



SHADOWRUN[®]



FIRE & FROST

KAI O'CONNAL

EXCERPT FROM UPCOMING SHADOWRUN NOVEL!



FIRE & FROST

A SHADOWRUN NOVEL





PROLOGUE

“The only secret to life is knowing what people like, and how much they’re willing to do to get it.”

Hearn sighed. “You know, our conversations would go a lot quicker if you could resist the urge to sink into aphorisms.”

The troll smoothed the lush, brown hair that fell over his shiny horns. “I say things because they are things you need to learn.”

Spare me the armchair philosophy, Hearn thought as he paced back and forth in the library, wishing there was a window he could look out of. Spending time in this room with only a troll, wall-to-wall bookshelves—all overflowing—and several stacks of books was starting to make him feel claustrophobic. It didn’t help that the room had no trace of Matrix access. There were no devices in sight; no AROs Hearn could call up. He patted his right cyberleg occasionally just to remind himself that it was still the twenty-first century.

With nowhere else to go, he stopped in front of the troll again. “I assume this means that you think you know what this Elijah Tish wants.”

The troll nodded gravely.

“And what he’ll do to get it.”

Another nod.

“So that means ...”

“You just have to follow him. Stay far enough away that he doesn’t make you, but close enough that you can take the map shortly after he gets it. If not sooner.”

“You understand it won’t be a simple journey, right? It’s not like the map is just sitting in some library like this somewhere, waiting for him

to grab it. There's probably going to be a lot of travel on short notice. It's not going to be cheap."

The troll's expression remained impassive. "That's my concern, not yours. If there comes a point where I feel things are becoming too expensive, I will tell you."

Hearn nodded. His hand wiggled near his hip, instinctively looking for the gun that wasn't there.

"All right, then," he said. "We're on the case until you say we're not."

The troll, who called himself Tempest, had provided transportation to and from his home or office or wherever the hell it was where they had just met. That meant Hearn had about forty-five minutes to himself in the back of a sedan on the way back to civilization. For twenty of those minutes, he kicked himself for not bringing a device with satellite Matrix access. The signal from above would have been perfect, with nothing around to block it, only scrub brush and rocky hills. There was no regular Matrix access until they got closer to civilization. The moment he got access, Hearn dove in, looking for as much information as he could find about this map the troll had talked about.

The way Hearn figured it, the troll was missing one part of the equation. It was good to know what people wanted and how much they wanted, but sometimes—especially if you wanted to figure out what they were up to and how they were going to act—you had to find out why.

Hearn had been paid a decent chunk of money in advance, and figured he could sacrifice some of it to help him feel better about working with a cartographically inclined troll.



PART ONE



“Man, I feel as out of place here as a Humanis thug at a Red Rovers rally.” Surveying the well-dressed crowd through her violet-tinted Evo Nightwear eyeglasses, Kyrie raised a crystal flute to her lips and sipped, her eyes widening as the champagne slid down her throat. “Bubbly’s real, though. Good, too.”

“Glad it meets with your approval—I’m sure our host would be pleased,” Elijah said. “Any security measures I should be particularly concerned about?”

Kyrie adjusted the onyx choker around her throat, making Elijah smile. You could put Kyrie next to any person in the world, and she’d be confident enough to hold her own—as long as she didn’t have to dress up. But that’s what this situation required, and he didn’t mind. With his salt-and-pepper hair, a muted gray Mortimer’s Berwick Noir 505 suit, and his own pair of Evo shades, he blended perfectly with the rest of the *nouveau chic* art lovers swirling around them. Holding a champagne flute that matched hers, he sipped his drink absent-mindedly. He couldn’t stop looking at the marble set of half-stairs leading to the hallway and the room beyond—and their target.

“Try not to look *too* eager, Elijah,” Kyrie said, one hand going to the peridot earrings dangling from her elegant, pointed ears. “And don’t worry—I’ve got his back. When are we going?” Her kaleidoscopic sky-blue and white floor-length Zoe Moonsilver dress swirled around her, making her look fetching enough to draw the attention of a handsome, ebony-haired elf gliding by. She gave him a look that made it clear he couldn’t handle her even if she gave him a shot. Elijah was a little depressed that he didn’t have anything like that look in his rep-

ertoire, especially when he saw the dark-haired elf break eye contact with Kyrie and slink away.

“Don’t worry, I’ll let you know. I need to make sure the path is clear.”

“Fine by me—I’ll just keep playing with the magic furniture.” Kyrie drained her drink—they’d both taken alcohol inhibitors earlier, so they could guzzle a gallon of bubbly and remain stone cold sober. She began to set her flute down, and as she did the floor extruded a slender column to meet the bottom of her glass. “How the hell does it do that?”

The room had nothing that was not built in. They were surrounded by blank, silvery-gray walls that exuded their own lighting, enveloping the space and everyone in it in a soft, relaxing glow. The room needed no separate furniture because it could supply anything on demand. The entire place was constantly shifting, reconfiguring itself to meet the needs of the guests. A person only had to begin sitting down, with nothing below them, and the motion would make a section of the floor smoothly rise to meet them, fashioning itself into a chair that flowed seamlessly out of the rest of the room.

And it wasn’t just seating. Shelves popped out of the far wall at random intervals, each one containing trays of delectable *hors d’oeuvres* that waiters passed to the guests. The food was all created from real ingredients, not a hint of soy or krill anywhere. Fitting the evening’s theme, it consisted of wild game and fruit from what had once been Central America—the vast jungle area now controlled by the Aztechnology Corporation. Music drifted from the walls as well, a somber set of deep bass drums underscoring a swirl of pan flutes piping a merry melody.

A text message appeared in a window in Elijah’s vision, a small square projected by his glasses. *<Pretty damn cool, huh? Probably a flexible nanotube mesh with a reactive AR host program to predict each guest’s movements and respond accordingly. I tried to peep at the program, and nearly got my mind blown out the back of my skull by the resident spider.>*

That was the third member of their team, a dwarven hacker called Slycer. He was across the room, wearing a lapelless, pinstriped Laurentine de Lion Millennium 3000 suit that minimized his stockiness. He seemed to feel a little left out to not be standing next to Elijah and Kyrie.

Elijah would rather work with a more independent, less chatty decker, but Slycer knew the man who had hired Elijah, and bringing him on seemed like a good idea at the time. He was a little chatty but seemed capable enough; he had been effective in getting them closer to their destination, at least so far.

<You're not supposed to be poking around where you don't belong, Slycer. You're supposed to be clearing the path to the display room, remember?> Elijah texted back.

Built into the stylish Evo eyewear was a miniaturized commlink that allowed Kyrie and Elijah to access their host's LAN—local area network—to communicate with Slycer without anyone noticing.

The glasses also allowed them to project holographic images that only the three of them could see—like the small window that showed the outside of the front of the house. As she watched, a shadow of a strange, stubby, wingless aircraft passed over the driveway, appearing only for a second before vanishing into the night.

“Our skyline exit is in position,” she told Elijah, getting a brief nod in return. He worked hard at scanning the entire room for threats, but always kept returning to that hallway.

“Security grid down yet?” he asked

Kyrie glanced left then right, looking at images only she could see through her augmented reality glasses. “Nope. Slycer's still working on it—whoops, hold it, looks like he's got it. Let's move. Turn on the charm.”

Elijah didn't even bother making a gesture; he simply cast a spell that made him more charismatic and persuasive than normal. He could feel the mana moving through him, making his stride more confident.

With a last casual glance around to make sure they weren't being observed, Elijah crooked his elbow out. Kyrie deftly inserted her arm through his, and the pair strolled to the stairs, casually trotted up the flight, and strolled into the hallway.

<Uh-oh.>

Elijah lightly grabbed Kyrie's arm. “Hold up.” <Don't say ‘uh-oh.’ Not now. What's the uh-oh?>

“What's going on?” she asked. “We're almost there.”

The message from Slycer almost left a flame trail on its way to Elijah. <Take the door on your right—now!>

Elijah didn't hesitate, steering Kyrie toward a featureless panel in the wall that slid open at their approach. Glancing back down the hall, he saw the sleek head of a low-slung animal crest the top step as she stepped inside the room.

“Guess you saw that biodrone, too,” she said.

“Yes. Let Slycer take care of it—we don't need to draw attention right now.”

"Fine. I want visual, though." She followed that up with a quick text. <At least let Elijah and me see the damn thing.>

In a small viewscreen that opened in the bottom left quadrant of her vision, Kyrie watched the guard dog stop at the doorway they'd just entered. It was a solid piece of work, a deep-chested mix of German Shepherd and pit bull—and probably twice as deadly as both, too, she thought. Watching its eyes as it looked up at the security cam she was observing it through, Kyrie shivered. The dog's gaze was cold and soulless—most likely a complete cyberware refit.

<You guys just hang tight for a moment...almost there.>

Although her eyes were slitted and her lips tight with suppressed anger, Kyrie kept her tone calm and professional. *<Easy for you to say—you're safe out there while we're in here with a fucking Razorhound that would love to shove its artificial nose up our asses.>* She kept one eye on the closed bedroom door. *<Just get rid of robomutt, and we can do what we came to do.>*

The hacker was good enough to convey tension through font choice. *<I'm safe? I'm the one who's gotta shiv the sec systems and not trip any ice while still looking like I'm attending the party and watch our backs to boot, while you two get to snoop the shadows and look at pretty art. Shit, you're lucky I make this all look so easy.>*

<Right. Gotten rid of the damn dog yet?>

<What, you don't wanna take it on hand-to-claw, chica? What's the matter—I thought you were an ass-kicker?>

"How about you two break it off now?" Elijah said. "And perhaps focus?"

Kyrie scowled. "I'm never taking another job with a hacker we haven't worked with before. Never fucking again!"

But that was the moment Slycer picked to come through. <Got it!> he sent. <You're green again.>

<'Bout damn time.> Kyrie sent. Smoothing her handsome-but-not-pretty features into a carefree party mask, she walked to the door and listened to the receding clicks of the dog's claws as it resumed its patrol. The door reacted to her presence by sliding soundlessly into the wall, revealing an empty hallway.

While Elijah watched her carefully, Kyrie nodded toward the far end of the hallway. "Heading for the door." Despite the upscale home's carefully calibrated temperature, he felt a bead of sweat on his neck, creeping under his starched collar.

The door to the room holding their objective still flashed red in her AR as they approached. Kyrie fired off a terse message before Elijah

had time to compose a more diplomatic text. *<What's the hell's the holdup? We're already behind schedule thanks to the dog show, and you are not helping.>*

<Shit, girl, first I pull robomutt off you, now you want a speed-of-light hack—I'm good, but I'm not—> The door flashed from red to green. *<Oh, right—I am that good.>*

Elijah tried not to smile at the exaggerated roll of Kyrie's eyes. "Never again," she mouthed while placing her hand on the palm reader on the left side of the door. *<You better have programmed Hayakawa's prints in correctly.>*

<And hacked the hallway and interior room cameras to cloak the two of you outside and in.> The door chimed softly, not loud enough to be heard over the party patter down the hall.

Elijah didn't like working with a stranger any more than Kyrie did, but he had to admit the cocky dwarf was getting the job done. He slipped into astral perception as the door slid open, and his eyes widened. Their host had a good sense of the value of Awakened artifacts, it seemed. But there didn't seem to be anything that was an immediate threat, so he gave an okay sign to Kyrie. They moved carefully into the room.

Unlike the rest of the sprawling house, decorated in ultra-sleek modern, this space appeared to have been transplanted from a twentieth-century museum. Dark wood paneling covered the walls, while the floor was swathed in thick, beige carpet that reduced footfalls to silence. The lighting was recessed and indirect, with much of it coming from the dozens of glass-covered recesses in the walls, each with a single object inside, all lit to display them at their best.

Elijah was almost paralyzed. Seeing the auras was one thing, but confronted with the collection right in front of him was almost too much to take. Each item was practically calling to him, begging to tell him its story. How it had been made, who made it, who used it, who took it, then who took it after that. The hands it had passed through, the lives taken in order to obtain it. The knowledge, the pure knowledge the item had brushed by during its existence. If he could get a portion of it, the merest fraction ...

But he was working. He broke out of his reverie to notice even Kyrie was focused on a particular object.

The dagger was beautiful, its double-edged blade fourteen inches long and razor sharp. It was obviously old, the hilt carved from a single piece of horn with three silver studs and two ornately etched wraps securing it to the blade. The sheath was also bound in bands of

similarly decorated silver, and she took a step closer, as if the weapon was beckoning her—

Elijah walked up behind her. “No time for window shopping, my dear,” he whispered. “Although I commend your taste. It’s a beautiful antique—Russian *kindjal*, late 18th to early 19th century, probably commissioned by a minor noble house. Oh, and it’s bound as well.”

“You mean—it’s a focus?”

“Exactly—probably why you were drawn to it in the first place. Speaking of focus, let’s get back to the job at hand, yes?”

Kyrie threw a last wistful glance at the enchanted weapon, then accompanied Elijah to the main attraction in the middle of the room.

Behind thick glass, what appeared to be a very old, orange-and-tan ceramic bowl rested on a sleek wooden pedestal. It looked to have been assembled from two parts, an inverted, tapered lower portion, and above that a slightly concave ring of fired ceramic as tall as Elijah’s hand that formed the bowl’s upper part. Etched decorations—alternating blocky spirals and what looked like crude, three-leaved trees—ran in a band of beige around the upper part, while the bottom was glazed in alternating stripes of orange and tan.

Kyrie did not look impressed. “This is what you’re supposed to authenticate?”

Elijah unconsciously reached out toward the bowl, but he kept enough control to stay clear of any alarms. “That’s it. And if it’s genuine ...” He looked over at Kyrie and smiled. “If it’s genuine, our host really should be keeping a closer eye on it.”

<Hey, you guys taking the dime tour in there? Hayakawa’s moving the party to the outside landing, which means I won’t be inconspicuous for too much longer.>

<Settle down, we only need two more minutes. Accompany the rest of the party if you must—we’ll catch up. Just neutralize the pressure plate on the central pillar before you go.> Elijah sent the entire reply without breaking eye contact with the bowl.

<Done and done. I’m off to sip some more of that fine Cristal, but Kyrie, don’t you worry that pretty head of yours—I’m still on the clock. Just holler if there’s any trouble, and I’ll do the same.>

Elijah ignored the preening hacker. A crease gathered between his eyes. “There’s something wrong. There’s mana here, but it’s ... wrong.”

Kyrie kept scanning the room, particularly the door. “Wrong?”

“Mayan religious ceremonies of the period often involved human sacrifice. Supposedly, certain priests used blood magic rites to imbue

these bowls with power, making them the objects of intense research interest. That gave it something, but not anything near what it's supposed to have. But I'll take another look, to be sure."

Keeping his arms outstretched, Elijah fell silent as he concentrated. Inside the case, the bowl slowly rose into the air, as if held by unseen hands. It rotated in a slow circle, first horizontally, then inverting it so the bowl's bottom was visible.

He *tsk-tsked* under his breath. "Just as I thought—a well-made fake. Perhaps two centuries old, but nowhere near the Late Classic period."

Kyrie was already edging toward the door as Elijah righted the bowl again and floated it back down. "How can you tell?"

"The clay's composition is wrong—not enough igneous base, which means it was probably made in northern Mexico, away from the volcanoes in Central America. Hayakawa spent far too much money on an excellent fake. I *knew* he was a poseur."

"Great, now that your academic feathers have been unruffled, let's get out of here and rejoin the party, 'kay?" Kyrie was already at the door when an urgent message appeared in her AR.

<Hold up, chica! You've got—>

The door slid open, revealing a slender man pointing a sleek, matte-black pistol at Kyrie's face.

<—company!>



Slycer took a moment to enjoy the surroundings of 16th-century Japan.

If he was going to do this right, he needed to stop dicking around with assorted devices and go on a deep dive into the mansion's host. So he did, plunging into virtual reality and the opulent Japanese estate it used for iconography.

In the blink of an eye, he was in another world, both as real and as illusory as the real one outside. A multi-story castle with several tiers of red-tiled roofs loomed in the distance. He thought there would be landscaped gardens and koi ponds, but instead a simple, bare field stretched out in front of him, covered with small, crushed stones that had been smoothed to a uniform layer.

Glancing down, he found the host had given him a kimono, belt, and wooden sandals. A straw hat was tilted back on his head, and the shaft of a wooden rake rested on his shoulder. It wasn't sexy, or even remotely attractive—he could override it in a heartbeat if he wanted, but it fit with his “hide in plain sight” philosophy.

Stepping onto the graveled field, he felt his shoulders tense—the deeper he went into the host, the more likely it was that he'd run into some mean intrusion countermeasures. And if he ran into IC, his evening would get bad really fast.

The only thing moving in the entire place was a small child sitting cross-legged in front of the steps to the castle. He appeared to be playing with a small, flat box of sand, sculpting various piles, then allowing some of them to collapse a few seconds later.

Slycer figured that when it seems there's only one way to go, you just gotta move. He walked across the field, cautiously approaching the boy.

He remained engrossed in his task, drawing piles up into cubes or rows, letting some remain, letting others disintegrate after seconds or minutes. The box looked vaguely familiar to Slycer, but he couldn't quite place it.

"What are you doing?" he asked. His words sounded unnaturally loud in the silence.

"I create and destroy as requested by my master." The boy looked up, his fathomless gaze seeming to stare right through Slycer, who tried not to pull back in surprise. The avatar didn't have the rote, scripted mannerisms of a standard program, but it also didn't have the individuality of someone online either.

What the hell? This isn't any standard agent or sec program I know. He squinted, his virtual eyes and his lifetime of experience trying to figure out what this kid was. Couldn't be an AI—who keeps an artificial intelligence to do their housekeeping?

As he watched, he started to understand what the kid was doing in the sand. The sandbox fit the general dimensions of the room where the party was being held. As Slycer watched, the boy created seats, tables, and shelves where they were needed. The hacker even saw his own seat in the corner and shivered again, knowing his meat and bones were sitting out there, all too vulnerable.

"Can you—leave this place?"

The boy had turned back to his work, and spoke more softly. "They would never allow it." His hand pointed behind Slycer, who turned to see what the child was referring to.

A small, pug-faced dog made entirely of gleaming metal, sat on the other side of the field, facing him. Its tongue lolled out as it waited—and watched.

Of course he's slaved the biodrone into the house security. Slycer thought about running silent, but nulled the idea, figuring the biodrone's avatar might investigate anything odd—like an icon suddenly disappearing.

Instead of hiding, Slycer cautiously made his way to the drone, then slipped one of his marks—a small, sharp knife slicing through an eyeball—onto it. He was smooth enough that the drone didn't seem to care.

With the mark in place, he had some access to the drone's functions, such as seeing what it saw. He pulled up a window in front of him to see what the biodrone was watching.

Hayakawa was there, ushering everyone into another room. As Slycer scanned the biodrone's line of vision, he saw that the oldster and the buff *chica* were still inside. *What the fuck? They should have been done and gone by now.*

Slycer opened a channel to the woman, asking what was taking them so long. The old man said to follow the party, but to disarm the pressure plate in the main display first—which Slycer had done before they'd even set foot in there. Dividing his attention between the departing party guests and the VR boy, he noticed one of the servants heading toward the hall that led to the display room. Jumping to the security cameras, he watched as the man climbed the stairs and stalked down the corridor, reaching inside his jacket and drawing a small pistol. Pulling a silencer from his other pocket, he screwed it onto the end of the barrel.

Oh, shit! Slycer thought, cutting back to inside the museum room, where the woman was just about to open the door.

<Hold up, chica! You've got company!>



Kyrie drew up immediately, staring past the stubby, silenced pistol to the man holding it. He was dressed in a crisp, white, collarless shirt; short, black suit jacket with matching pants; and looked vaguely familiar. Kyrie's eye twitched as she tried to reply to Slycer, but the man extended his pistol an inch closer, making her focus on him again. He was good, staying just out of range of her hands and feet.

“Do not speak to your man in the other room—I'll know, and will stop you, permanently if necessary. Do not take your eyes off me again, or I will shoot one out. With one hand—slowly—remove the glasses and hold them at your side. Twitch wrong, and your brains will be the latest display in this room. Tell your partner not to try anything stupid either, or he'll die right after you.”

While he spoke, Kyrie thought about trying to take him out, but dismissed the idea. Despite appearances, things hadn't progressed to that point yet. He hadn't shot her, which meant he wanted her alive, at least for the time being. Besides, even as good as she was, there was the small chance that he might get a shot off if she went for him, which would no doubt set off all kinds of security. She decided to go along with his demands—for now.

It would help, though, if I could remember who the fuck this guy is. Kyrie racked her brain, trying to figure out where she'd seen him before. His face wasn't that memorable; a hint of Central American in his wide nose, dark brown eyes, and swarthy skin. And why was he on the edge of her memory, as if she had seen him—or someone like him—recently? As she took the glasses off, she was careful enough to hold them

so the front of the lenses were aimed at the gunman, hoping Slycer was already reacting to this new threat.

She caught a strange odor on him—shrimp, and some kind of spicy sauce overlaying it. *That's it!* “You’re a runner posing as service, aren’t you?”

He sniffed. “Took you that long to figure it out? Surprised you even made it this far.”

Kyrie didn’t bother to retort, but just let him continue to think he had the upper hand. “What do you want?”

“You and your friend are going to finish my job for me—you’re going to steal that Mayan ceremonial bowl, and I’m going to take it out of here.”

Kyrie shrugged and nodded at the pedestal behind her. “You want it, you get it.”

The pistol’s muzzle never wavered, although his voice did, just a bit. “Don’t—push—me. I’ll gladly kneecap you if you don’t do as I say.”

Kyrie regarded him for a long moment, then turned her head just far enough to talk to Elijah while still keeping her captor in sight. “He wants us to give him the bowl.”

The older man nodded. “If he insists, I’ll be happy to fetch it for him.”

The man tensed as Elijah turned to retrieve the object in question. “Ah, ah! First, have your hacker disable the alarm on the case—just it, and nothing else.”

Speaking of that shithead, where the hell is he? He should’ve had the living room extend a pole up this guy’s ass by now, Kyrie thought. She raised the glasses to her mouth. “Slycer, disable the alarms on the bowl case. Flash for confirmation only.”

The runner divided his attention between both of them. “Watch for his signal, only then will the old man get the bowl.”

“If you don’t mind, I gotta know—how’d you get the gun past security?” Kyrie asked

“They never scan the help as well as they should.” He motioned at her to step back with his pistol. “Now shut up and get inside—I want to keep an eye on both of you.”

Her eyes never leaving the gunman, Kyrie stepped back from the doorway far enough to let him come inside just as her glasses flashed green. “Aren’t you worried about showing up on camera?”

“I’d worry about yourselves instead. All right old man, open the case, set it down, then pick up the bowl—carefully. One wrong move, and your friend here gets a third eye.”

Elijah did as ordered, his eyes staying on the gunman. “No need for threats—you have us right where you want us.”

His tone alerted Kyrie that he was thinking about trying something to free them. She got his attention as he approached and shook her head minutely, trying to warn him not to do anything that might get either of them killed. Elijah, though, didn’t react. He walked to the runner and held out the bowl. “Here you go.”

“Neither of you move.” Keeping the pistol trained on Kyrie, the man reached for the bowl with his free hand. Elijah let him take it, then stepped back, keeping his hands in sight the entire time. “You two stay in here. Tell the police I said ‘hi.’”

Pistol still up, he backed to the door, pausing while it soundlessly slid open. Stepping into the hallway, he was about to turn around when he was struck by a large, brown-black blur that shoved him back into the room. The pistol and bowl both flew from his hands as he was slammed to the floor.

Kyrie dashed forward, grabbing the gun out of the air. In her peripheral vision, she saw Elijah moving, but her attention was focused on the man, who screamed in pain as the Razorhound lived up to its name.

It lunged at him without a sound, titanium claws raking his legs and chest. Before the runner could move, the biodrone’s mouth, filled with gleaming, stiletto-sharp teeth, clamped onto his throat and ripped it open with one savage tear. Blood spurted over the floor, his thrashing limbs slowing to spasmodic jerks as he died, a mute appeal for help frozen on his face.

Kyrie trained the small pistol at the dog’s head, which slowly raised to stare at her, blood dripping from its jaws, still not making a sound. “It’s way past time to get out of here.”

Elijah slowly got to his feet, the bowl cradled in his hands. He quickly set it on the floor. “I agree, but we have to get past that, and astral overwatch around here will be all over us if I summon anything. Any suggestions?”

“I’m assuming Slycer hacked the mutt and is controlling it right now, so we should be able to simply walk right past.”

“Then why are you still pointing a gun at it?”

“In case I’m wrong.” Kyrie brought her other hand up and put the glasses back on. <I’m here, Slycer.>

<Good, ’cause you both need to get the hell out of there! Everything in the place just locked down triple-tight—including that damn dog! I’ve got IC closing in, and it’s going to make life miserable if it catches up to me.>

"Aw, hell—" Kyrie took a step backward, pistol still aimed at the animal's head, as the Razorhound crouched on the shadowrunner's bloody corpse. "If you got any fancy tricks up your sleeve, Elijah, now'd be a good time!"

"It's more machine than animal—I'm having trouble controlling it."

At that moment, the dog leaped off the corpse at Kyrie. Her adept's reflexes kicked in, and Elijah and the rest of the world slowed around her—the dog, not so much—as she prepared to meet the airborne threat. Focusing all of her power into her right foot, she leaped straight up. Kyrie whirled in a full circle, her foot building up momentum before slamming into the side of the biodrone's head in a ferocious blow that sent them both careening in different directions.

Kyrie felt like she'd just kicked a block of vanadium steel. Even enhanced by her magical ability, her foot still throbbed, though she didn't think she had broken anything. The dog skidded away to crash-land in a heap on the other side of the room, its head canted at an odd angle. Breathing hard, she brought the pistol back on line and waited to see if she had taken it out. "I think—"

The dog's hind legs twitched.

"Goddamn it!"

Its head lolling off an obviously broken neck, the biodrone scrambled its feet and fixed Kyrie with a lopsided stare. Crouching, it leaped again, claws gleaming with a combination of steel and fresh blood as it reached out to rake her chest.

Dropping the pistol, Kyrie crouched under the animal as it sailed over her. Grabbing its right foreleg with both hands, she rolled onto her back and kicked up into its midsection with all her strength, feeling reinforced ribs flex under the blow. Its leg trapped by her tight grip, the dog flipped over and crashed to the floor, a spray of blood and other dark fluid jetting onto the carpet. Kyrie did a kip-up to regain her feet and whirled to see the dog also rising, although it was now dragging one leg.

Snatching the pistol, Kyrie lined up the tritium sights and squeezed the trigger three times. At less than two meters away, she couldn't miss. The bullets bounced off its head, one smashing an eye and making it go dark, the other two carving bright scratches of metal where they impacted on its armored skull. The rounds made the dog pause as somewhere inside, programs evaluated the damage and adjusted accordingly.

Kyrie realized the pistol was about as useful as a flyswatter against the armored blasphemy of nature. "Screw this." Turning, she pulled

the pistol's trigger again, shooting not at the dog, but at the reinforced plasglass barrier in front of the focus dagger. The tough material starred under the impacts, but didn't break. Kyrie was already moving toward it, knowing she'd have to time her actions perfectly.

"Watttchhh—ooout—!" she heard Elijah's drawn-out warning, and knew the biodrone was almost on top of her. Focusing her *qi* again, she drove her fist—the knuckles of her index and middle finger extended in a ram's head punch—through the weakened plasglass, then uncurled her hand and grasped the hilt of the Russian dagger. Drawing it from its silver-wrapped sheath, she spun on her heel in time to see the dog soaring through the air toward her again, its tilted head cocked to savage her.

Kyrie sidestepped and brought the dagger around, plunging the foot-long blade into the dog's side, just behind its front leg. She felt the edge slice through skin and muscle, skitter off a rib, then penetrate the sub-muscular spider-silk armor weave and sink deep into the animal's chest cavity.

It was like she had hit the biodrone's *off* switch, turning it from 130 kilos of relentless attacker to instant dead meat. Its momentum carried it past her, almost tearing the knife from her grasp before it smashed into the wall and fell to the floor, a bloody mess of fur and metal.

Breathing hard, Kyrie wrenched the blade out and wiped it on the animal's pelt. She rose, grabbed the sheath, shoved the dagger into it, and turned to Elijah. "Don't know about you, but I'm ready to get the hell out of here."

Elijah was right behind as she stepped to the door, but stopped as she held up her hand. "Slycer, give me a sitrep on the living room—Slycer!" There was no answer. "I think we've been cut off. Wait on the far side of the door."

Once he was poised on the right side, Kyrie crept over to stand on the left, then waved her arm to activate the sensor. The door didn't open. She tried again, with the same results. "House security seems to have trapped us in here as well."

"Can you break through?"

Kyrie pushed experimentally at the barrier. "Hardwood, very solid, maybe with a steel core. I don't think I could break through it easily. Let's see..." She flicked through screens in her AR until a floor plan overlay appeared in her vision, every room now flashing bright red. "They haven't cut off my guest view of the house yet. Since waltzing out the main entrance isn't an option, we need to get to the back

door—which is back down the hallway and to the left off the main room.” She glanced at Elijah. “Your call.”

Elijah grimaced. “While I hate having to bust our way out of here, there doesn’t seem to be much of a choice now. Stand back.” He picked up the pistol as a disembodied voice spoke in the display room.

“Unidentified intruders, this is Knight Errant Security! You have thirty seconds to surrender, or we will use all appropriate force to apprehend you! This is your only warning! You now have twenty-five seconds to lay down your weapons, switch off all cyberware, cancel any sustained spells, dismiss any summoned spirits, and come out with your hands up!”

Elijah examined the gun in his hand. “Keep clear of the door.” He stepped to one side, then fired a shot at the wood. It ricocheted off, the light slug whining away to bury itself in another wall. The response was immediate—a flurry of pistol fire punched several holes in the door immediately before loud shouts in the hallway brought it to a halt.

“Unidentified intruders, you now have fifteen seconds to drop any weapons and spells and come out with your hands in plain sight!”

Elijah took a deep breath and stepped away from the door. “You might want to make some room—my friend’s going to need it.”



Ever since he was a child, Elijah had been insatiably curious about *everything*—from where things went after they were flushed down the toilet to whether there were other worlds beyond this plane of existence. When he'd first learned of the astral plane, he immediately spent every waking moment learning about it and how to access it. That knowledge had served him well.

He had done this so often it was practically a reflex. He imagined a spirit in his mind, and then mentally transmitted a simple request.

“I need you.”

The telepathic link took hold instantly. His mind filled with a deep, sonorous, echoing voice that sounded like it had begun speaking before the beginning of time, and would continue until after the universe ended. *“Whaaaaaat dooooooo youuuuuuuuu wiisssssssshhhhhh?”*

“Remove the door to this room, conceal this woman and myself from all human and machine sight, and protect us from all who seek to do us harm until we have left this building.”

“Tttttttt wiilllllllll beeeeeeee donnnnnnnne.”

The air thickened as an insubstantial form appeared, floating for a moment before coalescing into a very solid, humanoid form that landed on the ground with a *thump* that shook the entire building. Composed of irregular rocks, smooth stones, and lots of dirt, the earth spirit regarded Elijah from a face formed of muddy features that constantly dripped and reformed as it moved. Staring at him, it pointed at the door, the question obvious.

“Yes, that one, please.”

The spirit drew back a stone-studded fist the size of Elijah's head

and let it fly. The entire wall trembled with the impact, and the door bowed out, a corner of the steel core punching through the outer layer. The spirit raised both of its arms and brought them down on the door, pushing the top half completely out of the frame.

Elijah glanced at Kyrie, who was staring at the thing as it worked. "They're looking for a target—I thought we'd give them a rather large one."

"Da-yamn," was her only reply.

One more massive punch sent the door spinning into the hallway, narrowly missing a pair of body-armored, full-face-helmeted Knight Errant men approaching the entrance. The large, deadly missile made them scramble for cover.

"Holy fuck—get the mage up here ASAP!" Elijah heard one of them say just before they opened up with their Ruger Thunderbolts. Heavy slugs chunked into the spirit's body, causing puffs of dirt and chips of rock to fly off, but otherwise not harming the entity in the least.

"Stay back!" Elijah warned Kyrie as a few bullets punched through the spirit's body. One of them tumbled through the now empty pedestal, leaving a ragged hole in the polished wood.

Ducking under the doorframe, the spirit took one giant step into the hall and lashed out with its boulder-sized fists. Each one slammed into a sec man, sending them both flying. Their pistols clattered to the floor, followed by their unconscious bodies a moment later.

"Unidentified paranormal entity, stop all hostile actions immediately or you will be banished!"

The earth spirit took another bone-shaking step into the hallway while Elijah shared a smile with Kyrie over the futile command. "Time to go."

"You're sure they won't be able to see us?"

Elijah nodded. "Next to air spirits, earth are the best at concealing other creatures—it has something to do with their connection to the planet. Stay close to the walls, though—we're hidden, not bulletproof."

The spirit was now halfway down the hall, forcing the rest of the Knight Errant squad to retreat. Three of them had clustered around a fourth one, who was holding a small item in his left hand while his right traced a pattern in the air. The other three guards fired as fast as they could, bullets and clouds of smoke filling the air.

Elijah frowned. "That's a problem." Before he could instruct the spirit to take out the magician trying to banish it, the earthen being raised a hand and blasted out a stream of glowing particulates—accompanied by a roar that sounded like a full-speed freight train—that scattered the

entire group back into the living room. The spirit kept walking forward, its next step clearing the way for the two runners to reach the exit.

Elijah tried not to look too satisfied at the path the spirit had cleared. “We have an opening—let’s not waste it.” He started to run, but then Kyrie held her hand up.

“Wait,” she said.

“What now?”

“Slycer got nabbed.” She met his gaze. “Do we get him?”

They could have kept going and left the smarmy dwarf to his own devices, which wouldn’t have cost either one of them too much sleep. After all, the hacker knew the risks when he took the job, and since they didn’t know him personally, there was no real reason to risk their asses to try and save him.

But that wasn’t how it worked in the shadows. Whether you knew someone well or not, whether you liked them or not, once someone was on your team, you owed it to them to get them out, because that’s what teams do. Some of that was because you didn’t want to leave behind a witness who could describe you, some of it was because you’d expect them to come for you if the situation were reversed, but most of it was because that was simply the way things were done.

“He’s an arrogant prick, but he’s *our* arrogant prick,” Elijah said. “We have to get him.”

“I know.” With a resigned sigh, Kyrie edged to the far wall of the exit hall. “Do me a favor and clear a path, wouldja?”

Elijah peeked back into the room, where the spirit was still laying into the Knight Errant squad, sending bodies flying with each swing of its huge fists. “*Spirit?*”

“*Yessssssssss?*”

“*Clear a path to the far door for my female friend.*”

“*Yessssssssss.*”

A troll with more guts than brains was trying to restrain the ambulatory pile of earth and rocks. Having thrown its beefy arms around the creature’s chest, he strained to lift it off the ground. He might as well have tried to lift a corner of the house.

The spirit broke free simply by spreading its gigantic arms. The huge metahuman sailed across the room as if he was a 2.4-meter-tall paper airplane, smashing into the wall and leaving a large, troll-shaped imprint in the flexible material as he began sliding down, out cold. Before he reached the floor, the room formed a huge chair around him, making it seem like the Knight Errant officer had sprawled out for a

nap. The spirit strode relentlessly forward, making the other sec men scatter before it, yelling at each other.

“—Back-up, we need back up right now!—”

“—Fall back—fuckin’ paranormal’s taken out the whole squad, including Ertal!—”

“—Second squad, report to our position immed—!” The last order was cut off as the spirit bounced the speaking guard’s helmeted head off the floor, knocking him unconscious.

Elijah didn’t need to say a thing. He moved past the fallen bodies, and Kyrie was right beside him. The spirit lumbered behind.

This was when their legwork paid off. They had obtained detailed floor plans of the mansion, so finding the best path to the captured hacker wasn’t hard. They only needed to cross two hallways and an intervening room.

Then there’d be one more trick to pull off.

“Got a way out planned?” he asked Kyrie as they ran.

“Yep. It involves a window. Ready for that?”

“No problem.”

He ran into the second hallway, just ahead of a spray of bullets that splintered the doorway. They didn’t have much of a lead. In less than a minute, Elijah would find out if it was enough.



Sometimes three words were enough to ruin your day. Today, those three words were in a message from Slycer.

<Don't touch me.>

Kyrie and the earth spirit had made a spectacular entrance into the room, the spirit spitting fist-sized rocks through the air while Kyrie dance between them, leaping sideways and then launching herself off the wall while firing a shot at the unsuspecting officers. They were ready to grab Slycer and head for the window with his message came through.

“Don't touch me?” Kyrie said. “What the hell does he mean?”

“You're asking the wrong person,” Elijah said. At the same time he composed a reply to Slycer.

<Why not?>

Slycer's reply was terse. *<Can't jack out. Host range limited to mansion. Take me out and I'll be dumped.>*

Kyrie read the message at the same time as Elijah.

“Holy goddamn hell,” she said.

<What do you mean you can't jack out?> Elijah sent.

His wait for a reply was interrupted by bullets flying into the room's black door.

“We're out of time,” Kyrie said.

“I'm aware,” Elijah said. “Spirit, guard the door.”

Yesssssssssssssssssss. Theeennnnnnn IIII ammmmmmm donnnnnnnnnne.

Perfect, Elijah thought. Absolutely perfect.

<Slycer, NOW!>, he sent, if only to prove that the hacker wasn't the only one who could be terse.

Finally a reply came. <Fifteen seconds.>

Elijah took a breath. Fifteen seconds. Surely the spirit could hold for that long.

At that moment, the earth spirit blew apart into a rain of pebbles and dust.

"Damn," Elijah said.

Someone out there was wielding mana. Elijah switched to astral just in time to see a spell shooting through the space where the spirit had been. He didn't get a read on exactly what kind it was, but it had an angry orange glow he didn't like at all. He dispelled it with a sweep of his arm, then switched his view to reality.

"Grab him," he said. "We have no time left."

Kyrie picked up the dwarf. "He's not gonna like it."

"Then he should have gotten out of the host faster."

He ran toward the window Kyrie had selected, with the elf right beside him. They charged forward then leaped, feeling the glass splinter and shatter around them.

Suddenly the floor was gone and there was grass less than three meters below Elijah. It wouldn't take much to make their landing smooth, just a gentle reshaping of the ground below to make it more forgiving. He cast the spell as he fell, then he and Kyrie rolled to a landing.

As he moved to pick himself up, he saw Slycer lying on the ground, blinking and looking confused. "Welcome back," Elijah said.

"In a hurry?" the dwarf asked. Bullets fired from the window they had exited, answering his question. All three stood to run.

Kyrie took off in her normal blinding sprint, with Elijah running for all he was worth, but feeling like he was running in wet concrete compared to her. Slycer was even slower, though, staggering like a man at the end of a very long bender.

"Faster!" Elijah yelled.

"Trying!" Slycer replied.

There were flashing lights all over, cop cars going onto every paved—and unpaved—part of the estate. It was somewhat disorienting for Elijah to be in a part of the sprawl where Knight Errant responded to a call, let alone rapidly and in such numbers. Hayakawa must have supported several Policeman's Balls over the years.

And it wasn't just on the ground. Drones swarmed around in the night sky, a few peppering the ground with suppressive fire. This was one of those times Elijah was very grateful that he always made a

What If It All Goes To Hell plan. He just hoped he had enough left in him to make it work.

Ahead, Kyrie had veered right and was laying down fire with the captured pistol in an effort to keep people off their rear. The front side was going to be a problem soon, but that was Elijah's concern. While still running at full speed, he called a spirit out of the air. The wind rushing by his cheeks blew harder and faster, for a moment almost pushing him into a stop. The spirit he summoned did not manifest; rather it coalesced, a pocket of sentient will gathered into swirling air. It offered no words or coherent thoughts, mainly a presence waiting to be commanded.

Elijah pictured a certain spot in his mind, a small bare patch in the woods at the back of the estate.

"Make a clear path from me to there," he said.

The spirit howled as it whipped ahead of them.

Following it was something like waterskiing behind a tornado. They drafted into its slipstream, running through relatively calm air while around them dirt, sticks, and rocks swirled into the air. The Knight Errant troops behind them kept firing, but Elijah imagined it was tough to get a bead on them. At the moment, no shots were getting close enough to worry about. The stationary troops waiting ahead might have better shots, but that's what the spirit was for.

At first the spirit was just kicking up debris, but then it got serious. Large tree limbs snapped off, then entire tree fell. Two Knight Errant troopers charging from the perimeter were blown completely off their feet, rolling after they finally landed until they hit the fence of the estate. Elijah felt a surge of mana come in, possibly from the same mage who had dispelled the earth spirit, but this time the spirit didn't care. It shrugged the banishing attempt off and kept charging forward.

Elijah's legs were still churning, even though his breath was short, and a small ache was developing in his side. Kyrie was ahead of him, but Slycer had fallen behind again. It was okay. In the time it would take for Elijah to get the bikes ready, the dwarf could catch up. Assuming the bikes were still there, of course.

That was the next hitch in the plan. Had Knight Errant or the party's hired guns had time to sweep the grounds and find the three carefully designed piles of leaves?

With the spirit blowing ahead of them, the leaves would be gone. His ARO showed they had 200 more meters to go, most of it through the trees in back of the mansion. Troopers were closing in from ev-

ery side, their bullets getting closer. It was night, but Elijah couldn't tell thanks to the spotlights beaming from the cars and the floodlights shining from the drones. He'd have to make one small adjustment in his plans, but he could handle it.

His chest and legs were both burning by the time he saw the three rugged Gaz-Niki Wolverine off-road motorcycles. The spirit had done its job—no Knight Errant officer had a clear line of sight on him at the moment. Kyrie was already on her bike, engine revving. Elijah picked up Slycer's bike, started the engine, then went to his vehicle while looking for the dwarf.

He saw him limping through the trees, moving even slower than Elijah expected.

Wait, limping?

Slycer kept coming toward him, moving with difficulty. Then, about twenty meters away, the dwarf toppled over.

Elijah cursed, took a look at the dwarf's aura, then cursed again. He turned to Kyrie. "Slycer's hit!"

"How bad?"

Elijah looked back at the dwarf, who was still on the ground. "Pretty bad."

Kyrie didn't ask what they were going to do. She just gunned her engine and circled around to the dwarf. Elijah ran over on foot. He got there in time to help hoist the dwarf onto the front of Kyrie's bike. Slycer was pale, his eyes were closed, and as soon as he saw him, Elijah knew. He knew what the result was going to be. But he also knew that it didn't change a damned thing.

"Go!" he said, then ran to his bike.

Kyrie was dodging through the trees by the time Elijah got his engine started. He cast out his senses for his spirit and found it loitering nearby.

Fly five kilometers north as fast as you can, he sent. Then you are free.

The spirit howled away in excitement. Elijah and Kyrie gave chase.

For thirty long seconds Elijah stared straight in front of him, looking for trees to avoid, branches to duck under, swirling rocks to dodge, and bullets to swerve away from. He felt like he was gripping the handlebars so hard that they might crumple any second now.

The trees thinned, which was good for driving, bad for being a more exposed target. The gunfire grew more intense. Elijah made two quick castings; one to put a shield around himself, the other to do the same to Kyrie. The one-two punch of the spells nearly took his breath away,

and he sagged in the seat. The handlebars of the cycle twisted in his hands, and he nearly lost his grip. He let his torso fall forward, putting his weight toward the front of the bike, making sure he didn't lose control. As he did, a bullet passed overhead, brushing the back of his hair. Probably would have been buried in the back of his skull if he hadn't almost lost his grip.

Elijah took it as a sign that he was meant to survive this. Gunning the engine, he bumped over the rough ground, looking for the right spot in the fence. He'd recognize it by its astral glow, thanks to the glo-moss he'd placed on it.

There it was. So close.

"Blow it!" he yelled, hoping Kyrie had her earbuds in.

Either she heard him, or she had the same idea. Several small explosions erupted in the fence, and a large section of it fell away. Just like that, they had a door.

The cops saw it, and knew what was happening. Cars guarding the back entrance squealed their tires to cut off the escape. But they were too slow. The two bikes shot through, evading gunfire, blurring across long grass to hit the back access road and accelerate to top speed.

Once they hit the road it was over. The cops would give chase, but they had speed and maneuverability on their side. They would shoot to the Barrens, then hide in places Knight Errant wouldn't dare follow.

It would've been a perfect getaway, except that Elijah noticed that Slycer's aura had gone completely dark.



The following evening, Elijah and Kyrie walked into the foyer of The Eye of the Needle restaurant, set atop that most famous of Seattle’s tourist attractions, the Space Needle. Both were dressed in eveningwear similar to what they’d used for the run into Hayakawa’s home, just a bit more subdued.

Elijah met the *maître’ d*’s neutral expression with his own blasé stare. “Mr. Tish and Ms. Elyson to see Mr. Johnson. 8:15 p.m. reservation.”

They were precisely on time.

“Right this way, sir, madam.” As the *maître’ d* led them through the understated, elegant restaurant, Elijah saw Mr. Johnson awaiting them in a corner booth. The occult archaeologist kept his face impassive—given the long waiting list, a corner booth was very hard to come by. Their Johnson had either a skilled hacker or very lofty connections. Elijah would’ve bet on the latter.

Mr. Johnson was an elf with skin the color of Recchiuti’s dark chocolate. He had deep brown eyes that watched the pair approach with a soulful, almost innocent gaze. His hair was bound in dozens of tiny plaits, each one decorated with small silver beads spaced evenly from each end to the scalp. Everything else was straight-up elven; gracefully pointed ears, aquiline nose, a to-die-for smile, the whole package. He looked like a well-to-do executive meeting a business associate, or perhaps seeing some very lucky lady.

Elijah knew better—the man was a Johnson, therefore he was playing an angle—several at once, probably. The real trick was to deliver their good news and hope it would mitigate their bad news.

He wasn’t the only suspicious one. Kyrie sent him a quick message.

<I can't put my finger on it, but there's something not quite right about this guy—besides the fact he's a Johnson, of course.>

Elijah smiled tightly at Kyrie's words. *<Well, if you figure out what's up, let me know sooner rather than later, okay?>*

Mr. Johnson didn't say a word as they approached and sat kitty-corner from him. He simply sat there, his folded hands resting on the table as their waiter—another elf who could barely tear his gaze away from their host—ran through the evening's specials. Elijah scanned the menu that had popped up in his AR while also keeping an eye on their employer.

"Do either of you need a moment to peruse the menu? If you enjoy sushi, I recommend the tuna, watercress, and sweet egg *makizushi*—you won't find any better in the city," Mr. Johnson said. After starting his order with mango iced tea, he surprised Elijah by ordering a braised short rib appetizer. Although the mage didn't think he'd shown any reaction, the elf grinned. "Not all of us 'dandelion-eaters' are vegetarians."

"Of course not." Despite the events of the previous evening, Elijah had worked up enough of an appetite to order sparkling water and the Kobe burger, rare. When someone else is paying, go all out—he had found it to be a simple, effective rule. Kyrie took Mr. Johnson's suggestion and got the sushi platter, along with a diet Ko-Cola.

After the waiter had melted into the background, Mr. Johnson spread his hands. "So, what's the word?" His voice was melodious and smooth as silk, his tone calm and gentle as the Sound during a heat wave. Despite himself, Elijah found himself relaxing slightly, and admonished himself to remain alert.

Exchanging a quick glance with Kyrie, he laid out what went down the night before, from walking into Hayakawa's home to their unexpectedly rushed exit out the back—all carefully couched in non-specific language, of course. "The bottom line is, the object you'd asked to have analyzed was a fake. The down side is that the assistant you'd suggested accompany us didn't make it back."

"Hmm, that's interesting—I didn't catch any mention of an intruder being killed at the scene of the break-in."

Elijah's face could have been set in stone. "We took care of it." Which they had; the dwarf's remains had been sunk in a deep part of the Sound early that morning.

The elf cocked his head ever so slightly. "I certainly hope there wasn't any sort of disagreement between you all that ended—badly."

Before Elijah could reply, Kyrie did. “He died because he was slow. He was locked into Hayakawa’s host, and couldn’t get out fast enough. Because of that, he caught a bullet that made him even slower. That made him catch a few more bullets. He was dead when we left the grounds.” The steel in her tone dared Mr. Johnson to even try to dispute their version of events.

The elf’s shoulder twitched, and he made what might have been a *tsk* noise out of the corner of his mouth. “Well, Slycer knew the risks when he took the job. I wouldn’t think his loss has upset either of you too much—after all, it simply means one less split of your completion payment.”

Elijah felt Kyrie stiffen beside him, and wondered what her reaction to his words meant, but Mr. Johnson spoke again before he could text a query to her.

“What’s important is that you accomplished the job, and—despite the obstacles placed in your way—did so without appearing on the local screamsheets, either public or law enforcement. A commendable performance overall.”

Elijah had met some ice-cold customers on either side of the table, but this guy gave them all a run for their money. Of course, he might have sent Slycer with them in the hope that he’d get taken out—who could tell what machinations lurked in the mind of a Mr. Johnson?

The elf’s next words, delivered in his oddly deep, honeyed voice, made Elijah’s eyebrows raise. “So, if you don’t have anything planned in the immediate future, I have another job for you. This one involves a bit of travel, but I think you’ll find the compensation well worth the trip.”

Elijah kept his face impassive, although a part of him wanted to accept before he’d even heard the terms. He frowned at the sudden wave of impulsiveness washing over him. *What’s going on here?* The waiter arrived with their drinks, and he seized the interruption to text his partner.

<I’m getting the strangest sensation while sitting here. You got anything on this guy yet?>

<Nothing I can pin down yet—I know something’s going on, I just can’t place it...>

Elijah took a quick look at Mr. Johnson’s aura and got nothing. This was one exceptionally cool and controlled customer. He could get more info by actually casting a spell, but he didn’t dare risk it—the overwatch in the Eye was so sensitive that any detection of unauthorized

casting would get Kyrie and him ejected from the establishment—and he'd been dying to try the Eye's burger anyway. He sipped his water and set the glass back down. "We're listening."

"I'm sure, Mr. Tish, that a man of your expertise is aware of the Aleph Society."

"Yes. That's the Chicago branch of the group—many call it a cult—that claims to be able to restore magical ability to impaired or burned-out mages."

"Exactly. Recently it has come to my employer's attention that they have acquired what appears to be an antique map of a remote area of Antarctica. Your task would be to travel to the Chicago area, gain access to the Aleph Society facility there, and use your skills to ascertain two things. First, whether the map is genuine, and second, whether it has any arcane properties of any kind. If it does, you are to liberate the map from the Society, depart the city, and contact me to arrange for its delivery. I can facilitate travel within forty-eight hours, as well as complete schematics of the target facility in Rolling Meadows, and the information we've already uncovered regarding the map itself. As for payment, I think twenty thousand nuyen—each—plus transportation should be sufficient. So, are you interested?"

His words flowed into Elijah's ears like soothing elven jazz, and again he had to fight the nearly overwhelming urge to agree to the job. An antique map hit his archaeologist button in the first place, so it wasn't like he needed a lot of convincing... The task as outlined wasn't even sending him any danger signals—and maybe that was the problem. It all sounded really good—sounded too good—

"It sounds good to—"

<Oh shit!>

Kyrie's exclamation brought Elijah out of his slight daze and back into full alert. Coughing to cover the sudden break in his answer, he reached for his water glass and sipped from it while shooting her a quick query. <What?>

<How could I have been so stupid! This son of a bitch is a social adept! He's doing that damn voice thing that would make you agree to walk bare-foot through the Sahara just because he asked nicely.>

<No wonder he sounded so convincing. That also explains why he's not alerting the place's overwatch—adept abilities don't flare up like spells do. Plus he's masking his aura so I didn't notice anything. He's good.> Elijah preferred that explanation to the other alternative, which was that he had been sloppy in his scan.

<So how you want to play this?>

<Well, assuming everything's on the level, there's no reason not to take the job. I'd just prefer he play straight with us.>

<Weren't you the guy who said he's a Johnson a few minutes ago so our default mode should be distrust?>

<Touché.>

"Are you all right, Mr. Tish?" Mr. Johnson positively oozed concern.

"Yes—just something caught in my throat," Elijah replied. "As I was saying, we'll accept the job, but I'll need a 72-hour window before departure. I have—various affairs to put in order here first."

"That can be easily arranged."

Elijah leaned back in the booth with a smile. "Then it's settled. Upload all pertinent files and the first half of the payment at your convenience."

Mr. Johnson smiled, and even though Elijah knew what he was, he still had the strongest feeling that this guy could be trusted completely, that there was no way he would leave them hanging out to dry—

The entrees arrived, and Elijah drank more water while digging his nails into his thigh under the table. The brief shock of pain helped clear his mind, and he was able to focus on the matter at hand.

Mr. Johnson dabbed his mouth with his linen napkin. "Until his unfortunate demise, I would have recommended that Slycer accompany you on this run as well. However, since he is now unavailable, there are several others I would be glad to recommend..."

Again Elijah felt that wave of suggestibility wash over him again and fought it off with an effort. "Nothing against your suggestions, but if you don't mind, this time we'd prefer using people we already know. I have certain contacts in the area that will prove useful in bringing us up to speed on the situation in the Midwest."

The ghost of a frown crossed the Johnson's features for a second, there and gone so fast Elijah thought he might have only imagined it. "Fair enough." He lifted a forkful of short rib to his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. "Everything you require will be in your accounts by tomorrow morning. When precisely would you prefer to leave?"

"That was quite a meal, even if the company left something to be desired." Patting her stomach, Kyrie leaned against the back wall of the elevator. "I don't think I'll be able to look at another piece of chocolate cake for a month."

“It was something, wasn’t it?” Still savoring the subtle flavors of the Kobe beef and a delicate red wine horseradish lingering in his mouth, Elijah sent the elevator to the lobby. He glanced upward, almost as if he thought Mr. Johnson could eavesdrop on them from where he was still sitting in the booth—which was quite possible, if the Eye’s security was sleeping on the job. “I think the sooner we hit the road, the better.”

“Couldn’t agree with you more—a road trip sounds pretty good right now. By the way, who do you know out in Chicago? I wasn’t aware you had any connections there.”

Elijah smiled. “I haven’t yet told you everything I’ve done. Besides, I wasn’t exactly talking about Chicago. I know a human hacker based in Detroit—he’s good at what he does and should be happy for the work. Since he’s in the area, I can even get him to head over and start poking around, easing our way in and getting the lay of the land.”

He frowned, and Kyrie caught it. “Yeah, I’m worried, too.”

“Come again?” he asked.

“I think we might have said yes too fast,” the elf replied. “The surroundings, his charisma, the food, the money he offered—I wasn’t on my A game, and no offense, I don’t think you were either—I saw you lean forward when he mentioned the map. If someone wants to send us someplace like Chicago, there are a few more questions we should’ve asked. We let him off easy.”

Elijah realized she was probably right, but hated to admit he’d been slacking in his negotiations. “It wasn’t any of that.”

“All right, so what gives?”

“It’s just ... Chicago doesn’t hold many fond memories for me. In fact, the last time I was there, I promised myself I wouldn’t go back—ever.”

“Ah. But the target changed your mind, I take it.”

“Something like that.” Elijah’s expression made it clear he wasn’t going to discuss the subject any further.

Kyrie rolled a shoulder and moved on. “Well, since we’re heading to Chicago, feral city extraordinaire, *and* we may be crossing nano-blades with the Aleph Society, I think we’re gonna need a bit more muscle on this job than usual.”

Elijah raised an eyebrow. “I suppose you have someone in mind?”

Kyrie grinned. “As a matter of fact, I do. He’s a troll named Pineapple, and if he’s available, he’ll be the perfect mountain of street samurai to have with us on the run.”

The elevator chimed to announce their arrival at the lobby, and Eli-

jah was already walking forward as the doors slid open. “Works for me. You contact your guy, I’ll contact mine, take care of any other necessary business, and meet at Sea-Tac to fly Mr. Johnson airlines in three days.”

“Yeah—their slogan would be ‘fly the suspicious skies.’ See you then.”

Hearn had eavesdropped on people being tortured before, had been forced to listen to the sick, wet twisting and snapping sounds, followed by screams that choked off into sobs. He would rather do that again a hundred times than have to eavesdrop on people eating at a luxury restaurant. He could hear every smack of their lips, the quiet sounds of pleasure they didn’t realize they were making when they swallowed. He heard the clink of glasses, the contact of metal flatware on ceramic plates, even the sound of serrated blades gently cutting through tender meat. And he heard it all while sitting in the back of a dingy van with nothing to eat besides a bag of sunflower seeds.

It was horrible.

But he’d learned what he needed to know. This pair, Elijah and Kyrie, had passed the audition. It was time for the real fireworks to begin, and it looked like they were set to go off in Chicago. Hearn figured he could chisel a few thousand extra nuyen out of his employers for the annoyance of having to visit one of the worst hellholes in North America.

He pulled away from the curb. He didn’t need to worry about cleaning anything up—the drones he used were busy self-destructing, disintegrating into small clouds of undetectable dust. His work tonight was done. He was going to get some real food, dammit, while he thought of a way to make sure the many threats in Chicago kept their hands, claws, and other assorted grasping limbs off him.

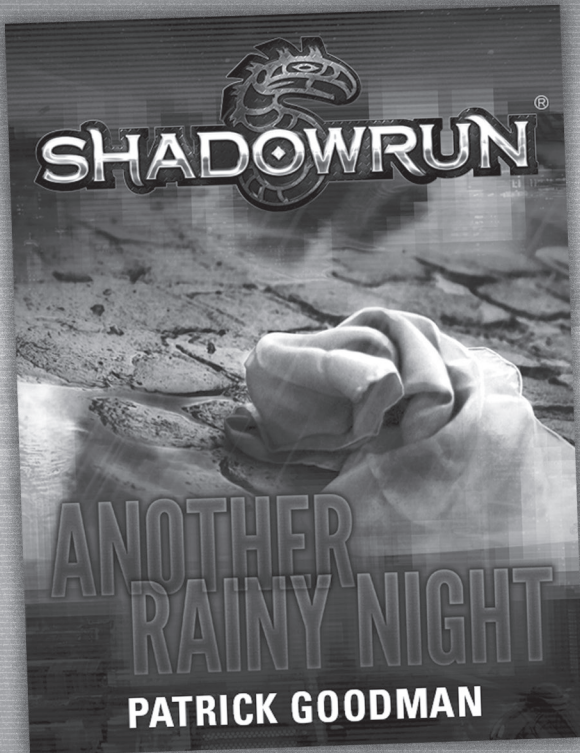


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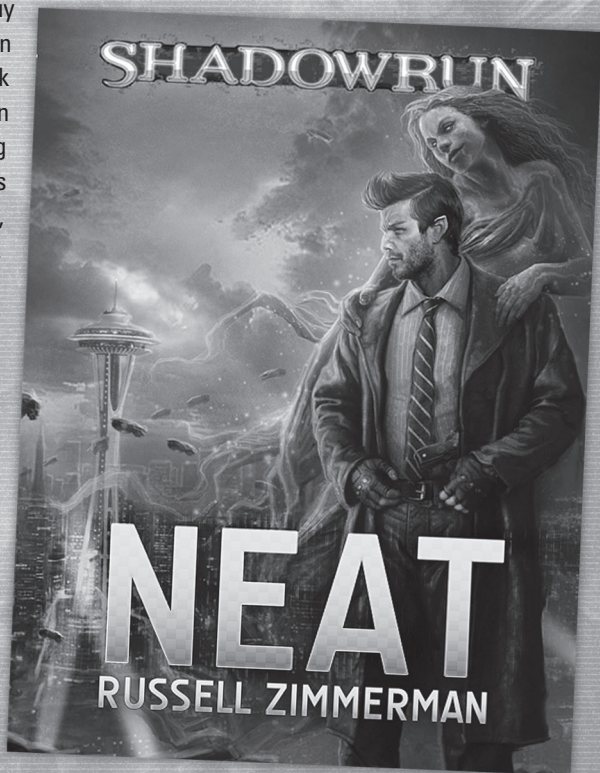
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**A SHADOWRUN NOVELLA BY
PATRICK GOODMAN**

THE MEANEST STREETS

James Kincaid is the type of guy who might be described as down on his luck, if only he'd had some luck to begin with. Like so many people in the shadows of Seattle, he's trying to get by with what he has. In his case, that includes a lively spirit, a sadly diminished magical talent, quick wits, and good knowledge of the twists and turns of Seattle's dingy streets and back alleys. He puts all that to the service of whatever clients he can dig up, solving whatever cases they're willing to pay him to take on. With any luck, he'll scrape up enough nuyen to buy a few rounds of his favorite drink—whiskey, neat.

His latest case seems simple enough—find a girl who's gone missing. But throw in a couple of feuding megacorporations, a few organized crime families, and a full selection of the odd denizens of Seattle's streets, and you've got a case that's anything but easy. It's up to Kincaid to see how many people he can keep alive—including (and especially) himself.



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DIGGING FOR DIRT

Arcano-archaeologist Elijah knows that digging into the past can be its own reward—or peril. When he's hired to find an ancient map purported to lead to a mysterious location at the bottom of the world, his professional curiosity is more than roused. But his quest to simply get his hands on the map is more dangerous than he expected—even for a shadowrunner.

He and his own team of runners—including everything from a goblin rigger to a troll street samurai—follow a murky trail that takes them from the ruins of Chicago to the jungles of Amazonia. Along the way, they discover that they're not the only ones looking for this map—and that it may lead to a treasure even greater than anyone could have known. Elijah and his crew plan to get both the map and to its riches first—assuming they survive the very dangerous road trip to get there...



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