd thought there was any other way to end this thing and live, we would have taken it. If there had been a way out, I know we would have at least been tempted.

Duncan kept watch along the rooftops, and I watched the area ahead of us. Every step we took that plunged us deeper into the Walled City also brought an invisible burden of despair that weighed heavier and heavier on us.

We came upon a group of people huddled around a fire in a barrel under overhanging eaves that kept most of the rain away. The downpour hissed and smoked when it hit the flames. The men and women eyed us suspiciously, but they made no move to pursue as we trotted past. Of course, the many weapons we carried might have had something to do with that.

I checked our progress against the GPS marker Isobel had dropped, and found we were rapidly closing the distance. We hadn't been into the Walled City this far before.

"Look," Duncan said as we trotted down an alley. He scratched at the wall,

pulling paint away from the duraplast. “This is part of the original city. And there’s this.” He scratched deeper, revealing a faded stamp there as well.

It was for Tsang Mechanical Services.

“We’re getting close,” he said.

I nodded, and we kept going. I checked in with Racter and the Yellow Lotus leader to make sure they were good. They commed back immediately, and I couldn’t help wonder if we were successful so far, or if we were just being toyed with, being set up for a final, crushing defeat. To make matters worse, I didn’t know if those doubts were my own, or if they were inspired by the Queen.

Ahead, a light glowed in the rainstorm, revealing a group of Yellow Lotus 49ers standing in front of some canvas tents somehow still standing against the high winds. One of them, a dumpy elf with chipped teeth and a bouffant hairdo, stumbled toward us and brandished her SMG as a warning.

“You!” she yelled. “All of you drop your guns and get down on the ground!” She shook her head, like she couldn’t keep it still. Her bloodshot eyes caught the light and looked crimson. “Drop everything, or we’ll gut you like pigs!”

I stopped near a pile of rubbish I could use as cover. Duncan, Gobbet, and Isobel fanned out around me, taking up defensible support positions.

“You’re from the Lotus Den, aren’t you?” I asked. “Strangler Bao is backing this play.”

“Bao? *Bao?*” She snorted and spat. A thin stream of blood trickled from her left nostril. “His time is *done!* Our new *Queen* has *shown us the way!*” Lowering her weapon, she started firing as she rushed at me.

Duncan dropped her with a single shot from his heavy-caliber sniper rifle. The battle only lasted a few seconds. We took cover, but the gangers acted like they were invincible, charging at us like they were high on kamikaze. That street drug made you feel bulletproof, but you weren’t.

When the shooting stopped, we walked over their corpses as the rain sluiced away their blood. I wondered if the Queen was feeding on the deaths, not caring who died that night, just as long as someone did.

We climbed a fire escape and found a suitable rooftop that led to the upper floors, then followed a makeshift bridge over a narrow alley into a taller structure and plunged into a narrow hallway that let out onto yet another rooftop made accessible by another shaky bridge. If not for my PDA and Isobel’s marker, I would have been lost. I hated being up here because we were more vulnerable to the storm. It felt like the lightning and thunder were going off just above my head.

“Down!” Duncan commanded as he planted a big hand in the center of my back and shoved me to the wet roof.

I hit the ground and rolled, coming back up to my knees and bringing up my Ingram as a brief burst of heavy-caliber autofire dug divots out of the rooftop where I’d just been standing.

I tracked the muzzle flashes to a gun turret on the building ahead of us a second before Duncan took it out with his rifle. “Close call,” he said, peering ahead.

I agreed.

On a nearby wall, Isobel cut into a jackpoint and slipped away from us for a moment. When she came back, she said, “There were more turrets ahead of us. I shut them down. I’m getting used to shutting down Tsang Mechanical.”

“They put the turrets there?” Gobbet asked.

“It was their software,” she said. “After everything I’ve cracked today, I’d know it anywhere.”

Rounding another building, we came upon a commando contingent wearing Tsang colors in front of a sec door on a building behind them. We stopped and got ready to fight, but I let my group know I wanted to try and reason with them first.

“Whoa!” A commando held up a hand. Lightning flared overhead, revealing seamed scars on his face. “Hold on there. Tsang Corporation has limited inner city access to Tsang personnel only. No pedestrians. So if you don’t take kindly to the idea of an early death, I suggest you hightail it outta here. Nothing but hell past this point anyway.”

“We’re a contract team,” I shouted back with all the authority I could muster. “Tsang Corp hired us to assist the teams farther in. Let us through.”

The lie was believable. After all the confusion we’d caused at Tsang, and our liberation of Raymond, it stood to reason that Josephine Tsang would be hiring temporary muscle.

The commando looked at me like I was crazy. They didn’t want to go into the building. “I might’ve heard something about that. Let me clear it with the others.” He held his commlink up to his face. “Team Three, this is barrier reinforcement leader Ngai. I’ve got some contractors here requesting access to support our squads. They cleared?”

Gunfire and the voices of shouting men came from the other end, loud enough that I could hear it from where I was standing, despite the storm.

“Damn it, man!” Duncan roared in his best Lone Star voice. “Let us in! You

heard that as clear as we did! They need backup, and they need it *now!*”

For a moment, Ngai held his ground, torn because he didn't have clear orders. Finally, he made up his mind. “No more time to lose. The squads need you. Go, go!” He waved us forward and one of his men opened the sec door. “And watch your back!”

I ran through the open door, listening to how the storm sounded even more threatening in the emptiness around us. Ahead, I heard gunfire and shouting, fearful men dying.

## CHAPTER 94

### THE SHADOWS HAVE TEETH!

My commlink buzzed, and the screen showed Raymond's worried face. I answered, but kept my eyes on the hallway ahead of me.

*“What is your status?”* he asked.

“We're almost at the center of the Walled City.” I went wide around a corner, sweeping the darkness with my cybereyes, alert for the slightest movement. Nothing was there, but the shadows looked like they were in motion. “Had some opposition from Tsang security. They're all over this place.”

*“Tsang security? How did you get through?”*

“Bluffed our way past.” I stopped briefly at another door, opened it and peered beyond to see nothing, and moved through.

*“Good.”* Raymond sounded relieved. *“Too much bloodshed already. We must prevent as much as we can.”* He took a breath. *“You need to be careful. The nearer you draw to the Fortune Engine, the worse the astral disruptions will become. And make sure when you reach—”*

Whatever he was saying was lost in a sudden, harsh blast of thunder. The signal faded and dropped.

“No, no, *no!*” Duncan growled. “Did that sound important to you? Because that sounded absolutely fucking necessary to me.”



I agreed and kept moving. We didn't have a choice.

Around another turn in the maze of hallways, walkways, and rubbish-covered roofs, we spotted a Tsang commando unit blocking a group of citizens, menacing them with their weapons. A man lay dead at the commandos' feet, nearly decapitated from a close-range shotgun blast. The people wailed in fear, begging to be allowed to pass the cordon.

A commando wearing sergeant's chevrons fired above the crowd, stitching a line of bullets across the stucco wall. The citizens ducked and yelped in terror, nearly driven insane from the fear assailing them.

That panic was working on me, too. It was everything I could do to focus on what I needed to do.

"Back away!" the sergeant roared. "Back the *fuck* away!" He waved his weapon threateningly. "I'm *warning* you! Clear the area *now*!"

The people didn't retreat, though. It was obvious they feared whatever was behind them more than the commandos. The holding effort wasn't going to last long.

"Please!" an old woman called out. "*Please!* We cannot stay here!"

"This is for your *own good*!" the sergeant yelled. "We are here to *protect* you!" He waved his SMG again. "*You can't be here! Back away! This is your last warning!*"

We held up, not wanting to add to the confusion. I wondered if I could bluff again and get the sergeant to stand down. He didn't sound all that rational, either. He was just as scared as the people in front of him.

Before I could do anything, the sergeant opened fired and dropped the old woman. I didn't hesitate then, just shot him without warning, hoping to prevent further murders. Duncan fired immediately, too, putting another commando down. Gobbet threw a fireball into the other two commandos, covering them in flames just before Duncan and I put them down.

Realizing we weren't going to harm them, the people ran past us. A couple picked up the commandos' weapons, but no one appeared interested in us.

"Did you see that?" Gobbet asked. Her face was ashen.

"See what?" Duncan asked.

"That—*thing*. That *thing* standing behind the commandos."

I searched the shadows, but didn't see anything. I shook my head. "Nothing's there."

"There was something there. I *saw* it. It was...*horrible*. There were teeth

everywhere. And I *felt* it—it radiated menace and hatred.” She paused. “I think it was what caused these men to go crazy like they did.”

“I believe you,” I said. “Maybe it was in astral space and you could see it, but we couldn’t.” Thinking about it, I realized I’d felt that old, familiar vibe I got every time I encountered the astral.

“We can’t hang around here,” Duncan said. “Somebody may come looking for these guys.”

I took the lead and we ran through the door. Dead bodies littered the hallways, some of them days or weeks old. They’d been killed by guns and knives and fire. Some of them had been torn to shreds. More gunfire cracked in staccato bursts ahead of us.

Another group of commandos blocked a hallway, all of them with weapons pointed at each other.

“She’s *here* for us!” one of them screamed. “I’ve seen her in my *dreams*!”

Duncan cursed as we took cover along the walls, hiding in the shadows.

“*What* is here?” another commando shouted. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, damn it!”

The first speaker faced me, but he didn’t see me. His eyes were wide and blood oozed from his tear ducts. He shook his head, like something had crawled inside and was causing him pain. He reached over and pulled a female commando to him, surprising her.

“I know how to keep us safe!” the man said. “I saw how to do it.” He pulled a multi-tool from his belt and held the woman tightly. “Open your mouth!”

She pushed against his chest, then beat on him when he didn’t release her. “You’re crazy! Keep away from me!” Finally breaking free, she drew her sidearm and shouted at the other man with them. “Get backup! Hu has gone insane!”

The third commando ran down the hallway away from us. Hu stepped toward the woman.

“This is for the best, Yang,” he said. “Trust me! I’ll do you first, and then I’ll do me! By the time I’m done, she won’t be able to hurt us anymore!” He moved faster than I’d anticipated, catching the woman before she could shoot him. Or maybe she held back because she didn’t want to hurt him. He sank his multi-tool into her throat right before Duncan put a round through his skull.

Both of them dropped to the floor. The woman bled out before we reached her, eyes glazing over as her pupils turned into black pools.

Leaving the two dead commandos where they lay, we went on. A terrifying

buzz filled my head now, and I didn't know how much longer I could withstand it.

The hallway let out onto a rooftop where a dozen commandos had collected. They milled around, hands clutching their heads. A wailing keening echoed around us, and I didn't think the storm was causing it. To one side, I caught a glimpse of something stirring in the shadows. As I turned to face it, that itch I always got around the astral scraped my nerves raw.

It had fangs, dozens of long, gleaming things that ended in sharp points. The *thing* was tall, slender, and writhed like it was boneless. Just as I was about to pull the trigger, it vanished.

The snarl of gunfire sent me to the ground hunting cover. Out on the rooftop, the commandos shot each other till no one was left alive.

Two buildings further on, a man stood in the hallway in front of us. From his clothes, I assumed he was one of the locals. Dead bodies—some of them still bleeding—lay around him.

He looked at us and backed away fearfully. "Leave me alone! Go away!" While he was screaming, blood dripped from his torn gums. Half of his teeth were gone, looking like they'd just been ripped out.

"Can't let them find me!" the man howled. "Can't let them catch me! Have to hide from them! From *her*! Can't get free! Can't get clean! When my eyes close, I see them there, twitching, *shaking* like broken things!" He reached for me, blood dripping from his fingers. "Please! Please help me!"

"Don't," Gobbet said. "Something's scrambled his brains. Might've been the Queen or her servants, or maybe just the stress. Either way, there isn't much we can do."

I nodded and ran past him, followed by the others, wondering if any of us—or *all* of us—were going to end up like that.

The farther we ran, the more the citizens of the Walled City ran past us in waves of madness and fear. We were lucky none of them had weapons. Those that attacked us, we put down hard so we could continue, but we tried to leave them alive when possible.

Isobel's marker was only a dozen or so meters ahead now. We were about to face whatever was causing all of this.

## CHAPTER 95

### NETWORKED

I tried my commlink over and over as we ran, and had the others try theirs, but none of us had any luck contacting Raymond or the others. It was as if we'd been dropped into another world.

Thinking about the link to astral space the Fortune Engine was supposed to have established, I knew it was possible. I tried not to think about it, just kept my eyes open, the Ingram ready, and concentrated on believing we could defeat whatever lay ahead of us.

As we neared our destination, I spotted the thick electrical cables snaking across the cracked walls. The hum of energy vibrated everywhere, right through me, echoed by the storm pounding the sprawl around us. The cables led to a steel-reinforced wall ahead. Inside the next room, computer equipment sat on shelves. LEDs glowed, throwing out pools of light in a rainbow of colors. All around us was the *thrum* of the machine, unmistakable now.

“This is it,” Duncan said. Rainwater dripped from his chin. “*Prosperity*. Just like in our dreams.” He scowled as he looked around. “The Fortune Engine has to be somewhere in this complex.”

I nodded. “We find the machine and secure it until Raymond arrives.”

It sounded simple enough. I tried to believe it.

We followed the cables through the buildings out onto a rooftop that fronted a massive steel wall. Computers sat all around, somehow still working in spite of the falling rain. I worried that we might all get electrocuted, but we couldn't go back now.

Uneasy, I halted at the edge and looked back at Isobel. “What is this?”

She shook her head. “Something big. Powerful. It's all networked.” She paused. “That's all I can tell you. None of this makes sense to me.”

Warily, I crossed the rooftop to the massive door set in the steel wall. I scanned it, trying to divine its secret. “The door's been sealed. It looks like it's been shut for quite a while.”

“There's got to be some way to get this door open.” Duncan banged on the door with the shotgun's stock.

“There’s a control back here,” Is0bel called. She stood at a computer console with streams of data trailing across it. “It’s still drawing power. That’s promising.” She stared at the screen. “Thing isn’t even password-locked. The display looks corrupted, though. Lots of garbled text and gibberish.”

“As long as we can open the door with it,” Duncan said, “we’re good. We don’t need it for anything else.”

“See what you can do,” I said, stepping back from the door and bringing the Ingram up as I looked over her shoulder.

*Prosperity Project Admin Terminal*

```
> >TSZNGMECH4NIC4L S3RVIC3S< <  
> >SPECIAL PRZJXCTS D57ISION< <  
IFIE.....WXLFNX....2302VF3... */I  
> >PROSPNRITY ADMIN0SYSTEM< <  
< <I.//OPIN TESTBED DZOR> >  
< <O.//SEDC...##135345@XV> >  
< <Z.//QQV1.....RRPWED...3R...> >
```

“Here goes nothing,” Is0bel said.

The computer screen flickered, then the code shrank into darkness and the screen, dappled by the rain, turned to ebony.

“Damn it,” Is0bel said. “Let me take a look.”

A wave of nausea slammed into me, driving me to my knees as my stomach tried to crawl through my mouth again. Duncan, Gobbet, and Is0bel followed me to the rooftop. I fought it and, finally it faded away, leaving me gasping and my senses spinning.

The itching sensation returned, surpassing anything I’d ever felt before. For a moment, the crashing rage of the storm went away and I stood swaying in an unnatural silence.

Crimson strands threaded together in the shadows in front of us, growing thicker as they entwined. As I watched, frozen, a figure manifested there, terrible in its beautiful cruelty. Red silk and carved ivory covered the tall, slender form, and I recognized her at once.

## CHAPTER 96

### QIAN YA

The Queen of a Thousand Teeth stood before us, lashed by the fury of the storm, but unbending. Shadows clung to her like grave swaddling. A horned, gold mask hid her face. She waved her hand, and three spirits popped into existence on different sides of the rooftop. All of them possessed flaming arms that snapped like writhing snakes as they reached for us. Snarling faces weighed us and found us wanting. Their overwhelming confidence leached into me like acid, and I knew it was affecting the others as well.

“Shit,” Gobbet whispered, taking a step back.

“Qian Ya,” Isobel said in awe.

I took a firmer grip on the Ingram, and wondered if bullets would even touch her. She was a true force of nature. Even the storm bent to her will. We had come this far, faced and beaten every obstacle we had come up against, yet now, everything in me screamed to run away as far and as fast as I could.

But there was also a flicker of anger deep within that fear, too—a burning hatred of everything we had been forced to go through, everything Raymond had faced back when he was Edward, and everything he had suffered after coming back to make restitution. I clung to that anger, nurturing it as my best defense against the monsters we faced.

I already knew how to do that. I’d spent my whole life living on anger.

“Steady,” I called to the others. They responded by spreading out so we couldn’t be attacked all at once, and we kept firing lanes open. Unwilling to take my eyes off the demon in front of us for more than a millisecond, I shot the barest glance at my companions. Gobbet and Isobel stared wide-eyed at the inhuman creatures before us, but both stood fast, their spells and weapons at the ready.

Duncan just looked nearly as pissed off as I felt.

“*You are here,*” she said in a serene, striking voice I did not expect. Her tone was pure seduction, a siren call that promised razor-sharp pain at the end. Her words echoed around us, like a surround sound effect in a high-end sensie. “*You have come to us.*”

The spirits, covered in elegant, enamel-lined carapaces, crooned like a Greek choir, but underneath it all was an unholy hunger. *“Come to ussssss.”*

*“We called to you,”* Qian Ya said, *“across the breadth of space and time. And now you are here, standing before us. Just as you were meant to be.”*

*Raymond and the others are coming.* I told myself that, even if I didn't know it for sure. I had to buy enough time for them to arrive. I focused on my anger till it burned white-hot. At this point, it wasn't hard at all.

“Why did you call to me?” I asked. “What do you want?”

*“We call all who will listen.”* She tilted her golden mask up to the sky as lightning seared the heavens. The reflection on her mask nearly blinded me. *“All are welcome in our court.”*

*“Allll are welllllcomme,”* the spirits sang.

*“And all are welcome in our larder,”* Qian Ya said in a mocking tone. She spread her arms and lightning glinted from the dagger-length nails at the ends of her impossibly long fingers. *“You belong here, slave-thing. With us. Now and for all time.”*

The sickness washed over me again, threatening to take me down. We couldn't wait any longer. I didn't know where Raymond and the others were, but we had to fight back right now. If we didn't, the pervading fear would undermine us, drive us apart. We had to act now, while we could still operate as a team.

“I'm gonna blow you back to whatever hell you crawled out of,” I said, raising my Ingram and opening fire.

She dodged in a whirl of red silk, so fast I didn't know if I'd hit her. She called to the spirits and they set up behind computer consoles. An instant later, red lightning sprang out of the equipment and streaked for us. A heat wave trailed in its wake, raking steam up from the rooftop.

We dove, splitting up and not organized in any way. I ran toward the spirit opposite Qian Ya, firing steadily, fighting through the blast furnace of the concussive wave. Bullets ripped into its flesh as it frantically tried to bring the lightning to bear on me. I dodged to the side, threw myself back, then hurled myself forward in a headfirst dive as the stench of ozone enveloped me.

The spirit's lightning bolt caught the right side of my face, lashing me with searing pain. The stench of my burning flesh flooded my nose, and my muscles spasmed from the electricity sparking through me. I dropped to the rooftop, screaming in fear and pain, but somehow managed to keep my weapon trained on the spirit, driving it back with burst after burst.

When the SMG cycled dry, I dropped it and drew my pistol while pushing myself up. I fired again and again, driving the spirit back to the rooftop's edge. The thing flicked lightning at me again, and I barely managed to duck beneath it.

Before I could press my attack, its second strike caught my ankles with enough force to knock me over. I broke my fall with my free hand as fresh agony split my face. Gritting my teeth, heedless of the pain and terror, I fired again and again. All the while I kept moving, pulling myself together enough to roll back to my feet. If I stayed put for even a few seconds, I would die right there.

The pistol locked back empty. I grabbed a grenade from my armor, pulled the pin, and slipped the spoon. Then I was on top of the spirit, smelling its stinking foulness that nearly took my breath away. This close, its face was a horrifying combination of humanoid and frog, with goggling eyes, two slits for a nose, and a wide, gaping mouth that popped open and closed. Its slick flesh was hot to the touch, hot enough to burn my hands, and just felt *wrong*. The burn across the side of my face tightened from the heat it gave off, and for a moment I thought I was going to pass out.

Grabbing the spirit by an undulating arm, I set myself and got the leverage I needed, then heaved it over the side of the building. Before it had dropped three stories—still a long way from the ground—the grenade I'd tucked in its robes detonated, ripping it to pieces and throwing it out of this world.

Breathing hard, my hands and face burning from the contact, I ran back to the others. My right eye was already swelling shut. Peering through my impaired, blurred vision and the agony ignited inside my skull, I picked up the SMG from a pool of rainwater and slammed a fresh magazine home. My rage was erupting inside, threatening to completely overwhelm me.

*Kill her! Kill her, and you save yourself! You save Duncan and the others!  
And you save Raymond! KILL HER!*

Face scraped raw and bloody, with a swath of hair on his head burned away, crimson streaking his eyes, and a tusk broken in half, Duncan shoved his shotgun under the chin of the spirit he'd taken on. It clawed at him in a frantic attempt get away, ripping chunks off his armor, but he pulled the trigger and blew its head apart before it could reach his flesh. Wisps of its corporal presence faded into the rain.

A gout of flame made me glance over in time to see a fireball strike Isobel and knock her back across the roof. She rolled head over heels, and when she rose unsteadily to her feet, battered and smoking and spitting blood, she simply



snugged her grenade launcher tight into her shoulder and fired again. The HE round snuffed the nearest spirit in a blinding explosion, and the dwarf turned her sights to its mistress and fired again.

The HE round's concussion made Qian Ya stagger back and curse in a language I didn't understand, but there was no mistaking the tone. Her arms flailed as she recovered from the explosion, but a water spirit Gobbet had summoned sacrificed itself to smother the remaining spirit the Queen With a Thousand Teeth had summoned to battle us. In a huge cloud of steam, the two spirits vanished, leaving just us—and her.

Thinking we had her on the ropes, we attacked without mercy, hammering her with everything we had. Isobel knocked the Queen back with more grenades from her launcher. Duncan and I added grenades of our own. Much of the computer equipment was wrecked, and I hoped if they were holding her in this world, they would fail.

Bleeding from the side of her head where her ear had been torn away, Gobbet summoned an earth spirit, spraying blood with her words. The walking pile of dirt and stone waded in, its knobby fists flailing while we continued targeting Qian Ya.

I was deaf from the noise of the combat raging around me. I was screaming, but I couldn't hear myself. I was a gunsight, and I did not miss. The pain in my face and hands warred with the dark fear racing through me. I channeled every bit into my inferno of hatred, and directed all of it at the figure in front of me.

Finally, covered in flames and soot from the explosives, her rich silken clothes burned and blasted away, her grotesque body scored by hundreds of rounds, Qian Ya almost toppled, caught herself, then caught another of Isobel's grenades in the face. She went down slowly, but she went down. Nothing but blackened flesh and burned silk lay in a heap.

I turned to Duncan and caught him up in a hug we hadn't shared in years. Neither of us could believe we were still alive.

“*Raymond,*” Duncan mouthed at me.

I shook my head. I checked my commlink, but it was still dead.

Then I heard Gobbet cry out in alarm.

Whirling to face her, I saw her gaping in horror at the burned debris left from our battle. I stepped back as a new wave of fear slammed into me, staring in disbelief as the burned and bloody thing *twitched* and started to move.

As we all watched, the red silk knitted itself back together, filling as Qian Ya healed, her body regenerating inside the ceremonial outfit. Maniacal laughter

pierced the thick, cottony silence as we watched her stand to face us once more.  
“We are *so* slotted,” Duncan wheezed, even as he fumbled for fresh rounds.

## CHAPTER 97

### BATTLE IN THE ASTRAL

Red fury blazed from the eyeholes of Qian Ya’s golden mask, and her words dripped disdain.

***“You cannot kill us, meat.”*** She threw back her head and laughed again. ***“You have not even seen us yet.”*** She swept her red silk robes out, and they looked as if they’d just been woven, fresh and clean, with no marks from the past battle on them. ***“This form is but a shadow. A droplet of divine essence filtered through a keyhole.”***

My entire body felt leaden, and I could barely stand. The pain in my face was unquenchable, even in the rain, and I swore I heard raindrops sizzle when they struck my flesh.

Gobbet’s hands shimmered with energy, but she didn’t move. “I think she’s telling the truth,” she said quietly as blood dripped from her mutilated ear. Her eyes were rounded and wide. “That thing over there isn’t Qian Ya. It’s just a fragment of an enormous astral entity. The little ones, the servitors we banished from this plane, are all parts of her, too.” She took a breath and let it out, looking like a drowned rat from the storm. “We are *so* fucked.”

***“The rat-servant sees the truth of it,”*** Qian Ya declared. ***“Glimpses us as we really are. Were you to behold our full magnificence, your mind would wring itself into pulp. You will see, slave-thing. We will show you a world not meant for mortal eyes. You will see.”***

She moved back then, not retreating, but toward the heavy sec door behind her. It opened just before she reached it, letting a sickly, golden-green light inside spill out over the rooftop. Madness lay within that room. I felt it pull and twist at my mind and my senses.

“We can’t let her get away,” Duncan said in a hollow voice.

“I don’t think she’s trying to get away,” I said. Why would she run? She had already almost killed us the first time.

“She’s...challenging us...to meet her in her realm,” Gobbet told us. “She’s even stronger there.”

I tried to think through the pain and rage and fear. I didn’t know much at this point, but I was certain of one thing. “If we don’t stop her now, tonight, she’s only going to come back stronger.” I turned my face up to the rain, hoping the cold chill would stop some of the pain. It didn’t, but the narc slap patch Duncan affixed to my neck blocked some of the agony. My head cleared of some of the worst of the torment, but it dulled with the pain-blocking effects. Still, I was focused enough to be dangerous, to kill.

Isobel stared into the glowing room and spoke with quiet fury. “Can we hurt her there?”

“I don’t know,” Gobbet replied as she touched a shimmering hand to the side of her head. The flow of blood from her torn ear slowed, coagulating almost at once.

“If we don’t stop her, she’ll take this city,” Isobel said. “Then she’ll take more and more, until there’s nothing left. We can’t allow that.”

“We don’t know if we can stop her,” Duncan said.

Isobel shot him a challenging glare. “You want to give up before we even try?”

“I’d say we already tried.” Duncan grinned coldly back at her. “But I still have ammo, and knives after that if the bullets don’t do it. I’m in.”

We moved into the room, and as soon as we stepped inside, the world turned black.

For a moment, I thought maybe Qian Ya had just killed us outright. No longer wanting to take any chances, I figured she’d turned our lights off and called it a day, just to show how truly powerless we were.

But I wasn’t going out that way. Even as hurt and afraid as I was, my anger was stronger, sustaining me, driving me forward. I wanted to go down with a gun in my hand, spending my last breath trying to kill my enemy.

Then my eyes snapped open, and I saw we were someplace else. We stood

in the middle of a temple. Strange, twisted statuary lined the sides. There were no walls, like we were floating in the middle of nothingness that reminded me of running with Is0bel in the Matrix.

Qian Ya stood before us. More servitors awaited her orders, an even larger group of frog-faced lizard things, bigger than the ones we'd beaten on the rooftop. ***“Now we shall see what you are truly made of, meat!”***

This time, even though our opponent had seemingly risen from the dead, we were ready. We worked together. At Is0bel's command, Duncan and I concentrated on horde of servitors, blasting any that got too close while trying to maintain a safe distance and use the pillars as cover. One of them charged at us, and I fired till my SMG cycled dry.

“I'm out!” I yelled, reaching for my pistol, even though I didn't think it would do much good.

“Take out its ankles!” Duncan yelled as he ripped a grenade off his combat harness.

I followed his directions immediately because there was no time to think. The Savalette Guardian bucked in my hand as I put a half-dozen bullets into the monster's feet as fast as I could pull the trigger. With its feet pulped, the servitor fell flat on its face. I didn't know if the impact knocked the wind from its lungs, or even if it had lungs, but it lay there with its mouth gaping open for just a moment.

Which was more than long enough for Duncan to toss his primed grenade down its maw. He barely lunged away before the creature exploded, throwing a shower of blood and meat in every direction. I didn't know where a spirit went when it was driven out of astral space. I didn't care. But this one sure left in a hurry.

Another servitor focused on Is0bel, raining fists down on her. Even over her screams, I could hear bones cracking, and she slumped to the rooftop—for all I knew, she was already dead. Covered in gore from the destroyed servitor, I raced to help her. Her blood flecked my face as the servitor drew its fist back for another blow. I blocked the hand, drew a knife from my boot, and buried the blade into the thing's armpit. The heat from its body scalded the burn on my face again, and I bellowed in pain.

But I didn't let go of the captured fist. I left the knife where it was, clawed another from my boot, and put a foot on the back of the servitor's calf to scramble up its superheated body, ignoring the flare of pain in my burned hand. When I was high enough, I reached over its shoulder and cut its throat.

A torrent of viscous, black blood gushed out. I hadn't fought many astral creatures, didn't know if the knife I'd thrust into its armpit had reached its heart, but I was certain most things that lived, in one form or another, couldn't do so with a slashed throat. The servitor grabbed its neck, trying to stem the tide of ichor leaking from it, and tumbled lifelessly to the ground before disappearing.

Isobel struggled to speak, but couldn't. Blood covered her face and she looked dazed, but she forced herself to her feet and reached for her grenade launcher.

As I jammed the bloody blade back into its sheath, a feral shriek of loss pierced my ears and brought me around, searching for the source.

On her knees, her chest a mass of flames, Gobbet gazed in horror at the burned and twisted bodies of the rats lying around her. A few still crawled weakly, dying only a meter away as the flames overcame them.

"NO!" She waved a hand over her chest and the flames died away. With shaking hands, she picked up two of the dead rats and glared at Qian Ya. "You *bitch!*"

Duncan shouted my name. As I turned toward him, he tossed me the SMG. I caught the weapon and reloaded it, then joined him in firing at the demon. One of Gobbet's grenades missed its target, but struck close enough to stagger the demon queen.

I ran to Gobbet and pulled her to her feet. I put my face close to hers, knowing she was wracked by physical pain as well as the emotional trauma from the death of her friends.

"Can you go on?" I demanded.

She didn't answer.

Desperate, I tried another tack. "Do you want her to get away with killing them?"

"*No!*" The fury on her face was absolute. Twisting her head away from me, she hurled fireballs at the demon as it came at us again. The Queen still laughed, but she sounded weaker now. She waved to her remaining servitor, commanding it to join her.

"Stand behind me!" Gobbet raised a wave of shimmering energy between us and the hideous Queen of a Thousand Teeth. Her fireballs blasted against it, but couldn't penetrate the invisible barrier. The wind the shaman summoned next threw the demon off balance, and Duncan and I took advantage. Isobel lobbed grenades over the barrier, landing them again and again with increasingly better

precision.

Except once.

A grenade caught the edge of Gobbet's barrier and bounced back between us.

"Shit—!" Isobel yelled.

I caught the grenade up in one hand and flung it at the remaining servitor. The thing put its hands out to block the missile, but the grenade detonated centimeters before making contact. The gout of flame and the concussive wave blew the servitor to bits.

We turned to face Qian Ya, who stood there looking undamaged. She moved more slowly, though, and her magic didn't hit with the same power as it had earlier.

"She's weakening!" Gobbet said, but the strained look on her face told me she was weakening, too. Sweat beaded her forehead, and it wasn't just the heat from wherever we were.

Duncan and I worked around the edges of Gobbet's shield. We were close enough that we didn't miss. Our bullets blasted into her.

Then my weapon locked back empty. I looked at Duncan. "I'm out!"

"So am I," he said.

At that moment, Gobbet collapsed, exhausted, and the barrier fell away. Qian Ya laughed gleefully, but didn't approach. She stood back, gathering power as shimmering energy surrounded her hands.

Without a word, having nowhere to run and not even certain where we were, Duncan and I both rushed toward her. I drew my remaining monofilament dagger again. Duncan reversed the shotgun and wielded it like a club. He slammed the stock into her face, cracking that golden mask. I sliced into her midsection, afraid that I would only cut silk, but there was substance there, and I found it again and again and again.

Qian Ya stumbled back, weakening, but she swiped a hand at both of us and knocked us back. As Duncan and I regained our feet and gathered our weapons, Isobel hit the demon with another grenade that drove her back a couple steps.

"Die!" the dwarf shouted.

"Die, you fucking demon *bitch!*" Gobbet screamed as she threw a shimmering blast into Qian Ya that tore through her red silk robes and left a gaping hole in her torso. For a moment, the demon stood, then she sank again into a quivering pile of burnt and broken parts. Black ichor gushed from her wounds.

The blackness happened again—and we were once more standing on the

rooftop in the rain.

We waited, watching the crumpled mass before us fearfully. Gobbet lay on the ground, sobbing as she held the limp form of yet another rat that had died. A meter away, Isobel crumpled to the ground, dead or unconscious. Duncan reached into his medkit and started toward the decker.

In despair, I watched as Qian Ya's body regrew, and the demon queen arose once more, her contemptuous laughter echoing around us again.

Battered, bloody, and burned, I just stood and stared at her, the true horror of our situation becoming all too clear.

There was no escape from her. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. And we were dead on our feet; low on ammo, low on mana.

In just a few moments, we would all be easy prey for the Queen of a Thousand Teeth.

## CHAPTER 98

### FINAL SHOWDOWN

Qian Ya's form was different this time. The silk robes were gone. She stood before us with multiple arms, all of them ending in mouths sporting huge fangs.

She truly was the Queen With a Thousand Teeth.

***"I am not defeated,"*** she said. ***"Projections on top of projections. All aspects of our divine being, shed as easily as a lizard sheds its tail."*** Her arms moved like snakes, like there were no joints.

Part of me just wanted to tell her to get it over with, but I knew torture and fear were two of the many weapons in her arsenal. There was nothing for her in the death of those she captured. She lived for the fear and the pain. That was why she wanted into find a way into our world. She and Josephine Tsang were the same in that regard. They just counted wealth differently.

Clutching my lone remaining dagger, I fought to stay upright. I had nothing left to fight with—both my body and my arsenal were depleted—but I would die

on my feet, facing her, drawing the last bit of blood—or whatever flowed through her otherworldly veins—that I could get. It wouldn't make a difference to anyone but me, and at the moment, that seemed to be all that mattered anymore.

***“You cannot harm us, meat,” she taunted. “But, you have amused us. Perhaps you are worthy of an audience after all. Perhaps...”***

She stopped speaking, and tilted her head to look behind us. I heard the sound of pounding feet, of many people approaching us. I dared not hope, but when I looked over my shoulder, I spotted figures running toward us out of the rain.

There were fewer of them than when we had begun, but those who remained looked fearsomely resolved. Gaichu and Racter reached us first, both taking up defensive postures. They both looked like they had been through their own small war, with blood and dirt covering their soaking-wet faces and bodies. Even so, Gaichu had his swords out and ready. Racter stood beside a dented and bullet-pocked Koschei, whose heavy machine gun was prepped and ready.

Raymond Black and what was left of Kindly Cheng's men followed them. The remaining gangers looked like they'd survived a war. Barely.

Grim determination filled Raymond's withered features as he faced the demon queen. He moved more surely now, like he'd regained a part of himself that had been lost. I felt better just seeing him there, even though I knew first- and secondhand that Qian Ya was undefeatable.

“The demon still lives,” Gaichu said with a smile. “Good.”

“I did this,” Raymond said. “I brought this creature here.” He stood before her, unbroken, unbowed.

I felt proud of him. If we were all going to die, this was the way to do it. Except I didn't want to die.

“My fault,” Raymond said. “My responsibility.”

Qian Ya laughed at him, but I noticed she didn't come any closer to us. Fear showed on the gangers' faces, but they stood their ground. And they had plenty of firepower.

My head swam as I fought to keep my senses and not pass out. The pain helped with that as much as it threatened to push me into black oblivion.

***“It has returned to us,” Qian Ya said, her toothy arms still in motion. “The tunnel-builder. The architect of my ascendancy.” She leaned toward him, smiling with her horrible fangs. “You will have a special place in our court, builder. You will stand by our side, exalted for all time. A living token of our***



*unending rule, and an undying symbol of the folly of man.”*

Raymond stepped toward her, and Duncan and I stepped—limped—up with him. Blood covered our scored, shattered armor, and we sucked in great draughts of air.

“I have been a fool,” Raymond said. “A great fool. But I will not be your slave. I will stop you.”

I looked at Duncan, and neither of us had a clue what Raymond was talking about. I grabbed an AK-97 from one of the gangers and opened fire. Duncan took another rifle from another ganger. Gaichu attacked with his swords, staying low and slashing at her legs, at the toothed arms. Koschei fired systematically, scoring with every shot. The Yellow Lotus gangers started shooting, too.

We had surprise for a moment, and we had the guns, and one of the Yellow Lotus gangers was a mage who raised an earth spirit that matched the one Gobbet called to us. Maybe that made all the difference, that there were so many of us. Or maybe it was because Raymond was there with us this time.

The demon queen fought back again, just as fiercely as before. She managed to kill three gangers with her snake-maw arms, but Gaichu was a blade-wielding blur around her. He lopped two of the sinuous limbs off, then a third that bit him in the chest.

Meanwhile, Koschei fired .50-caliber rounds with pinpoint accuracy, unrelenting as the drone targeted and shot her again and again.

Crippled by such an onslaught, Qian Ya fell easily this time, and by the time she hit the rooftop, only a rancid green mist remained, and the strong winds soon carried that off.

Everyone was silent for a moment.

“That time was easier than I thought it’d be,” Duncan said, but he reloaded his borrowed rifle all the same. “Problem is, she has a real nasty habit of not staying dead, but usually she leaves something behind.”

The gangers and our friends looked unsettled. Gaichu smiled and shook blood from his blades, as if relishing the continuation of the fight.

“We can stop her,” Raymond said. “There is a way.”

“How?” I asked.

“We can turn off the machine.”

I looked at Raymond. “You know how to turn it off?”

He looked up at me and put his hand on my shoulder. He was weaker than he’d been letting on. “I have been ready for more than two decades, but now I

know what is needed.” He pointed at the terminal that had gone dark earlier. “The control console is just over there. We must move quickly.”

“Why?” Duncan asked. “It’s over. She’s gone.”

I shook my head. The demon queen had been gone longer this time, but the foulness of the sprawl still coiled around us. She wasn’t gone for good. Only for the moment.

Raymond punched buttons on the keyboard and the computer powered up again. After another sequence, a large, round machine that looked like a giant’s top pushed up through the rooftop and sat there spinning.

“I still must close the rift,” Raymond said. “Otherwise she will be back. I just need—” His eyes widened in fear as he scanned the terminal’s screen.

“What’s wrong?” Duncan asked. “Destroy the thing before she comes back!”

Raymond waved at the readouts in perplexed confusion. “I...I *can’t*. There is a one-way flow of astral energy moving from the inner Walled City through the tunnel the Fortune Engine must open. I know what it is.”

Cradling one of her arms, Gobbet wrinkled her nose and stepped back. “I can feel it, too. The energy is coming from the people that she’s feeding on. Their essence. Their *spirits*, for lack of a better word.”

Raymond nodded. “If I destroy the machine now, it will collapse the tunnel. All of those people will have the better part of their essence—what makes them who and what they are—trapped inside. With her. Forever.” He shook his head sorrowfully. “Thousands of people, condemned to an eternity with that parasitic *thing*.”

I couldn’t believe it. The demon was going to win after all. “Do we have another option?” I asked.

“Yes.” Raymond looked at the Fortune Engine. “Someone could enter the tunnel, close the rift safely. The people would be saved. Restored to life in the real world.”

“And what happens to the person in the tunnel?” Isobel asked quietly.

“He stays there forever,” Raymond answered. “With her.” He looked at the console, staring at it. “There’s no way out once the tunnel is closed.”

I listened to the rain fall, unable to speak. Someone would have to make the ultimate sacrifice—and even if we won, we would still lose. Everyone was quiet for a moment, trying to get around that. My heart ached more than my wounded face.

I opened my mouth to speak, then Duncan put his hand on Raymond’s

shoulder.

“I’ll do it,” he said. “Just tell me what buttons to press.”

## CHAPTER 99

### FAREWELL

I was torn. I’d run away from this family, tried to avoid the ties I’d sworn I never wanted.

Raymond straightened and stood taller. “No, my son. I am not truly Raymond Black. My name is Edward Tsang, and *I* built this machine. I set this terrible avalanche in motion. Whether I meant to or not. It is my responsibility to stop it.”

He turned to me. “This is what this is all about. What it’s been about since the very beginning. If anyone is to do this, it must be me.” He paused and pressed on, determined, unstoppable. The way I remembered him. “It *will* be me.”

“Don’t...don’t do this, Ray,” I whispered.

“No.” He hugged me for a moment, and I almost couldn’t let him go. I knotted my fists in his jacket and held him close, thinking about all those years I’d missed. Because I had been so proud and stupid. My eyes burned. “The demon could return at any moment. There is no time to teach you what to do in there. I must set things in motion.” He nodded to himself. “It must be me.”

He turned to Duncan and hugged him. Duncan had tears running down his face. I knew I did, too.

“You must be there for your brother,” Raymond told me. “As you were so long ago. At least for a while.”

“I will,” I promised, my voice breaking even as I said it.

“Thank you for coming to Hong Kong. Thank you for coming when I called.”

I nodded, opening my mouth again, but this time I couldn’t speak for a moment. Finally, I forced out what I knew would be my last words to the old man.

“Goodbye, Dad.”

Fearlessly, Raymond flipped a lever on the machine. A wavering tunnel suddenly opened above it. Without a look back, the only father I’d ever truly known stepped into that opening.

And when that tunnel closed, he disappeared forever.

## CHAPTER 100

### AFTERMATH

I want to say that the world changed instantly with Raymond’s sacrifice. But that’s not true.

Except for the storm. That broke immediately and was gone, leaving the sprawl half-drowned and leaking, but more or less intact in spite of all the wind and madness that had swept through the streets.

The media released the story that an illegal drug lab explosion caused all the mass hallucinations and violence. The street criminals started back to work the next night, so the world didn’t stop.

At first, Kindly Cheng wasn’t happy with the fact that she’d been shut out of the true story until it was all over with. When I finished telling it to her the next day, she was convinced I was lying about the whole thing. Then she was convinced I had control of the Fortune Engine and wasn’t cutting her a piece of the action.

Either way, she was mad at me for a while.

Somewhere in there, our relationship broke even. I was good in the shadows, and she still wanted to use me. As it turned out, her immediate supervisor was killed that night and she got a promotion, which made shadowrunners even more necessary for her. Strangler Bao got a promotion, too.

Neither of them threw a party. Or if they did, we weren’t invited.

When we got back to the *Bolthole*, after getting our wounds tended, none of us could sleep for a while. Gobbet had a broken arm and the missing ear. The rest

of us were burned and banged up. We sat up and talked for the rest of the night, trying to make sense of it all. And I think Isobel got the closest to the truth about everything Josephine Tsang was doing by trying to convert Raymond's memories.

"I felt something in that room while we were there." Gobbet sat and petted her new rat friends, taking calmness from them. "A flow of positive *qi* that I didn't expect. I think it was leaving the Walled City."

Isobel nodded. "I bet that machine did something else—something even Raymond didn't know about. What if it was a siphon? What if Josephine Tsang was stealing the cast-off positive *qi* from the Walled City? Leaching it for her own benefit?"

"She sealed up the Fortune Engine," Duncan added, "siphoned the good *qi* for herself, and took Tsang Mechanical Services from the minor company Ray's father built to the ballbusting near-mega it is today." He clenched his jaw. "That's how she got herself on the Executive Council of Hong Kong."

Of course, that was all speculation. We couldn't prove any of it. All the evidence of Josephine Tsang's crimes had disappeared with Raymond. Whatever luck she'd sucked out of the Walled City stayed with her for a while. With all the blame that went around for that night, none of it landed on Josephine Tsang. She kept on making money like she was printing it.

None of us liked that, and we followed the stories in the screamsheets and thought about things. It didn't take us long to start putting together plans to take away some of Josephine Tsang's good fortune.

Another oddity was that the APBs on all of us were dropped. Kindly Cheng told us that a "mysterious benefactor" had called the shots on that, and even she didn't know who it was.

So that was another mystery that needed to be solved at some point before it bit us on the ass. Nobody does anything for free. The butcher's bill for that little act of kindness would come due someday, and we didn't know what it would cost. We wanted to be ready.

With the APBs gone, Duncan and I could have gone home. Except we were now SINless. There was no future for us that we didn't seize with our own two hands.

So Hong Kong's our home now, and we have one of the best teams in the sprawl. The work is good—dangerous, but good. Kindly Cheng isn't our only client these days, but she's the most regular.

Not much has changed. Except for the times I sleep. There are no nightmares

anymore.

Only shadows.

**THE END**