

# PART TWO:

## *The Return of Owsen*

*"On the first day of the first month of some distant year, the whole sky froze golden. Some said it was the aftermath of the radium bomb, while others told of a final retribution, a terrible revenge of the gods."*

—LED ZEPPLIN

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### **7: Ordinary Lives**

TOLMAN HALL  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY  
THURSDAY, MARCH 4, 2004  
4:45 PM

There was a TV in the psychology graduate lounge.

How it got there nobody could say. How it got cable was an even murkier question, and the officials in charge of the department had decided that it was better not to inquire into the matter in case there was some illegality involved. (It was actually that some enterprising psychology graduate student came up with a way to get DirectTV billed to the department, and the dish was up on the roof of Tolman Hall, the home of the psychology department. But that's just not as much fun as the idea of graduate students and illegality.)

A bunch of the psychology graduate students were news buffs, Katze included. Katze usually watched in dread that something would come up that would have been easy to deal with in the days when there was a Jihad, armed to the teeth, but would be difficult in these days with most of the Jihad spread to the four corners of the universe.

She had gotten a horrible shock in the second semester of her graduate program when terrorists had crashed planes into the World Trade Center, but after two

weeks of continual TV watching, she decided that it was an unfortunate but normal act of terrorism and not the Wyrms' return to this world.

On the whole, since then things had been fairly quiet, and she had managed to progress through her graduate program much faster than she had managed an undergraduate career.

She sat in the office assigned to her, just down the hall from the psych grad lounge, and looked at the work she had completed. She was writing a proposal about magical thinking for a possible dissertation topic, and smiled quietly to herself about the term. If they only knew who she really was.

Laura McKinley, one of Katze's two office mates (the Psych Department was crowded, and graduate students had to share offices, but at least they all had their own desks), poked her head in the door. "Kats?" she said.

Katze looked up from her typing, and smiled. "Hi, Laura. What's up?"

"I was going to ask you if you were really busy, because I have a student who I really need to talk to."

Katze looked up at the clock in the office. "Yeah, I'm done. I need to get going if I'm going to make my dinner date."

"Date? With Josh?"

"Yeah, and Brian, my other friend. We're celebrating a common anniversary." Katze hoped she didn't ask any more about what was going on, because Laura believed that Katze was just another human, and Katze didn't really want to explain Marraketh to any of her fellow graduate students.

"That's cool. You think Josh is ever going to pop the question?"

Katze smiled slightly. "If I know Josh, he's going to do something to startle me. I don't think he'd do it over a simple dinner date, it's just not his style."

"I wish he'd hurry up and do it. It's obvious he's madly in love with you."

"Enh, there's a whole life ahead of us. But things are rather stable now, Josh has a job...maybe you're right, maybe it's time to start thinking about it."

Laura nodded. "Yeah, you're just about to get underway with your dissertation, no?"

"Yeah, I was writing the proposal. Anyway," Katze said, packing her laptop into her backpack, "I really have to get running."

"No worries. Have fun, I'll see you tomorrow."

**RIVOLI, SOLANO AVENUE  
NORTH BERKELEY  
5:30 PM**

Katze wound her way through the tables to where Josh and Bri'in were sitting. Bri'in was in his suit, and it looked like he'd just come from the office. Josh was in his khakis and it was obvious that he'd just gotten off work too. Katze, meanwhile, was dressed in college student casual. There hadn't been much in the way of choice because Bri'in, who was in charge of getting the dinner reservation, got it early.

She dodged past a few more waiters and arrived at the table. Bri'in looked up and gave her a grin. "Just one more page?"

"Naw, Laura caught up with me and was asking questions, so I missed my bus down the hill. Oh well, worse things could happen. I'm here, no?"

"Yeah, it would have been hard to have a birthday celebration without the birthday girl. How old are you now?"

"Gods, I don't know. Thirty-something, I think, I was supposedly twenty-eight or so at the liberation of Marraketh. But I think in Gregorian, and I'm younger in Gregorian."

Josh raised his eyebrows. "Yeah, yeah, just remind me of my worst moments."

Katze grinned back. "Hey, in the end, it all worked out, no? You got the girl, and you got rid of Sid. What more could you want?"

They sat and talked about Katze's research and Josh's work. Bri'in would chime in with horrible lawyer stories. A waiter came and took their orders, and a bit later, food was brought out, and the conversation slowed a bit as everybody ate.

About halfway through her spaghetti, Katze caught Josh grinning like a fool. "What are you thinking about?"

"Like you wouldn't know if you looked."

"I make a policy of not reading the minds of those closest to me. Sometimes I don't want to know."

"Well, that's reassuring. Anyway, you're the birthday girl, so do you want to open presents now or later?"

"I'm curious. How about now?"

Katze caught Josh and Bri'in looking at one another. Josh finally reached in his pocket and handed a small wrapped box across the table. Katze unwrapped it, and opened the lid only to find a California Golden Poppy sitting there. "Josh, um, it's a nice..."

Josh stopped her. "I still remember the poppies. But I'd check your box a bit more carefully..."

Katze carefully lifted out the flower and found that the stem was very carefully wound around another object. Josh watched, his grin growing larger and larger with each passing second as Katze extracted a ring. "Josh..." she said, and then stopped, as Josh rose from his chair, very carefully took it from her and went on one knee.

He then looked at her, grabbed her left hand and simply asked, "Tjarlin Katze Brenner, will you marry me?"

"Josh..." Katze said, for once utterly speechless. "You...well...yes!"

The entire restaurant broke out in applause, or so it seemed, as Josh rose to his feet with a huge grin and put the ring on her finger. Katze started laughing. "You..."

"What's so funny now?" Josh asked.

"Well, Laura asked me as I was heading out the door when you were going to ask. She's going to get a kick out of this tomorrow."

"I figured it was appropriate, given that it's your birthday and all. And I didn't

want to wait until November.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s a birthday on *both* calendars. But I’m glad you couldn’t wait.”

Bri’in chose that moment to step in, holding a manila envelope in his hands. “Now, I know Katze’s just got the shock of her life, but I have a present for you too. Or rather, I should say, a present for the both of you, but I’m going to let Katze do the honours.”

He handed the envelope over to Katze, and she slit it open. A couple pictures of a house fell out, and Katze extracted the other paperwork, stared at it for a second and then dropped it. Josh picked them up. “Geez, Bri’in. A house?”

“Yeah, if you both are going to get married, I presume this means that there just might be kids in the future. Besides, I really want to stop paying the rent on your apartment. Lastly, with you working in North Berkeley, and Katze going to school on the north side of campus, it makes sense for you both to be in Northside. I was going to wait and give it as a wedding present, but something told me you’d both appreciate it now.”

Josh chuckled. “Well, between the two of us, I think poor Katze’s going into shock.”

Katze just shook her head a few times. “Well, there’s something to be said about good friends. Bri’in, when can we start moving things?”

“Well, I figure, if I can get both you and Josh to sign the paperwork, I could let you at it tonight. The place is empty; I couldn’t convince anybody to rent it. The economics are just nasty right now, and so I make both you very happy, get a non-moving property off my ledger, and stop worrying about paying your rent.”

“You never had to in the first place, Bri’in, I had enough money saved up,” Katze said.

“Enh, yes, but the point was to make those who stayed as comfortable as possible, and there’s really not many of us. Besides, use that money for something useful, like paying for a wedding.”

Josh looked at the papers, picked a pen from Bri’in’s suit pocket and signed it. He then looked at his scrawl and said, “Hey, Katze?”

“Yeah?”

“I know between your two names you’d rather stick to Brenner, because that’s what you’re used to...”

“Josh, I’m happy to be Schnider.”

“Well, yes, but I don’t like my name. And Harldcast just brings up bad memories for the both of us. So...I know it’s not traditional, but...y’mind if we be the Brenners?”

Katze laughed. “Why not? If you’re happy with it, I could be.”

And the two of them, newly minted fiancées, just grinned at each other as they finished their dinners, and Bri’in just smiled with them, happy to see two of his very good friends so very happy themselves.

UNKNOWN LOCATION  
FRIDAY, MARCH 5, 2004  
3:00 AM

Katze awoke. In a hazy memory, she seemed to recall having fallen asleep next to Josh, but there was nobody in the bed besides her. She shook her head to clear it, and then decided that the atmosphere wasn't right either. She reached for her bed lamp, only to first not find it where she expected it, and then growling in frustration that it wouldn't come on. Angrily, she muttered the words to an illumination spell.

The light flared and Katze blinked. The walls were a mix of random shades of blue paint. The walls were covered with framed pictures, and somehow an old Alpha Squad banner had been hung on the wall too. It took Katze a bit longer to place that she had woken up in a place where she hadn't been for a very long time, as evident by the dust strewn over everything.

The paint scheme had been Ari's idea, she recalled. Except that Ari hadn't been all that good at matching colours, nor did she really have the patience for the job. The Alpha pennant had been a joke, Theta squad had raided Alpha's offices and she'd ended up with the pennant they had swiped from the place — ironic, because she was eventually transferred into Alpha. A large chunk of her old Jihad memorabilia had been left in Blanca when the Jihad had closed down.

So she was in her old apartment in Blanca. She got up out of the bed, and looked ceilingward. "I thought we had an agreement that there would be no sleep-teleporting," she grumbled to nobody in particular. The silence was quiet, as silence is prone to do, and Katze just shook her head and spoke again. "You brought me here. What do you want?"

This time, she was drug across the room, as if something had clasped her hand. One of the pictures neatly hung on the wall hopped into her hand. She looked at it. The caption under the photo read "Alpha Officers, 1999." To the far left of the picture, she spotted Mel, with Nolan next to her. At the far right, Pupp stood next to a visage of herself. Everybody was smiling for once.

Katze stared at the picture of a long time. "Let the dead stay dead," she finally quietly said. "Nolan and Kap died in service to a cause. It happens."

She cocked her head as if she was listening to a quiet voice and then said, "There was nothing to fight for. He left this world. I insisted..." She lapsed into silence, and put the picture down on the dresser. She stood there for a long time, and then opened a drawer and removed a small cedar box. She didn't open the box, though. She whispered a few words, and the illumination spell sputtered and died.

A few seconds later, Katze was looking at the kitchen table in her apartment in Berkeley. She set the cedar box on the table, turned on the overhead light, and opened the box. Slowly, she removed the contents, starting with the JihadLinker she had stashed on the top. Underneath them was a TRES patch, and then a really old Theta patch, Katze's first squad. She smiled a bit, as she stuck the Alpha patch on

top of it. A VR patch was underneath the both of them, then a few candid photos from some JPV party. Underneath those was a Dobe pin, from her supply clerk days early in her Jihad career. Then there were her Rear Admiral bars. She held those in her hand, and they glinted in the light.

A sleepy voice behind her said, "Katze, it's 3 AM. What are you doing?"

Katze twisted in her chair and saw Josh, half awake, staring at her. She said, "Looking at old mementos."

"Why are you looking at old mementos at three AM?"

"Because a certain perverse Source thought it funny to do the sleep-teleport again."

"I thought that wasn't going to happen again."

"I thought so too. But apparently something has It agitated. If I only had a clue..."

Josh sat down at the table. "Maybe I can help. What happened?"

Katze told the story of waking up in Blanca and of the picture. Josh listened quietly. Finally he said, "It drug you to your old base and showed you an old picture and wanted you to pick up this box? That doesn't make sense."

Katze sighed. "I know. And that bothers me, especially with your proposal earlier. The fact this happened the same night really bothers me."

Josh looked at her. "Are you sorry you accepted?" he finally said.

"No, Josh, no, no, no. I'm not. I love you."

"Was it too fast?"

"I don't think so. You can't predict the future."

"You can."

"Not really. I catch glimpses occasionally, but it's...well...like looking into a mirror dimly, as Paul said. I only catch the occasional bright flash. I only get a second of warning before travesty kicks in. I'm not omniscient, Josh, nor do I particularly want to be right now.

"But you know what Paul said in that same chapter? He said, 'Though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.' I am nothing, Josh, without you. It doesn't matter what powers the Source has decided I need, it's about you."

Josh nodded, and picked up the next patch. He smiled at it. "You kept a commemorative patch of the liberation of Marraketh?"

"It was the big win. We had to celebrate somehow. I think I've got a 'Goddamn Phoenix is over'TRES Corps patch, or something like that, in that box."

"Yep. It's the next patch. And under that is what appears to be a bar napkin, folded in half."

"Huh? I don't remember putting that..."

Josh had unfolded it. "It's a phone number. In the 303 area code. And it has written above it 'in case of emergency'."

“Oh, I did put that in there. 303’s Denver. It’s Mal’s direct number. At least, he said it would reach him 24/7, so I’d better be damned sure it was important before I rung it. His concession to my worry that the Wyrms was pulling a huge trick on us.”

“Mal? He was the Lyran, right?”

“Yeah, or at least he was pretending to be.”

Josh thought for a second and then said, “Maybe the Source was hinting that there’s going to be an emergency, and wanted you to have the number?”

“Probably. It’s probably not a bad idea to carry the ol’ Linker around either.”

Josh smiled. “I remember when you tried to convince me it was one of Greg’s prototypes.”

“You weren’t on my side then.”

Josh smiled. “I am now. Promise me something, though?”

“What?”

“That whatever’s about to happen, that you’ll return to me?”

“With Kyrill as my witness, I’ll try my best. But if I have to give up this life to save folks, Josh, I will.”

“I know. But...”

“It’s okay to be a bit selfish. Just know that I’ll do my best, Josh.”

“I know you will. But I don’t want you to be lost to me.”

Katze carefully packed the patches and the rank pins back in the cedar box, and then rose from her chair. Without a word, she kissed him.

He smiled and returned the kiss. “Shall we go back to bed?” he asked.

“Yeah. We’ve got to be up in a few hours.”

They went back to bed, and the last thing Katze remembered before drifting off to sleep was how nice it felt to fall asleep in Josh’s arms.

**SKYVIEW HIGH SCHOOL  
DENVER, COLORADO  
FRIDAY, MARCH 5, 2004  
3:00 PM**

“Alright, see you guys tomorrow,” Joseph Lacroix said over the din of the final bell and the rustling of three dozen departing students. “Don’t forget to have the next five chapters read by the end of the break; I haven’t decided if I’ll test you on it or not yet.”

“Is that a threat?” the class wiseass quipped, stuffing books into her backpack.

“Depends, Erin, is that a dare?” Lacroix said, already turning to the work on his desk. He smirked as Erin adopted her best “you win!” expression, hurrying to catch up with friends in the corridor. Lacroix waved at the last few stragglers heading out to catch buses, and turned to his pile of assignments.

“Teachers are done for the day at five, my ass,” he muttered to himself, brandishing the nearest red pen to get to work. It was only his second semester teaching

English at Skyview High, and Lacroix was still learning the ropes of education. Chief among his lessons was “don’t cluster assignments together,” which he was currently learning as he stared at the pile of essays and several smaller assignments for the three sections he taught. The stack of thirty-four essays for his twelfth-grade English class, now reduced to twenty, definitely wasn’t going anywhere - which meant Lacroix wasn’t either. Heaving an ostentatiously martyred sigh, he set to grading them.

Lacroix knew he was kidding himself about feeling so harassed, of course; the truth was, he really enjoyed where he was in life. The young teacher was lucky enough to be blessed with three largely-enthusiastic English classes - even if the twelfth-graders needed some work with their writing! - and the job was actually what he’d initially planned on doing. It certainly wasn’t as exciting as his old job, but that was much of the appeal.

His old job. It still seemed strange that it was gone and in the past; the three years’ service with TRES and VRDET had left their mark on Lacroix in all too many ways. It was nearing the fourth anniversary of both the end of the Hidden War and Lacroix’s discharge from VRDET, but it simultaneously felt like a lifetime ago and yesterday.

Lacroix’s pen wandered across the scratch paper he used for rough notes as he chuckled to himself. If the Jihad gave anyone an opportunity, it was the opportunity to live multiple lives, in sequence or series as one needed. The vanishing act needed to get into the Jihad, and his experiences once in it, definitely accomplished that. The Joseph Lacroix of 1993 would never have recognized himself in 1995, 1997, 1999 or 2004. Things really had changed.

As he toiled away at the students’ papers, Lacroix’s mind wandered some more. He welcomed the wandering. It happened quite often while grading; compositions for high schoolers were trivial compared to the monstrous thesis he had written at Adams State two years ago, and so the corrections and suggestions flowed onto the papers with almost no effort. The disconnect was therapeutic as well; it helped Lacroix to relax after a day of dealing with his students, and he couldn’t spot any screwups with the grading yet.

For the rest of the afternoon, the papers and assignments went by smoothly enough, only interrupted a couple of times by two of the history teachers - their work finished blissfully early - popping into the classroom to say goodbye to Lacroix before returning to their homes. As Lacroix faded back into the work, time marched on, and he finally looked up after awhile to realize it was 4:30.

Seigneur, he thought to himself, this is pretty dull work at times. A moment later, he sat upright and realized that he actually was bored!

That in and of itself was odd. Lacroix enjoyed his work, and it usually went by swiftly despite the huge piles. However, he realized, now and then things had occasionally become a little dull. Dull was a rare sensation for Lacroix, one he had been actively seeking for several years. The past nine years of his life had been intense.



The first year of teaching (he marveled at how quickly he had gotten a full-time contract, and wondered if someone had had a hand in that), preceded by the crucible of Colorado's education program, and the game of mad catch-up that was the remainder of his English degree at ASU. And before that, the Jihad.

Now, there was a life worth a biography or six! Lacroix could only barely remember how he had stumbled over the organization, catching a mention of a "Church of Saint Dino the Avenger" one day on McGill's campus and checking it out on a lark. Before he knew it, he had learned things he couldn't have conceived of before, and found himself in Colorado with a leave of absence from McGill, preparing to join TRES Corps in the fall of 1994.

Although he had heard seditious rumors saying otherwise, Lacroix was firmly convinced it was impossible to be bored in the Jihad. It was almost as though he was dumped into a parallel world, replete with high technology, functioning magic, hundreds of nonhumans — something he'd never quite gotten over — and a conspiracy-laden world of allies and foes which he was only beginning to truly understand at the end of his first year. He must have been doing something right, anyway, as he quickly rose through noncommissioned ranks in TRES to the rank of sergeant after a mere year.

Lacroix' career in TRES, only a year old, was looking good — as was the war in general, as the B'harnate forces seemed on the run. The great operations before his enlistment had scored major victories, and even the debacle of Operation World-walk seemed to only be a brief setback. Yes, things were looking optimistic — and then the battles of Operation Phoenix came down on the Jihad. Things looked somewhat less well after that, but the Jihad persevered, Lacroix mostly recovered, and when the War came to an abrupt and bewildering end in 1999, he found himself wondering what to do with civilian life — and here he was. Not just a teacher, like he'd wanted to be since high school, but someone who had gone through an unimaginable life and managed to reintegrate himself into civilian life enough to remember what boredom felt like.

One could do worse with a postwar life, Lacroix thought as he started packing up his papers. Might as well do the rest of the grading at home.

### 5:35 PM

Every time Lacroix crossed Broadway without being driven into the pavement, he counted himself lucky. To say the street was a deathtrap implied it was far safer than it was, although it guaranteed a certain minimum of excitement in Lacroix's life, no matter how mundane the rest of his day went. Still alive and unharmed, he went indoors and climbed the stairs to his apartment.

As far as homes went, Lacroix's apartment was modest, a simple one-bedroom affair. It was well enough located to be expensive, but a stroke of good luck on the contract combined with some culinary record-keeping in the US Marine Corps inflicted by some liaisons and Jihad personnel towards the end of the demobilization

earned him and several hundred other Jihaddi consistent pasts — and some modest pensions of one type or another. A number of Jihaddi were officially ex-military, veterans of the Gulf War or other recent campaigns, despite having no such past — at least, that’s what the Purple Heart and Bronze Star tied to Lacroix’s name in official records implied.

The apartment looked mundane enough, but many of the Jihaddi either received or “borrowed” artifacts from their respective JAOs on the way out after the end, and Lacroix was no exception. Scattered bits of TRES and VR memorabilia — the kind that wouldn’t attract too much curiosity — were here and there in the apartment, and a small locker in the bedroom contained some of the other articles, such as the once-ubiquitous JihadLinker, his Corps and VR decorations, and a pair of weapons - his officer’s sword from TRES Corps, and a sidearm from his VRDET service. Lacroix had no idea why he kept them around (well, alright, he meant to hang the sword on the living room wall sometime), save for a nagging feeling that the War wasn’t as neatly over as people thought. Granted, he was far from the only person with that kernel of suspicion; it had all been too neat.

However, nothing had happened since 1999, and for the most part people were relaxing. Lacroix ran into veterans now and then, and they kept in discreet touch, but as the former Jihaddi began fanning out across the world from Colorado, they each took some of the war with them, until it seemed inaccessibly distant. It was far enough away now that Lacroix and others like him could focus on more important things - like dinner!

Setting his briefcase and the papers therein on the kitchen table, he went about seeing what was available. Steady work is steady work, but young high school teachers were far from rich anywhere in the world (that Lacroix knew of, else he’d be there and not in Denver), but a plain selection was worse than a lot of things. Besides, whatever it was, it wouldn’t be ramen. Thank God.

The apartment was largely quiet while Lacroix rummaged through the fridge for the night’s victim, aside from the droning of traffic on the street outside, merging into the dull hiss of a late winter rain. Enjoying the sound of the latter, he opened the living room windows to let some of the sound in - besides, it was also unseasonably warm. Pulling out the hot dogs and buns, Lacroix started getting ready to prepare supper when he heard the sound of a speeding vehicle and the thrum of music, suddenly interrupted by

the

metallic

of

shriek

*the X’hirjq fighter-bomber’s engine as it passed low over the battlefield gain, the staccato hissing of its laser cannons’ vaporizing whatever snow, earth, or people struck. All was pandemonium, the soldiers still peeling themselves off the ground from the hammer blows of the massive bombing run mere seconds before. Sergeant Lacroix picked himself*

*up, dazedly took inventory of what was left of his position, and tried to find which direction was the front. The line was in chaos, huge gaps blown in it by the bombing runs. Time slowed. Crump of bombs sounded, somewhere above and behind him. Dimly sensed the Ellipsoid shattering from X'hirjq attack. Got bearings — forward! That way! Pulled the rifle — heavy now — to his shoulder, took aim at oncoming attackers, gave orders barely audible to his own ears. Tried to do so louder, but drowned out - weapons fire, shriek of the bombers again, snaps and crackles of dirt thrown up around him. Ground rumbling beneath the chorus of X'hirjq war songs, chilling but strangely beautiful. take aim, pull trigger — rifle's dry! look for fresh weapon — no one left alive to left, no one to right, all scorched ground and body parts the squad is gone! it's just me! draw combat knife. hunch in foxhole wait only gonna get one chance Roar of fighters' engines*

fades

to a

mere

hissing

of the rain outside came back in with the force of a hard slap to the face, physically dragging Joseph Lacroix back. Things felt different — ah, that's why. Trying to take and hold deep breaths to get past the desperate gasping, Lacroix shivered from a mix of fear and cold sweat. As he got his breathing under control, he suddenly felt sharp pains in both arms and hands. Willing himself to move again, he let go of the death grip on the fridge door handle and kitchen counter, feeling pins and needles course through his hands and arms from the locked posture.

After a few more seconds, he got himself back under control. Sighing, he walked to the window to close it, looking outside for a moment to see the source of the sound. A car was parked halfway through the intersection out front, almost visibly moving as the bass from its stereo thrummed. On the opposite side of the street, someone pulled himself off the road, kicked resentfully at the slush pile he had slipped in, and got back onto the sidewalk, sending an "I'm alright" wave at the car's driver.

Lacroix shook his head a couple of times to get the last remaining bits of fuzziness out of his head. Fortunately, that had only happened rarely anymore, and never for more than a few seconds. That didn't make it any less Goddamned aggravating, anyway, not least because they weren't the most predictable. Last week he was the guy who slipped in slush, and got nothing out of that other than a bruise from the curb.

"That was then and this is now," Lacroix said to himself before going back to preparing the hotdogs. He decided to forget the papers for the time being. Besides, it was a Friday, and the break was coming. No reason he couldn't take a few days to veg out just a bit more.

Besides, it wasn't like anything was going on next week.

2317 HILGARD AVENUE, NORTH BERKELEY  
SATURDAY, MARCH 6, 2004

It was a beautiful old house that Bri'in had picked, Katze decided as she stood on the staircase. Five whole bedrooms, an attic space, a spacious kitchen...there's no way Josh and her could have afforded this on their own. Good ol' Bri'in.

Not only that, the location was perfect. It was only a three block walk to Tolman Hall straight down Arch St from their new place, and it wasn't much further to Josh's work in the other direction. Katze practically couldn't understand how Bri'in couldn't rent this place out.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the voice of her beloved, calling up to her. "Hey Katze! Your folks are here!"

Katze looked down at Josh, at the bottom of the stairs, and descended. Standing in the foyer was not only Tyrene and Horetia Katze, her folks, but also two of her favourite people from Marraketh, Remmick Merkin and Rene Ewerter. She felt a pang of loneliness, knowing dear quiet Grahm wouldn't be with them. She shook her head, knowing why Grahm couldn't be there, and decided not to pursue that line of thought. "Father! Mother! Remmick! Rene!" she called out.

"Tjarlin!" Remmick responded. Well, it was better than "the lady Katze", Katze decided. She could deal a bit better with her Marrakethian name these days, but still preferred the name she used on Earth — the name David gave her when he misheard Tyrene. The thought made her twinge, for he really ought to be here as well. Indeed, if this had been a while ago, he would have been overjoyed to find Katze was marrying Josh.

But that was beside the point. She hadn't heard from him in years, and last she had heard, he was still in that cultish Christian church. She forced her thoughts back to the here and now as she hugged her parents, and showed her ring to them and Remmick and Rene.

Bri'in walked out of the kitchen, and smiled. "I see the Marraketh-Earth run has been rather busy this morning."

There was much chatter after that point, and Katze conscripted Josh and Bri'in into showing the place off. Just as the gaggle headed up the stairs came a knock on the door, and Katze opened it to find Miranda Delgado standing there. "Hey! Come in!"

Delgado smiled. "Helen's showing up later, will that be a big problem?"

"What have you told her?"

"She knows about you, yes. She was glad to find out just how you slipped through those defenses."

"Delgado the intel officer telling somebody who wasn't a Jihaddi about the Jihad. I never thought I'd see the day."

Delgado looked down at her shoes, and then smiled at Katze. "First time for everything. Besides, she was asking and I figured you probably wouldn't mind. Be-

sides, Helen's trustworthy."

"Good, my folks are here, and it would have been hard to explain otherwise."

"I finally get to meet the people who created you? This should be an experience."

"Yeah, well, you know..."

"Yeah." Delgado looked Katze up and down. "The Jihad's been dead and gone for four years, Wraith, why are you wearing your Linker?"

"Because I take hints."

"What are you talking about?"

Katze waved her hands in the air. "Mystical mumbo-jumbo. Something's about to go horribly wrong, I think."

"Well, I still keep an ear to the ground, as much as I can. Consequences of being an intelligence officer, I guess. But I've heard no chatter. Even the Order has been very quiet as of late. I think you're overreacting. Probably just a worry now that you've agreed to calm down and have a family."

"Perhaps you're right. Ah well, if nothing happens in a few weeks, I'll put the Linker back in its box. I probably don't need it, I have Mal's number in my phone."

"Wow, that's pretty heady, how'd you get Mal's number?"

"We worked together. And he agreed that it should exist, to placate my insistence we needed to keep you on the job."

"Ah, right, I forget about your VR commission, you being such a good TRES officer."

"Those days are over now. To be frank, I'm sorta enjoying the normality."

"You too?"

A knock on the door saved Katze from further thought on the matter. Standing there was Greg Wu, carrying a laptop. "Got your wireless up yet?" he said.

"Silly Greg, you know we've not moved much furniture over yet. Luckily, we've come up with some extra help. C'mon in."

Greg walked in, nodded to Delgado. "Where's your boyfriend?" he asked Katze.

"Upstairs with Bri'in, showing the Marraketh crowd around."

"Wow. I actually get to meet them?"

"Yeah. Now you'll see why I'm so weird."

Greg laughed, just as Josh and Bri'in led the Marraketh contingent down the stairs. Katze introduced Delgado and Greg, and then the two groups split up, one to stay at the house, and another to go move furniture. Josh, Katze, and Bri'in had all agreed that keeping up appearances was important, so they would move the old fashioned way rather than attempting to teleport the furniture.

The moving went easily, with all hands, and Delgado, after the first haul, ran to get pizza and returned with Helen in tow. The Marraketh contingent was slightly weirded out by pizza, but all agreed it wasn't bad stuff once you got past the look of it. Rene amused himself by sorting books, after Katze wrote the English alphabet out for him. All in all, it was probably the best move Katze had ever been through.

Folks cleared out after dinner, Katze hugging her folks and promising she'd let

them know when they were going to have the housewarming party. Finally, it was Katze and Josh, alone. Katze was chewing on a pen, trying to figure out how to tell David about their new address in case he was ever inclined to forgive.

Josh looked over her shoulder. "You don't have to do that, you know."

"Yeah, but I want to have the door opened if he wants to talk to me. I'm his only living relation, and our kids will, by rights, be his grandkids. His only possibility of grandkids."

"Why can't you just write, 'Hi Dad, Josh and I are engaged, if you want to get in touch with us, here's our address and phone number?'"

Katze thrust the pen at Josh. "You write it then. I'm going upstairs to work on my thesis."

"Kats, don't get upset."

"You aren't the one he called a demon and banished from his life."

"Maybe it is better that I write the letter. But Kats, what are you, from a Judeo-Christian perspective?"

"I don't work for the Prince of the Void. It's funny how much the Christians got right, there is a dualistic nature to the universe, but it's not as simple as God and the Devil, y'know? And I'm not a demon. If I had to fit in Judeo-Christian mythology, I'd rather be an angel, you know? But really, I just want to be Katze Brenner, a normal human."

"Well, you're a Marrakethian, not a human, but..."

"Connecting to the Source long enough to prove to David I'm not a demon is a gamble in two ways, and you said you didn't want to lose me."

"I don't. I'll write the letter. Why don't you go to bed? It's been a long day."

"I think I'll do that. Night, Josh."

"Night, Katze. I'll be up in a while."

**KINGMAN, ARIZONA**  
**SUNDAY, MARCH 7, 2004**  
**1:07 PM**

"Who the hell's bike is that in my spot?" Dee raised an eyebrow and glanced at the newcomer. She was at a table in one of her favorite hangouts, a bar called Smokin' Pete's. It was more or less a dive, but had good sandwiches and live music some nights. It was only around 1 in the afternoon right now though and Dee was on her lunch break, just finishing off her Mountain Dew.

"I said, who's in my damn spot!" the man shouted again. Dee sighed to her self. Pete's was also a hangout for a lot of local bikers, sport bike riders mostly. This was what led her to the joint in the first place. Most of them were good people to hang around with, but some were complete blowhards.

"White and red bike, Honda of some kind?" Shit, that was hers. Worse yet, now that she looked at him Dee realized that the jerk had a foot of height and around 150 pounds on her. Not, really, that that was that remarkable given her diminutive

stature, but it came to mind with as hostile as he was being. She knew that she had a pistol under her jacket, and that her artificial right arm could do nasty tricks, but she also knew that she really didn't want things to get to that. She left a five on the table and got up, adjusting her jacket.

"That's mine, sorry." The guy settled down, evidently not anxious to pick a fight with a girl who looked like she was 15. Dee grabbed her helmet off the table and started for the door.

"Not seen a Honda like that before, girly... what is it?" the man leered.

"RC211V." The guy blinked and bristled.

"Bullshit. That's a factory race bike. Why'd you go and lie to me about that?" Fuck this guy, she thought. Major attitude problem, and she had to get back to work.

"Run me at the light if you don't believe me. I've got somewhere to be." She strode out into the bright Arizona sunlight, strapping on her helmet. She knew it must be painful to look at; it was all in the chrome finish that had become popular in racing, a brightly mirrored red visor and finish with slightly lighter red "ghost flames". She caught a glimpse of the asshole straddling a Suzuki as she threw a leg over her own bike.

The wail of the engine split the air as the Honda's V5 spun to life, then settled down into an irregular burble as she idled out to the light in front of the bar, ignoring the rider next to her. The cross street light turned yellow and she dimly heard the man's Suzuki revving up at the same she was opening the throttle on her own. The cross street light turned red, then their light green. Dee cranked the throttle open at the same time as she let go of the clutch and the Honda screeched and shot forwards. The next 10 seconds were far too busy for Dee to pay attention to the rider beside her, as she was maintaining the delicate balance required to maintain control of a full race bike accelerating as fast as it could. She only glanced at her mirrors once she had eased up on the throttle, and by then the other rider was well out of sight.

"You're back early," said Damocles as Dee got back. They were running a business called Athena Heavy Industries, started shortly after the dissolution of the Jihad. Dee wandered into the bathroom and put her helmet and jacket into a locker.

"Yeah, well, some asshole wanted to how fast he could lose," she called back as she changed out of her riding clothes and into the work clothes she was wearing before going out to lunch. Athena Heavy Industries did specialized machining, capitalizing on her and Damo's experience in the Verthandic Rangers' R&D wing. Damocles mostly did guns, while Dee also tinkered with cars and motorcycles for people. She took her shoulder holster and pistol and put them on the top shelf of the locker before closing it.

"Figured it was something like that." Dee crossed over to the workbench where she had a cylinder head clamped down and had been working on it. She picked up the die grinder in her artificial right hand and called up a file of what she was doing on the cylinder head before starting to reshape the metal with a precision not

possible with human hands. In a way it felt like cheating, and in a way she relied too much on the precision and processing power in the arm that had been grafted to her by VRDET to replace the one she'd lost years and years before. She mentally shrugged and called up an mp3 from its internal player, piped directly into her nervous system to drown out the annoying whine of the air tool.

"Are you going to help me with loading the display and stuff into the van?" he asked. They were heading to the SHOT Show in Vegas in the evening to show off one of Athena's first products, a specialized combat shotgun. And also, there was the whole fact of her really wanting to go; various racing commitments had prevented her going in years previous.

"No, I've got to get this head finished and shipped off before we leave."

"You're just saying that so you don't have to help with the heavy lifting."

"It'd seem like that, but really that's just a happy coincidence."

**JUST OUTSIDE LAS VEGAS, NEVADA**  
**TUESDAY, MARCH 9, 2004**  
**6:21 AM**

The man in black remembered the pain, the feel of the heavy wood driving into his stomach, the sensation as the spell burned his organs away. Then the light as the alien magic ripped his flesh away. Finally, he remembered the darkness that fell over him, sealing away both pain and light, leaving him alone inside his own head for he didn't know how long...

...and then the darkness subsided, replaced by light, a brilliant flash of actinic white that surrounded him. Hiding in the light were things that seemed to reach out towards him, making the man in black recoil in terror. And then the pain, a thousand shooting needles all over his body until the individual sensations were whited out and became a gray static of agony.

Finally, the pain subsided, the light dimmed from unbearable white to a deep red-gold color. The man in black, almost totally insensate from the exertion, tumbled through open air a short distance before collapsing onto a dirt surface.

The man in black lay face-first in the dust, only barely aware of his surroundings. He stayed there for almost an hour as the sun rose over the horizon. His mind was whirling, stray thoughts and memories colliding without reason, the images of his life and the things he saw on his trip through the void crowding each other out in an attempt to get his attention. The man moaned softly as a vivid memory of his emergence shot through his mind.

Finally, his consciousness managed to grab a hold

*(Wake up.)*

forced his eyes open

*(You are still you.)*

and got him out of his faceplant and into a half-crouch, looking for all the world like just another desert creature.



*(You have a job to do.)*

“wh.. where?” The man in black looked around, squinting in the early morning light. He had arrived (From where? That memory at least was still a bit hazy...) on a flat expanse of brown and yellow (A...desert? Okay, but *where?*) near a road. In the distance, hard to make out through the sun, there was a city of glass, chrome and kitsch.

The man in black rose, a bit shakily, from his crouch and took a deep breath. The smell of the air reassured him. Yes. This was Earth, no doubt about it. Somewhere in America most likely, this certainly wasn't home, unless something had gone wrong...

The thought flashed across his face, and he instinctively went for the sword belted at his side. Feeling the grip, he drew the blade and held it up in the morning sky. He smiled. This was *his* sword, there like it had always had been, the black length of metal (Part of his mind wondered, “Black? When was it black?”) his most constant companion. Seeing the blade let him remember more about his life, his victories, his friends and his enemies.

Especially his enemies.

Sheathing his sword, the man in black dusted the desert soil off his tunic — must remember to adjust his landings a bit in the future — and set off towards the road, the city, and the future, whistling a happy tune.

Lord Tilden Alexander Owsen had a lot of things to accomplish, and not much time to do it in. He would have to move quickly, otherwise the Scouring might come down before he was finished, and that just would not do.

That would not do at all.

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## **8: A Grand Day Out**

LAS VEGAS, NEVADA  
TUESDAY, MARCH 9, 2004  
11:00 AM

Tilden Alexander Owsen strolled down the Strip, with a song in his heart and a sword on his belt. Combined with the black shirt, coat and jeans - he made a mental note to track down a kilt as soon as he could; jeans were serviceable, but they were too... confining for his taste — Owsen tended to draw some stares, but that was mostly from the tourists. The locals had gotten used to strangely-dressed people wandering down the Strip. The guy was probably just another costumed flunky for one of the big theme casinos.

Owsen didn't mind the stares. In fact, he was enjoying the attention. After three years trapped in limbo and then another five preparing for his triumphant return, Owsen was extremely happy to be back on Earth (even if he hadn't arrived in the green hills of his homeland) and to have a job to do. It is nice, Owsen thought expansively, to be wanted. He smiled a friendly smile at a middle-aged couple that had stopped to gawk at him. The couple paled slightly and hurried back on their way. Owsen stopped smiling as if a switch had been thrown; -that- wasn't a polite reaction, oh no.

Well, no matter. He had bigger fish to fry than to chase down a couple of tourists

and... chastise them.

Owsen shifted the weight on his belt around. The sword felt right, just as it always had, but he missed the familiar feel of his Alpha and Omega pistols. He didn't *need* the pistols, not anymore, but he *missed* them, and it never hurt to have a backup handy, right? Obviously the originals were long gone, so he'd need to get another pair of guns to replace them. But where?

There were plenty of pawnshops around, of course - this was Vegas after all - but a pawnshop gun wasn't what Owsen was interested in. Most of them were too small, too low-powered. To replace the Alpha and Omega, he needed something big and state-of-the-art, something he couldn't find in a pawnshop...

Owsen's eyes happened to light on a big banner out in front of the Sands hotel. The blue-white banner read "WELCOME TO THE 23RD ANNUAL VEGAS GUN EXPO"

...but maybe he could find it in there.

Having come to the conclusion, he altered his course and set off in search of weapons.

The gun show was great, Dee thought. The year before she'd been busy doing a rush job for one of her motorcycle customers, but now... well. The people were great too, for the most part... the novelty of a little girl who knew the hardware as well as they did. Perhaps better in some cases, but because she had the cute thing down no one seemed to get too bent out of shape. Something about a 5'2 girl who looked like she was 15 cheerfully and kindly correcting people twice her age and three times her size about fine points of weapon design took the sting out of it. Especially since she was almost always right.

"Well, it's true that a trigger like this won't usually last on a combat pistol," she was gleefully explaining to someone looking at one of the Athena Heavy Industries modified sidearms. "So we've switched over to some high performance alloys and very precise heat treating. In fact, most of the pistol uses non-standard alloys. There's hard-ceramic coatings on most of the wear surfaces too, so it can survive even having no lubrication."

"Geez. It's heavier than your carry pistols though."

"Yup. Combat pistols are supposed to be reliable over everything; they won't wear out under any reasonable amount of use. The carry pistols are a titanium alloy; they're lighter but you can eventually wear out the slide and frame. Still takes a while. Both are very accurate too, but you'd expect that."

"How durable is the combat 1911?"

"You effectively can't break it even with handloads unless you're being stupid. We tried. Chamber pressures started at 45 Super range and then went up... eventually we had to custom make steel cases to avoid bursting them. We got up to almost 50% higher than 45 Super before we ran out of room for powder, so then we put it in a durability test fixture. It was around 5,000 rounds before something broke... so

that area got reinforced.”

“Damn... that’s absurd.”

“Yeah. The combat pistols are as close to indestructible as we can manage without adding much mass.”

“I’m impressed... thanks!” The guy took a brochure and wandered off. Dee leaned back in her chair and brought up the CAD program on the computer in her artificial right arm. An image of Athena’s latest project, a combat shotgun designed from scratch, superimposed itself on her visual field. She played around with a few minor design details before grumbling and shutting it down.

“Hey Andrew,” she said to Damo. “I’m going to go look for souvenirs. I’ll send a message if I find anything cool.”

“All right, I should be able to handle things,” he said sardonically. Well, okay, so most of the people had only been there for long because Dee tended to get excited and talk a lot. Dee got up and stretched, before all but running out of view, turning a corner before he could change his mind.

“Excuse me, I’d like to buy some guns.”

“Sure,” the dealer smiled toothily. “What were you looking for?”

“Pistols, automatic, the largest caliber you’ve got.”

“Well, I’ve got a pair of custom Desert Eagles I was holding onto for a buyer who backed out. Nice guns, the Desert Eagles, biggest handguns in the world, you know.”

“Yes, I’m quite aware,” said Owsen dryly. “Mind if I take a look at them?”

“Knock yourself out, fella.” The dealer reached under the table and brought out a case, opened it, then showed the contents to Owsen. Inside were two heavily-chromed large pistols. Owsen took one out of the case, checked the sightlines, and twirled it around his finger experimentally. “Not bad,” he said.

The dealer nodded. “Yeah, they’re a real beauty, aren’t they? Still functional too, even under all that chrome. The whole deal comes with a shoulder holster for the pair, too; real tooled leather. Very nice package.”

Owsen pondered, then shook his head and smiled. “I’ll take them. Thank you.”

“My pleasure doing business with you!” The dealer got out the necessary paperwork. As Owsen mulled over which series of damned lies he should put down, the dealer eyed his customer. “Say,” he began, “if you don’t mind my asking, but you’re not from around here, are you?”

Owsen looked up. “No,” he said pleasantly, “I’m in town on business on my way to everywhere else. Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s...” the dealer looked uncomfortable. “It’s just your accent. It sounds European-” the man’s own accent made this sound like Yérpean “-and I was thinking, well, aren’t you gonna have trouble with that when ya go home?”

Owsen shrugged. “I wasn’t expecting to worry about it.”

“Y’aint some kind of... well, bad guy, are you?”

Owsen grinned happily, causing the dealer to flinch and involuntarily back off. "Oh my friend, I assure you," he said grandly, then leaned in to whisper dramatically, "I am the very *worst* of bad guys. I am The Villain, the Boogeyman, the King of the 21st Century... the black sheep of the family."

The dealer gaped as Owsen swept up his purchases and went off in search of ammunition.

Things in the show ran the gamut from boring and cheap to fantastically cool or creative. Much like any convention, she supposed. One of the first really neat things she saw was a pump action grenade launcher, like an oversized shotgun. The action was stiff and clunky though, but in fairness it *was* a direct copy of an underdeveloped prototype the Navy played with back in the 60s. She took a picture of it with her arm computer to remind herself of it later. No external cameras; since the computer tapped into her nervous system in several places anyway, it just took the image from her right eye and shrunk the resolution. A crude programming hack, but it worked well enough.

Heckler and Koch had a booth as well, and someone was nice enough to take a few pictures of her with various weaponry, including the brand new rifle they were developing for the Army. Her favorite though was one of the belt-fed machineguns, the HK21E. There was no way she could actually fire it from anything but a bipod or tripod, much less the hip, but a little girl with a big machinegun made for a fun photo according to a passerby. She went wandering a bit more and then caught something.

"Oh my god," Dee exclaimed as she stopped in front of a booth. "You guys are making these again!" She was gaping at what looked like a slimmed down tommygun, but with an ammo drum on top. American 180, she knew it was called, a 22 caliber submachinegun. The man behind the booth, a balding middle-aged guy wearing a camouflage jacket, chuckled at her reaction.

"You must be Dee Greist, reputation precedes you." She grinned.

"Sorry, I've just wanted one of these for a loooong time. Full auto I can use without knocking me on my scrawny ass."

"Well, do you have any real questions?" Dee was practically vibrating.

"How much with the standard barrel?" The man laughed at the easiest sell he'd ever had.

"Show special... and to you guys... thousand for the gun and a pair of the big 275 round drums. I know Athena's a class 3 dealer, so you just have to fill out the paperwork."

"Deal. Do you take Visa?" The man nodded and passed over the various paperwork in exchange for her card. Dee started on it as quickly as she could write, and shortly afterwards were fed into a fax machine. She took her card and the receipts back and stuffed the paper into a coat pocket as she practically skipped away.

"Hey Damo, I bought an American 180!" she mentally sent through her arm, as

a text message to Damo's cell phone.

A few rows over, Owsen found a stall specializing in bullets of all makes. "Excuse me," he said to the dealer, a tall, lanky man with the Confederate flag tattooed on his left arm, "but I'm looking for some shells suitable for a Desert Eagle."

The ammo dealer scowled at Owsen. "We only sell to Americans, buddy." He grunted.

Owsen blinked. This was a radical change of pace. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me, we only sell to Americans. Now take your foreign commie ass away from my table and fuck off back to France."

Owsen blinked again, then frowned. "You really shouldn't talk to me like that, friend."

"Don't you 'friend' me, you foreign bastard! You bitch about America all day, then you wanna buy our stuff? I oughta pop you right in the mouth for even thinking about it!"

By now this little drama had gathered a small crowd. Most of them were wondering what the guy with the case and - is that a sword?! - was going to do next. Owsen stood there for a minute, looking at the dealer. Then, carefully putting his shiny new guncase on the floor, he spread his arms and smiled. "Go ahead, pop me right in the mouth," he said.

The dealer was taken a bit aback by the offer, but nationalism overcame natural caution and he lashed out, fist flying towards Owsen. Owsen ducked smoothly, grabbing the man's wrist and using the momentum to yank him clean over his table. Owsen spun around, grabbing the man's ankle as he flailed, then whipped him back into his own display, sending boxes of bullets flying everywhere.

Owsen sighed happily. "That was fun," he said, looking at the aghast crowd. "Anybody else want to play?"

Two security officers, attracted by the commotion, took this opportunity to plunge out of the crowd to arrest Owsen. One stood in front of him while the other grabbed Owsen's shoulder.

That turned out to be something of a mistake.

Owsen turned to face the man holding onto him, all the good cheer draining out of his face. "You dare?" he whispered. "You *dare* seize the Herald?" Without warning, Owsen drove a fist into the unlucky guard's face. "YOU DARE!?" screamed Owsen as the security guard fell backwards.

The other guard reached for the billy club at his belt, but before he could unhook it Owsen lashed out and kicked the man square in the stomach, then grabbed him by the front of his uniform and threw him across the aisle into another display case. Owsen roared in fury, drew his sword, and began slashing at anything stupid enough or inanimate enough to not get out of his way. The crowd dispersed, running in a panic for the exits and inciting more chaos elsewhere.

“We don’t have much 22LR at home,” Damocles sent back after a short delay. Dee nodded to herself and looked up to take note of what row she was in before turning towards where the ammo vendors were clustered. She could probably get a deal on a couple cases of 22LR here, not that it wasn’t cheap as is. She turned in the right row and blinked at the crowd clustered around a man in black and one of the vendors... Ron, she remembered. The stereotypes about gun owners all being racist rednecks often weren’t true, but in his case they were all perfectly dead on; Ron was a complete asshole. She was just there in time to see him take a swing at the man in black... and him taking Ron’s hand and throwing him over the table before reversing him and throwing him back into the ammo that was displayed. She started edging back at that, to get out of the way by the time the security guards came. The man in black said something as a guard placed a hand on his shoulder... then spun and drove a fist into his face hard enough Dee could hear bone cracking from where she stood.

“YOU DARE!?” he screamed, then kicked the other security guard in the stomach and threw him into another display case. He drew his sword - “how’d I miss the sword?” part of Dee wondered - and roared in fury.

“Okay, this is serious... it can’t hurt to...” another part of Dee’s mind said and she started reaching towards the pistol concealed under her jacket when a shot rang out. Evidently someone had had the same idea but took it to its logical conclusion; a fat man with a blued 44 Magnum revolver, part of Dee’s mind resolved. She thought she saw the bullet impact the shoulder of the maniac with a sword, but she might have been mistaken.

The world seemed to slow at the shot, and go silent... she saw the man’s sword come around as if in slow motion and swing upwards at the gun. Instead of merely batting it aside though, it cut cleanly through it, lengthwise. And through the man’s fingers. The gun and fingers slowly flew away and there were tiny drops of blood already flying upwards. “This can’t be happening,” said part of her mind. “You can’t cut a gun like that. Another part had started taking pictures around the time when he punched the security guard and took another one; that part commented that it was good she hadn’t drawn her pistol. A third thought came up, perhaps the most useful one yet. “Run,” it simply said. It seemed like a good idea.

The world came back all of a sudden. There were screams of course. Some might have been hers. Her feet were working again though, so she ran. She heard another gunshot or two come from behind her, and more screams. Her mind was back to working properly after 3 or 4 steps and she quickly dialed Damo’s cellphone through her arm’s computer; she didn’t trust text messaging to go fast enough.

“What’s going o...” he started to answer.

“Man with sword,” she replied, more than a tinge of panic in her voice. “Attacking people. He cut through a Colt Anaconda.”

“Colt makes shitty wheelguns,” Damo replied and Dee almost laughed. “Are you safe?”

“I don’t know, I should be... he’s a couple rows back.”

“Good. Meet you at the South emergency exit.” Which was coincidentally where she and the rest of the crowd around here were headed. And sure enough he spotted her, more by the hole in the crowd than anything. He was carrying a black hard case that she knew would have their display items inside. “Seemed like the show was pretty much over,” he explained after they were a ways away from the hall. “Rest of the stuff is just cardboard.”

“Right... right,” Dee nodded.

“C’mon, I’ll buy you a drink.”



*"No army, no navy, no arms, no ammunition, no treasury, no friends.  
But, bless my soul, spirit!"*

—1776

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## 9: Getting The Band Back Together

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TOLMAN HALL  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY  
11:40 AM

Katze walked into the office and set down her folders containing her section's papers. Mikiko Tanaka, her other officemate, looked up. "Good afternoon, Katze-chan."

"Domo arrigato, Mikiko-chan," Katze replied.

Mikiko started laughing. "Your accent is horrible."

Katze smiled back. "That's what I get for not speaking Japanese from birth."

"Yes. I probably have an accent too."

"It's not bad, really. But you've been speaking English longer than I've been trying to speak Japanese." Katze was quietly pleased she still had a horrible accent. If she'd wanted to speak Japanese faster, it wouldn't have been hard. However, she was pretending to be normal and it was important to keep in mind that normal people didn't learn languages overnight, so Katze had been very careful to keep herself to only a few stock phrases. As an undergraduate, she'd been less careful, and had confused her Russian teacher by speaking the language like a native halfway through the semester.

"Laura said Josh finally proposed."

"Yeah. I'm pretty happy right now."

"I can tell. And here I am with no boyfriend."

"Aw, Mikiko, somebody will someday. I didn't expect it to be Josh, honestly, but that's the way it works out."

"I will be happy for you. When is the wedding?"

"We don't know yet, it's not been something we discussed yet, it was a busy week-end. None of my students have come by, have they?"

"Nope. I'm guessing they must have caught you after class judging by how long it took you to get here from the lecture room."

"Yeah, they had their midterm today. So I stayed late to let the stragglers have a bit of time to finish."

"Ah, your students must love you."

"I don't know if 'love me' is the proper wording. Probably hate my guts for other reasons, you know."

"You are a good teacher, I have watched you. If I could teach as half as well as you, I would be happy."

"Aww, thanks, Mikiko."

Katze sat down at her desk and pulled out a book. She really didn't feel like working on her thesis at the moment, but she was obliged to sit in the office for another fifteen minutes or so for students who might want to show up to office hours. After that, she pondered seeing if Josh was free for lunch, because the weather was too gorgeous to be working in an office all afternoon.

The two of them sat there, Katze reading and Mikiko working on a problem set of some sort, and it was all well and good for the next little bit, until they were interrupted by Tobias "Toby" Harrington, another fellow graduate student, bursting into their office. "Katze, Mikiko, there's breaking news on CNN."

Mikiko sighed at Toby. "Just because there's breaking news does not mean that the whole building has to know right this second."

"You never know when it's going to be another 9/11," Toby replied.

"Well, yes, you don't, but most of the time, it's not. So calm down. What's the breaking news?" Katze said, trying to keep Toby and Mikiko from going after one another.

"Some guy trashed a gun show in Vegas," Toby said.

"That is it?" Mikiko sighed.

"Yeah. It's just really weird, though, he did it with a sword," Toby said.

The last word hung in the air. Katze frowned. "Mikiko, you can stay here if you want, I'd like to check this out."

"It is probably Toby being overexcited again, but you know what is best," Mikiko turned back to her desk. "I will stay here and finish this assignment and then I will go to class unlike certain other people in this department."

Katze followed Toby back to the graduate lounge. There was a small cluster of people watching the footage from Vegas. Katze watched the figure wander through,

randomly knocking things over, and she wondered why there was this tickle in the back of her mind that the guy looked familiar.

But it wasn't for sure. She needed more than that nagging feeling to do anything, and it was probably best just to leave it alone, and see what happens. She was about to leave, when the anchor on the TV said, "This just in, video footage from the floor of the show. The reason the footage was being shot is unknown, but we'll play it for you."

Katze watched the footage. The man came closer to the camera, and Katze was struck by a memory. The face...the man...she remembered him pinning her Ensign insignia and shaking her hand.

So it was Grand Admiral Owsen. But why would he trash a gun show? Hell, why was he in Vegas? Wasn't he missing and presumed dead?

Katze struggled to keep her face neutral as the anchor chattered about calling the Vegas police with any information on the suspect. Katze had no intention of calling the Vegas police, though. They'd never be able to contain Owsen. No, this qualified as an emergency.

She stepped out of the lounge and back to her office. Mikiko had apparently left in the time Katze was watching the news. Katze hung the "Private Consultation — Do Not Enter" sign on the door, thanking Laura quietly for the idea.

Then she pulled out her cellphone and called up the number. She hesitated a second, wondering once more if it was enough of an emergency to call, and after taking a deep breath, pressed the call button.

The phone rang across the distance, and then somebody picked up. "Spiral executive ombudsman's department, this is Minerva. How may I direct your call?"

"Good afternoon, Minerva, this is Katze. Can I talk to Mal? It's rather urgent."

"Okay, hang on."

### **SPIRAL BUILDING DENVER, COLORADO**

Malaclypse the Seeker looked around at his board of directors. For the most part, they were like him, former Jihaddi who'd decided to come help him change the world. Two were mundanes, but had skills impressive enough for Mal to bring them into the inner circle of the company. "All right folks," he said, "We've got a lot of work today, so let's get this meeting started, eh? Now, concerning our operational schedule, I'd like to see the market share for our Armadillo 2004 line increase by the end of the quarter, if possible. We'll need to get a larger ad buy-in while—"

Just then the intercom buzzed. "Excuse me boss," came the voice of Minerva Fnord, Mal's "executive assistant" in the company and (unknown to everybody else, even the board) part-time AI, "but there's a phone call for you from a Ms. Brenner. She says it's an urgent matter regarding the Gemstone file."

Mal blinked. He immediately knew who Ms. Brenner was - there were only a handful of people who had his private reach-anywhere number, and only one of

them still spent most of her time on Earth. But a Gemstone matter? “Gemstone” was a private code, used whenever something involving the Jihad came up in a mundane setting. They hadn’t used Gemstone in almost three years, since Mal had to fix a few things for ex-Jihaddi trying to leave the country after 9/11. Something must be up, and serious enough for Katze to contact him.

“I see.” Mal rose from his chair, the board members doing likewise. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m afraid I’ll have to take this. We’ll reconvene in an hour and a half, and I apologize for the inconvenience. If any of you have something critical scheduled for that time, you may be absent, now, if you’ll excuse me...” Mal walked swiftly out of the board room and back into his private office where Minerva waited, holding the phone. She handed the receiver over to Mal.

“This had better be an emergency.”

“Hello to you too, Mal. Does Owsen trashing a gun show count as an emergency?”

Okay, this was pretty serious. “Owsen? The same Owsen who’s been *dead* for the last seven years?”

“He didn’t look that dead on TV.”

“TV? He’s on TV?” Oh, *great*. Mal could feel the familiar sinking feeling settle around him. It’s always something...

“You don’t know?” The surprise was clearly audible in Katze’s voice.

“I’ve been in a meeting. What’s this about TV?”

“Check out CNN.”

Mal covered the receiver with his hand and said “CNN.” Minerva waved her hand at the terminal on Mal’s desk, and the screen lit up with the Headline News report for that hour:

“In our top story today, officials in Las Vegas are still looking for the unknown man who entered the 23rd Vegas Gun Expo and began destroying exhibits with a sword. Several people were injured in the assault, most of them security guards trying to subdue the man. A camera crew captured these pictures of the assailant, and Las Vegas police are requesting that anybody with any information call the number listed below. Police are advising that the suspect is armed and considered extremely dangerous....”

Mal turned his attention back to the phone. “Son-of-a-bitch,” he swore softly, “Owsen’s alive, and causing property damage to boot...”

“There’s more..” Katze hesitated for a second, then told Mal about her midnight trip to her old VRDET apartment several days earlier.

“Interesting,” mused Mal. “Sounds like something had advance warning...”

“So this qualifies as an emergency?”

“Yeah... yeah, I’d say it qualifies as an emergency. We’ll need to talk, and soon. Preferably face to face. How quickly can you get out here?”

“About five, ten minutes. Where should I show up?”

“Can you manage the elevator lobby on the top floor?”

“I think so..”

“Make it there, then. Minerva will be waiting for you.”

“See you in a few,” Katze said, and hit the disconnect button on her cellphone. She filed the phone back in her pocket and scrawled a note to any late stragglers that she had a sudden errand to run.

That done, she shoved her laptop into her backpack, hoisted it over her shoulder, and went to find a quiet place to make the jump. She poked her head in the grad lounge, only to see Toby watching CNN. “Anything new?”

“Naw, same ol’, same ol’. Still an interesting choice of weapon.”

“Yeah, seems really funky. Anyway, I just got a phone call, Josh needs me to run a sudden errand. If any of my Psych 1 students show up, and they’ve got a question you can answer, do you mind helping ‘em out?”

Toby shook his head yes and turned back to the TV. Katze assumed that meant that he didn’t mind and fled to quieter pastures — a normally unused seminar room on the third floor. Sure enough, it was in that state now, and Katze slid into the room, feeling somewhat like Clark Kent searching for a phone booth. But no mind, concentration. Going someplace new involved a bit of a trick, sorta like flyfishing, only without the rod and the reel. Cast out, find one’s destination, and pull oneself through...

...into a rather quiet elevator lobby. Unfortunately for Katze, she’d made a minor misjudge of the height at the far end compared to the near end, and came into being an inch or two too high. Trying to make up for the sudden lack of floor where she was expecting it, she overcompensated and ended up tripping over her own feet and sprawling to the floor.

“Ow,” she muttered to herself, pulling herself back to her feet, which were now on the ground where they belonged. “I’m rusty, that was a stupid mistake.”

She shook her head trying to get her bearings back, which was always a small problem trying to jump to somewhere you’ve never been. As her head cleared, she realized there was another person in the room. She hoped she hadn’t been careless in making the leap and jumped right in front of, god forbid, a mundane. Delgado would be rather upset if that was the case.

She hoped she might recognize the other person. Hmm...woman, mid-twenties, about a half-foot shorter than herself, and ... something was off, but Katze couldn’t place it for the life of her. Rendered was the verb coming to mind, but Katze shoved the thought away.

And then the person spoke. “Good afternoon, Katze.”

The *voice* was familiar and Katze said, “N’kanyu tiri...err, wrong...wow. God-damn. Mal said you’d meet me but this wasn’t what I was expecting. Wow, Minerva, you’re looking good.”

So Mal had apparently been very busy in the four years since she’d seen him last. Katze should have recognized that the glasses as being the same as the ones her

fellow VR founder wore, but...Four years. Dammit, had they really gone that long without saying much, and not seeing each other?

Minerva smiled. "You like it? I had it custom built, and it's almost paid for."

Katze blinked. "Uh, what?"

"Long story," Minerva said airily. "It's good to see you too, Katze. It looks like college life agrees with yo- hey!" Minerva grasped Katze's left hand and examined her ring. "He finally proposed! Cool! When did this happen?"

"Last week, on my birthday." A small part of Katze's mind wondered exactly what Minerva meant when she said "finally," and exactly how much everybody knew about her and Josh. The rest of her was surprised by the feel of Minerva's hand. It actually felt *real*, not like a projection or something artificial. Minerva sensed Katze's surprise and looked up at the taller woman.

"Let me guess, you were expecting a hologram, right? Or maybe a plain boring old robot?" Minerva grinned. "Dad never did like that Star Trek gag with the holograms, and I didn't want to be stuck in another bloody metal shell. This is pure 100% human genome, right down to the bone. Except what's in here," Minerva tapped the side of her head, "that's nothing but VRDET original optical computer. I've got to maintain standards, you know."

Katze shook her head. "I.. wow. Color me impressed. I didn't know Mal could do stuff like that."

Minerva laughed. "Neither did he, at least until we got started." She guided Katze towards the lone door waiting at the end of the lobby. "C'mon, we can catch up on old times later, the Boss Man awaits."

They went through the only other door in the lobby, and stepped into a rather well apportioned office, with windows everywhere. Katze blinked at the view. It wasn't her beloved San Francisco, but it was rather picturesque at that, and she'd grown fond of Colorado in her years of service to the Cause. "Goddamn," she said.

The chair rotated around so the figure in it could face her. Mal always did have a sense of showmanship. "It is rather striking, no?" he said, and the voice was right but the general figure was wrong.

"Gah," Katze said, trying to find words. "I mean...I know that's you, but I'm still not used to it being you, even though I see you on the news all the time with that face..." She dropped off, figuring she'd get used to it at some point in time.

"Hmm? Oh...sorry," Mal said, and did something that rather surprised Katze, even when she thought she could no longer be surprised by anything her old cohort was capable of. He changed back into the face she was familiar with right then and there in what appeared to be the space of an eyeblink. "Is that better?" he asked.

"Showoff," Katze said, with a smile and a hint of admiration. "Although I'm going to take a wild guess and figure that's how you managed to play Lyran in Mar-raketh."

Mal smirked. "That old gag? Nah, that was just a mask and a cheap bathrobe," he said. "I didn't get the face-changing thing set up until right before the stand down."

Figured it might come in handy when playing CEO.” Mal stood up and crossed the room to a minifridge standing by the north wall. “I’m being a poor host. Would you like something to drink?”

“Sure, a Coke if you’ve got one.”

“Hmmm, Coke, Coke, where did you- aha!” Mal pulled out a can of Coke for Katze, selected a root beer for himself, then returned to the desk and sat down, handing his guest her drink in passing. “Min, you sticking around for this?” Mal asked.

Minerva shrugged. “I probably should, since it’s old business.” She sat down in a chair opposite Katze.

Mal opened his root beer and took a drink. “Okay,” he said, “so what do we know?”

“Owsen, who is supposed to be dead, isn’t.” Katze said. “And that he trashed a gun show in Vegas.”

Mal nodded. “Yeah, and that’s not normal behavior, even for Owsen. So the question becomes; what’s he going to do besides trashing gun shows?”

“You think he might try to go home? To the Jihad, I mean?” Minerva asked.

“It’s a possibility,” agreed Mal. “Certainly that would be my first guess; if he’s just got back from... wherever he’s been for the last seven years, then he might be heading back to TRES Corps. Problem is, he doesn’t know that the Corps — and the Jihad — is gone. If he’s got his Linker on him, we could trace him and maybe contact him that way, but-”

“But with the network offline, even if he’s still got a Linker we won’t be able to connect to him that way.” Katze finished the thought.

“Right. Hm. Okay, first order of business is to get the Net back up. That way, if Owsen does call in, we can be ready for it. If he doesn’t call in, well... we’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

“All right. Now, how do we do that?”

“Pretty simple really. We’ll call into Blanca and have Aris activate the local hub. Most of the relay satellites are still in orbit and functioning, so once we get the hub running the Net will be back up and functional enough for people to call in.”

Katze looked skeptical. “Great, but how do we call Aris without the Net?”

Mal smiled. “Oh, that’s easy. I’ve got a dedicated line.” He picked up the phone and started punching in numbers. “You didn’t really think I would just leave the place there without a way to get in, did you?”

“No,” Katze laughed, “I guess I didn’t.”

“Damn straight. Now,” Mal muttered as he continued dialing the connection for the long-abandoned Jihad base, “if I don’t dial this right, I’ll probably end up buying fifty pizzas for some poor sap in Singapore. Or maybe selling the company to the Russian mafia by mistake—”

“A gun show,” Minerva said softly.

Mal and Katze looked up. Mal dropped the handset back onto the phone. “What was that, Min?” asked Mal, concentration broken.

“Why did Owsen go into a gun show? Why not one of the other hotels? Or a bar, or a restaurant, or even a gas station? There’s hundreds of places for Owsen to have wandered into on the Strip. Hell, he could have even gone to the TRES Vegas safehouse, but he didn’t. So why did he end up at that show? Something doesn’t add up.”

“Maybe he grabbed the sword there?” Katze suggested.

Minerva shook her head, frowning. “No, the kinds of swords on sale at a show like that are display pieces. Stuff you’d put on your wall. From what I remember of Owsen’s psych profile, he’d rather fight bare-handed than with a cheap display sword.”

“Okay, then what would he be after?”

“Well, the obvious thing would be *guns*.” Minerva pointed out.

Katze blinked. “I didn’t think Owsen *used* guns,” she said, slightly puzzled. “I mean, he had the Barney-Slayer...”

“He had two,” Mal interjected. “They were modified .45s, and I think DeadLock ended up with them after Pacifica.” He frowned, tapping at the desk. “I don’t know what happened to them after that,” he added. “I imagine that they’re locked inside the TRES underground along with the rest of their gear.”

Minerva nodded. “Okay, so if we make the assumption that he stopped to get some guns, then that means he’s expecting trouble. Which begs the question: what -kind- of trouble is he expecting?”

“Yeah,” agreed Katze. “Is he expecting trouble with the Wyrms, or...” Katze trailed off, letting the unspoken assumption hung in the air. Owsen had, in the past, a tendency to monomania when he started out on a mission. It was one of the things that had made him such a terror on the battlefield, not to mention the reason he was given the Slayer in the first place. But if Owsen’s intensity had been turned on something that wasn’t the Wyrms...

...and it was known that the last time anybody had seen Owsen alive, he was in the company of the Lyran leader and High Mage.

The silence stretched for a few more seconds as the three contemplated that possibilities, then Mal picked up the phone. “Okay,” he said, “we’d better get things rolling, then.”

## DENVER, COLORADO 1:20 PM

A dose of unseasonably nice weather broke the monotony of the past week as Lacroix absently channel-flipped. In the name of getting the most out of his break, Lacroix had half burned himself out being unnecessarily productive since Friday, and found himself staring most of a week of no professional obligations whatsoever in its gorgeous face. This explained why, at almost half-past one in the afternoon, Joseph Lacroix was still waiting for his pre-consciousness pot of coffee to kick in while flipping aimlessly through television channels.



Lacroix's apartment had a decent cable package as part of his lease, in an oddly generous turn of events. Normally he wouldn't argue, but the inverse channel law was in effect — eighty-five channels, and the most interesting thing he'd seen so far was a documentary on the history of flax. Only able to take a certain level of boredom at any given time, he flipped through the channels some more. It was a Tuesday afternoon, but there was always the chance someone made a mistake and was broadcasting something interesting.

Something caught his eye suddenly while flipping through. Flipping back, he was presented with CNN. In the new environment of the twenty-first century, Lacroix was used to CNN blaring FUD about one thing or another, but the typical Breaking News! thing was still a little rare. Checking it out, he sat a little dumbfounded by what he saw.

"...veral people were injured in the assault, most of them security guards trying to subdue the man. A camera crew captured these pictures of the assailant and Las Vegas police are requesting that anybody with any information..."

"Well, this is different," Lacroix thought, looking at the footage of the oddly familiar man tearing up the exhibition hall he was in — with a sword, no less. A close-up shot of the man's face appeared, and a shock of recognition hit Lacroix in the stomach.

The man trashing the expo in Vegas looked familiar for a reason. Lacroix remembered him from his Jihad days. Usually a figure off in the background, glanced at a distance on base or during the odd interminable review session, speaking briefly to some of the TRES members, then recruits, late in his training in Alpha...

Joseph Lacroix gaped at the screen as he watched Lord Tilden Alexander Owsen take a small piece of Las Vegas to shreds.

"...What's going on?" Lacroix said aloud. Not only was the man one of the Jihad's greatest heroes, but he was also supposed to be dead, killed in single action against Charn'El (or so the rumours went) in that astonishing battle during the Pacifica operation. Not only was it Owsen, but it was Owsen with the Slayer - or was it? The blade in his hand looked like the famous sword, and every Jihaddi had at least seen a picture of the thing. However, it was a matte black instead of the silver-white of its odd alloys.

During his time in TRES, Lacroix was low-ranked, not even commissioned by the time of Owsen's death. He knew enough to recognize the former Grand Admiral, however, and he knew enough to know something was very, very wrong with at least one Jihaddi. He also knew that there was no possibility of a Maenad being apprehended by police unless he wanted to be; Owsen would be out and about as long as he damn well pleased.

Lacroix stared at the TV in shock for a few more moments, flipping to a couple of other channels to see if the other talking heads had different spins on what was going on, and then put the remote down. "Seigneur," he breathed.

A strong sense of duty and attachment still linked Lacroix to the Jihad, gone

these five years. Every one of those strings tugged at him right now, and Lacroix was filled with conflict. All that could go through his head was the fact that one of the most senior of the Jihaddi - who was supposed to be dead, dammit - had apparently gone quite mad, Lacroix desperately wanted to get in touch with any other Jihaddi to figure out what was going on, and he had no viable means of doing so. His first thought went to his 'Linker, until he realized the power cells in it were almost certainly dead by now. He could try that, but chances were good that he had nothing. "Seigneur," he said again. "What is going on?"

### **VRDET BASE BLANCA COSTILLA COUNTY, COLORADO**

Blanca Mountain had a few vehicle hangars, large empty open spaces where once private planes and vehicles retuned for hidden military purposes had been stored. The entrance to the outside had been completely blocked off with rubble, sealing the empty, echoing halls in from outside air.

One of these hangars was still occupied.

A television stood in one corner, hooked up to a single VCR. Next to the VCR were several neat stacks of Red Dwarf episode tapes. On the other side of the television was a metric ton of empty Powerbar wrappers. On the other side of the hangar was a snoring mountain of blue scales.

The scene did not change for a long time.

On March 9, 2004, a shrill beeping started in the hangar.

For a few seconds, nothing else changed. Then the mountain shifted, curled, and resolved itself into a living dragon, somewhat cognizant of the world around her. She scratched the ridges behind her head, then reached underneath her wing and delicately retrieved a small personal data assistant from the interdimensional portal she kept there.

"The hell?" she asked, before poking it with a claw. "Commander Merquoni speaking."

A couple of seconds later she said "What?", and then "WHAT?"

And a few seconds after that, "Shit. Okay, I'll see what we have here and get back to you."

She poked the PDA again, turning it off, and replaced it in her pocket. Then she closed her eyes and shifted into a tall human woman wearing very little besides a backpack. She took off the backpack, retrieved a black unitard from it, and put it on. Then, sparing one last look at the television, she left the hangar behind.

"So, what do we have?"

Aris sighed and tucked her 'linker in the crook of her neck. "Not much, boss. All the vehicles were dismantled, the weapons the same; the only thing that really works down here is the passive security system. Mal even took the fuel out of the Gate, so that's down."

“Can you get it up again?”

“Sure, given time. It’s got enough power to reload.” Aris spun around in her office chair and punched another console. It came to life, flashing angrily. “The software’s all here, but all our monitoring stations are kaput, so we’re not getting any readings. I can still patch into US and EuroMil, but they’re not calibrated for the kind of stuff we need. Maybe we can get one on the next Shuttle launch—”

“Shuttle’s still grounded.”

Aris scowled. “Since when?”

“Since *Columbia* went down.”

“Ack, I have been asleep a while.” She moved back to the first console. “I have the ‘Linker station back up, so you should be able to dial in.”

“Yeah, I’m getting it.”

Aris opened a geographical map of all active JihadLinkers and whistled. “What happened to everyone? Active listing is down to like nothing.”

“I think most everyone just turned their ‘Linkers off and stashed them. The war *did* look over.”

“I thought you weren’t supposed to turn these things off.”

“Yes, but you can. Or they might have left them on and let the batteries drain.”

“Dammit. Is there any way to send a remote electric shock to everyone who turned their ‘Linker off?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “And I’ve finished checking the base logs. Nobody came down here but you and me, which isn’t surprising, since there’s almost no way in here.”

“Great. Is the system online yet?”

“Still warming up. Without Minerva it’s a bit of a bitch. Uh, there might be some stuff on Sublevel 2, but I think Mal dropped a small black hole in there when the base went down, so I don’t really want to look. We certainly don’t have any more than four guns in the whole base, and one of those is mine.”

“Don’t go down there. Bring the system up and start going over data to see if there are any other options. I’ll call you back.”

“Right.” Aris clicked off the ‘Linker and typed a final command into her console. “Shit. The last thing I wanted to deal with this month was an angry Maenad.”

“So.” Aris fiddled with her headset to get her microphone in place and adjusted the monitor in front of her. “What do we know, exactly?”

The monitor was covered in data. The upper left corner had a map of the continental United States, Owsen’s last known position and the positions of all known activatable Jihaddi marked and labeled. The upper right had the CNN video on replay, volume muted and closed captioning running along the bottom. The bottom left of the screen had a checklist of everything that was supposed to be left in Blanca Mountain, a depressingly small amount of text.

The bottom right had an open text file. Into it, Aris typed, “Things we know.”

“He’s been presumed dead for the last seven years,” Mal grumbled.

Aris dutifully typed 'Ows presu. dead 7 yrs'

"He ransacked a gun show," Katze added. "He's up to something, and it involves firearms."

Aris added, 'plans with guns' to the file.

"And he hasn't attempted to get in touch with anyone yet," Aris added as an afterthought."

"Well, most of the phone numbers he would have had are no longer working," Mal pointed out. "But yes, this doesn't bode well."

'Mal worried, bad shit,' Aris typed.

"Agreed," Katze said grimly.

'Katze, too. And me.'

"So... what sort of a problem is this?" Aris asked as she typed. "I mean, what should we do? Call Ghostbusters?"

"You should have a list of call-anytime numbers for the Maenads there on the server," Mal said. "They probably have the best immediate chance of figuring this out and stopping him."

Aris started a new heading for 'To-do List' and added 'Call Maenads. Present assumed to be contactable: Nemesis, Windigo.'

"All right. I'll get on that as soon as I can." Aris scrolled down the list of known material in Blanca's stores, frowning. "Mal, is there anything in this base that isn't on this list? A McGuffin, anything?"

"Nothing that isn't on the list. There should be enough equipment down there to get the Gate back online, though. That should be priority number one, in case we have to move people in a hurry."

Aris hummed softly. "I'd like to get in touch with with either Mel or Shad before I do that. Both, if possible."

"This isn't Jihad business. Not yet," Mal pointed out. "But getting in touch with them is a good idea anyway. If this turns out to be a false alarm, all the better, but if something really is going on..."

"Right. Let me try and get them on the link. And Felton."

"All right."

Mel's 'linker didn't send any response, and neither did Felton's. Within twenty seconds, however, Shad's voice came on the line. "What's going on?"

"Shad? It's Aris. And Mal, and Katze. Have you been watching the news?"

"Yes, in fact, I was just about to call. Who else have you contacted?"

"Nobody, so far." Aris scowled at the list of numbers on the screen. "We're still trying to find the other Triumvirs."

Shad was silent for a moment. "Are we active again?"

"No," Mal said. "Not yet, anyway."

"But I'm going to open the Gate again," Aris said. "We're not official or anything, but I thought it would be a good idea to at least get two-thirds of the Trium on the same page."

“No answer from Melanie, huh?”

“Nope. I assume she and Felton are still barcrawling Western Europe.”

“And there are enough pubs around that nothing short of buzzing every city, town and hamlet in dragon form would find them. All right. I’m coming over there.”

“The Gate is going to be a while. I have to refuel and recalibrate.” Aris sighed. “I’ll get started on that as soon as I run down the list of Maenads. In the meanwhile, you can’t get in the base.”

“That’s fine. I’ll start groundwork in Denver while you work,” Shad said. “Which reminds me. Mal, is your delightfully charming and almost indecently talented daughter online? I need to ask her a favor.”

“Flattery will get you... Quite a distance, actually. What do you need?” Minerva’s cheerful voice cut in.

“Nothing much. It’s just that I don’t have any US passports any more and I’d have to have to explain how I got in without a visa. Could you work your magic over the government records and insert me an identity? Preferably a sufficiently out-of-the-way place that I’m not likely to run into anyone who should know me...”

“Sheesh, ask me a tough one already... Here we go. Chad Houben, of Montgomery County, state of Maryland. Date of birth, June 5 1982, not married. Anything else? A credit card?”

“I was about to ask. Won’t need it for much, but...”

“As good as done.” She rattled off a series of numbers. “Can you memorize those, or do you need me to write you a sticky note?”

“That’ll do. Minerva, you’re a smart girl.

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“All right.”

“Be careful with the hydrogen when you refuel,” Mal said to Aris, ignoring the byplay entirely.

“I will. Look, I’m going to leave this conference running and start calling the Maenad list. I’ll check in when I’m done and then see what needs to be done for the Gate.”

“All right, Aris,” Katze said. “Good luck.”

Aris changed over the channel on her headset and opened the Maenad contact list.

Not one answer.

She tried again.

Nope... not one.

She left a message at Felton’s office and checked in with the others. Still no conclusions on what Owsen was up to.

The instructions on refueling the Gate were a hundred pages long and covered in safety warnings. Aris printed out a hardcopy and headed for the stairs.

The Explorations offices were just a floor up from the R&D level, which was where the Gate generator itself was located. Aris stepped into the darkened room

and gazed over the collection of circuits, wires, and power sources.

She'd first seen the generator in 1997, preparing to leap into pan-D space after Katze. Since then, most of the exposed wiring and circuits had been packed away into impressive steel boxes covered in now-dim flashing lights, but the Van der Graf generators and Tesla coils still stood in an irregular procession around a central staging area large enough to hold a couple trucks.

Aris flicked on the lights. The generator looked no less imposing, but somewhat better lit. Taking a seat on the edge of the stage, she started reading the refueling instructions.

'Stage 1: Return facility power. Without facility power, the loading mechanism for the metallic hydrogen will not—'

Blink. "So that's what Mal was talking about. Damn."

"Make sure the loading arm is connected to power. Run test cycle A on loading arm before attempting hydrogen insertion... 'Great.'" Aris stood and looked for the large silver box labeled 'Loading arm.'

There was indeed a large silver box labeled 'Loading arm'. On the back was a thick black cord running to the wall, connected to a panel labeled 'High Voltage Power Supply.' Aris nodded to herself and flipped the switch.

There was a cracking sound and an angry spark. Aris scowled. "Shit. This better not be broken."

After a thorough examination, she found the circuit breaker and reset all the switches. Then she tried the power again.

Another crack and no power. The breaker was tripped again. After several more repetitions, she discovered the dial on the power supply. Grumbling mightily, Aris turned the dial to zero, hit the power, and then slowly raised the input to full.

"Stupid nonintuitive human devices," she grumbled, and set about reading the next direction.

## SPIRAL BUILDING 12:30 PM

After Katze had returned home, Mal sat behind his desk for a while, looking out the west window towards the mountains. The wheels of his mind turned over the facts, looking for the hidden implications of Owsen's sudden return. This was a skill learned through long association with the Illuminati, and one of the reasons Mal was so highly prized as an asset.

Mal sighed. The Illuminati; what to do with them? The implications Mal had come up with spelled nothing but trouble on the long-term, and the last thing he needed was to be blocked by the Five during the early stages. Getting back in might prove too difficult later.

He pushed the intercom talk button. "Minerva, a moment please."

Minerva poked her head through the office door. "You rang?" Mal motioned her in.

“Min, I have decided on a course of action. I want you to cut the data links with Agharti. A hard cut, too; break the lines.”

Minerva blinked, then looked around. “Boss? Are you sure you want to,” her voice dropped to a whisper, “go rogue?”

“I’m not going rogue, Min. We’re at a delicate stage with this Owsen situation, and I don’t want to be interrupted or pulled out until we’ve solved the problem. Cutting the link will buy us time, and it’s easier to ask forgiveness than permission anyway.”

“They won’t be happy about being left in the dark.”

“I know, I know. But if they’re on top of the Vegas thing then they’ve probably rolled the dice the same way I did, and nothing comes up good there. We’ll see. In any case Min, I still want you to cut the lines. I’d rather not be saddled with some junior investigator sent out to keep a leash on me.”

“Okay, I’ll go unplug the lines right now.” Min turned around and walked towards the door. Before she opened it, she stopped and turned back to look at Mal. “I sure hope you’re right about this,” she said.

Mal chuckled. “So do I.”

### OAKLAND TRIBUNE NEWSROOM 11:45 AM

Miranda Delgado sat at her desk in the newsroom of the Oakland Tribune, attempting to translate her notes into a story, but she was getting nowhere on it. The weekend’s events had brought home just how long it had been. She could still recall the first time she’d seen Wraith in person — had it been eight years ago now? — in a Memphis restaurant. And now, Wraith was engaged. Who’d have thought it?

Delgado stared at her monitor screen, trying to find words, but only found more pensive thoughts along those lines. The next time she had to go to LA was at Easter, and she dreaded it. It wasn’t because she hated to see her family, God knew they were close, but Delgado’s mother was just so, well, traditional. Maria Delgado believed a Latina’s place was in a marriage, and the first question out of her mouth come Easter was going to be the same as it was every other time Delgado went home: “Mira, have you found a good man yet?” And if she dared challenge her mother’s question, she would get compared to Lupe. Dear Lupe, the good daughter, marrying her high school sweetheart instead of going to college and out into the world...

Lupe hadn’t had to worry about saving the world, though. Delgado decided she was just feeling melancholy because even Wraith seemed to have fit into the civilian world quite well while Delgado was still leading a double life waiting for the other shoe to drop. That work, as well as keeping a civilian identity and career, had left her with little time to pursue a social life. That problem would have to be rectified, she suspected.

She looked up at the television that the newsroom staff kept tuned on CNN for breaking news, expecting to see the financial news, or whatever inanity CNN

broadcast at this time. She wasn't expecting to see some looney suddenly going ballistic with a sword in some place she couldn't make out. A caption appeared, citing the place as the "Las Vegas Gun Show", which answered the question of...wait a second, some looney with a SWORD?

She walked closer to the television, trying to get a better glimpse at who said lunatic was. She had been analyzing intelligence for years, which let her make quick judgments, and she wasn't liking the fact that the quick judgment she was coming to right now was that the other shoe had dropped. She stared up at the television, hoping that she wouldn't recognize the face.

No such luck, of course, the general build and facial features just about matched her memory of Grand Admiral Owsen, which caused more problems than it had solved. If it had been somebody who was alive, the grouping of former Jihaddi intelligence agents could have probably handled it. But the Grand Admiral? Coming back from the dead? This was a nightmare.

She backed up to her desk to grab her cellular phone. Perhaps Shelton would have a clue what to do. Shelton had been her partner in coming up with the grouping of former Jihaddi intelligence agents — they'd called themselves the Ancient and Honorable Order as a joke, although it wasn't much of a joke at the moment. Maybe Shelton could figure out how to end this nightmare. He technically outranked her, once upon a time.

The phone rang as she picked it up. The caller id said 'Shelton'. Seems Shelton had the same idea as she did. "Delgado."

Shelton's rich baritone rang out over the line. "Hey, Delgado, I'm sorry to bother you at work, but have you seen the news lately?"

"Yeah. Actually I was just about to call you."

He laughed, but quickly turned somber again. "Actually, I was wondering if you had any idea how to handle this one?"

Delgado slid back in her seat, looking around. Most of the newsroom seemed interested in the television, and there was nobody in range to overhear. "No clue. No clue at all."

Shelton sighed at the other end of the phone. "Same here. You think we ought to get Curtis in on this?"

Delgado frowned. Curtis was the third person who'd helped create the Order back when he and his whole JAO used pseudonyms. But since the disbandment, he'd asked to simply be called Curtis, his civilian surname. "Probably not," she said. "Curtis is simply going to remind us that this mess doesn't concern the Dobes, and he's right."

"Damn. I was hoping he'd have some idea of what to do."

"We should start at the source. Who do we have down there?"

There was the sound of clacking keys as Shelton typed something on the other end. "McAllister and Youngman, it looks like. McAllister actually works for the Vegas cops, it looks like."



“Good. Can we trust their discretion?”

“I think so. At least McAllister. I don’t know how good Youngman’s going to be for this problem.”

“Alright. It will have to do for the moment.” Delgado frowned. “It’s funny, really, Wraith was worried about something coming down the pipes this weekend. Wonder if this is what she had in mind?”

She caught the confused tone in Shelton’s voice. “Who’s Wraith?”

“Brenner. Alpha.”

“You’re still in touch with Brenner? Gee.”

“Yeah, we’re old friends. It’s not important, though, I was just musing.”

“I’m just worried, Delgado. I don’t know if we can handle this.”

“I don’t know if we can either, but we’ve got to try. Because if we don’t...”

Shelton sighed. “I know. If we don’t try, we could lose everything we’ve built up since we disbanded. But it doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“I don’t like it either, Shelton, but we don’t really have a choice in the matter. I guess, get McAllister to see what he can do, and we’ll just keep watching to see what happens. Maybe this was an accident.”

“Yeah. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Adios.” Delgado hung up the phone and looked around the newsroom, her story temporarily forgotten. She stared at the phone and then dialed a set of numbers memorized from dialing them often, and was surprised to be immediately dropped to voicemail.

She hung up the phone without actually leaving a voicemail. After all, what could Wraith do to help in this situation?

**LAS VEGAS, NEVADA**  
**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10, 2004**  
**2:13 AM**

Dee rolled over and fell off of the narrow hotel bed, onto the floor. She cursed slightly, then realized that hurt her head... then realized she had run to the bathroom. She must’ve been drinking. Yeah, waking up enough to remember, she had. Four drinks; need to remember that she thought as she cleaned up and went back to bed. She lay in place for a while before remembering something and calling up a message client seldom used in the last few years.

“ATTN: Intel,” she wrote. “Dee Greist here at Las Vegas, in town for the gun show. Some fuckstick trashed the place, any ID? Photos enclosed.” She attached a couple of the images she’d taken of the maniac with the sword and posted it through the JihadLinker feature before trying to fall back asleep.

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## ***10: Friday Night Maenad Massacre***

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AUSTIN, TEXAS  
FRIDAY, MARCH 12, 2004  
10:13 PM

Through the nighttime streets of Austin a werewolf stalked.

Well, not exactly a werewolf anyway. The tall, rangy guy with close-cropped blond hair didn't think of himself as a werewolf, but when you change from human to an inhuman creature with some distinct lupine features at the drop of a hat, you might as well consider yourself a werewolf.

This particular not-a-werewolf-really was known by his old friends as J-Rock. He'd spent the better part of the previous decade fighting the good fight with his friends in the Jihad to Destroy Barney. When the Jihad went bust in '99, J-Rock was left at loose ends. Having nothing better to do with his time, he went back to his home in urban Texas, picked up a smallish job and lived off the proceeds of a stipend set up for retired Jihaddi.

He was coming home from a concert, where a couple of his mundane friends had been opening for one damn numetal band or another — J-Rock never could remember which numetal band was supposed to be which — and was in the process of shortcutting through the park near his apartment when he noticed that a man in a black coat was following him.

J-Rock sighed, as he prepared to face his stalker. This happened at least a couple of times a year - muggers thinking they found an easy target got the mortal shit beaten out of them by an angry Maenad. The cops had no idea who was doing it, but since the incidents always involved lowlifes they tended to ignore the cases where a mugger got shoved up a drainpipe. J-Rock figured that this wasn't breaking cover per se, but a necessity for survival. Besides, it wasn't even sporting to damage normals; too much like killing spongin.

He had turned halfway, not bothering to shift into his redcap form, when the stalker spoke in a low, menacing but damnably *familiar* voice that froze J-Rock in his tracks.

"Hello, Slider," said the stalker, "did you miss me?"

J-Rock's instincts screamed out, breaking the trance just in the nick of time. He lunged sideways, hitting the asphalt bare tenths of a second before the black sword swung through the space where his neck had been. J-Rock rolled and came up in a fighting stance, his shape changing from human to Maenad instantly.

"I know I missed you," mused the stalker, contemplating the Maenad standing in front of him. "Just now, in fact. But even before then, oh yes. Yes indeed. I missed you."

J-Rock growled, this babbling stranger had just called him by his Maenad name - one he hadn't used in almost five years - tried to kill him, and now was taunting him! "Who the hell are you?" he snapped.

Disappointment laced the stranger's voice. "Oh, you don't recognize me," he noted, "I suppose that's understandable, it's been a long time, and the visibility here is poor. Let me... illuminate things for you then."

As he said it, the stranger's sword hand flared with violet-white light, bringing his face into relief. For the second time that night, J-Rock felt himself freeze, rooted to the spot, as he gazed into the pleasant, cheery face of Tilden Owsen.

"Ow-*Owsen*?" he stammered, unsure if this was real or some sort of strange hallucination. "You.. you're supposed to be..."

"Dead?" Owsen said cheerfully. "Oh, I was. For years and years. Blind, deaf, mute, floating in darkness, unable to do anything." Owsen grinned disturbingly. "All I had for comfort was the thought that my fellow Maenads would come and rescue me. Or that the Holy Albino would come for me."

Owsen's grin widened and his eyes brightened, making J-Rock twitch nervously. "Of course," he went on, his cheerful tone becoming more manic with each word, "that turned out to be nothing more than a lie, didn't it? You went along well enough without me, and Feral Jackson never showed even the slightest interest in my whereabouts, did he? No, poor old Owsen got to be locked in limbo for the rest of eternity and nobody cared. Poor, poor Owsen. Well, somebody took pity on poor Owsen, and he let me out. And now..." Owsen raised his sword, the light coming from his hand glowing so bright that J-Rock was forced to squint.

"Now, I have the chance to get little of my own BACK!" Owsen screamed the

last word, swinging his sword down towards J-Rock in a viscous overhand arc. The blade never touched J-Rock, but the arc of violet light streaking from the tip did, throwing the Maenad back ten yards to crash into a tree. The impact smashed the tree's trunk and knocked the wind out of J-Rock's lungs. As the tree fell backwards behind him, J-Rock fell to his knees coughing. Owsen bellowed unintelligibly and charged, waving his sword out in front of him like a man who meant to cut something.

J-Rock, still winded by the first blow, barely managed to duck the first swing. Unsheathing his claws, he parried the followup strikes. "Owsen," he panted, trying to stop this before somebody got hurt, "it wasn't like that—"

"YOU LEFT ME TO ROT!" Owsen roared, eyes blazing. "I SPENT TWO YEARS IN THAT HELL, AND YOU FORGOT COMPLETELY ABOUT ME! YOU SUPPLANTED ME! *ME! DESTROYERS AND URSURPERS!*" He pressed the attack, forcing J-Rock back with each strike. Owsen's black sword sparked when it hit J-Rock's claws (And where, J-Rock wondered, did he get a sword that would stand up to Owsenite?) as the pair battled their way across the park.

Sensing an opening, J-Rock tangled Owsen's blade in the claws on his left hand, then wrenched it towards him. Off balance, Owsen stumbled. J-Rock took the opportunity to swipe his right hand across his opponent's upper chest. The strike left long bloody furrows in Owsen's flesh.

For his part, Owsen only winced and pulled back. Fingering the gashes, he grunted and looked up at J-Rock.

"First blood," he smirked. J-Rock's eyes widened as the light in Owsen's hand flared again and the wounds repaired themselves, leaving only smooth skin showing through the tears in his clothing. "Not bad. But I've got better!" He charged at J-Rock, who prepared to block Owsen's sword once again...

...only to get Owsen's boot planted square in his face. J-Rock could feel his nose break under the blow as he tumbled backwards. Out of fighting position and slightly stunned, he couldn't move fast enough as Owsen swung his blade in another overhand strike, letting the light lash out and catch the Maenad in the side.

J-Rock flew through the air, almost knocked completely cold by the last hit. He landed painfully in the sandpit of a playground. He lay there for what seemed like an agonizingly long time, weakly coughing blood (A part of J-Rock's mind noted that he'd broken more than he'd originally thought.) as Owsen walked, almost casually, towards him. Mustering the last fragments of his willpower, J-Rock hauled himself to his feet and approximated a fighting stance.

"Oh very good," mocked Owsen. "The very picture of a servant of the Holy Albino. Bloodied but unbowed, fighting until the bitter end!"

"Shut up," J-Rock mumbled.

"Must do you good, knowing that you're about to die in the service of a lie."

"Shut. Up."

“He won’t save you, you know. He didn’t save me, the prophesied one, so why should he bother with you?”

“SHUT UP!” J-Rock screamed, “*SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP!!!*” He lunged at Owsen, claws out and ready to rip this damnably grinning imposter of his old friend, this twisted homunculus, this *fake* into little fragments. Owsen dodged the blow, stepped cleanly to one side, and brought his sword down on J-Rock’s left arm. The blade passed through the Maenad’s toughened flesh as if through air, neatly severing J-Rock’s left hand just above the wrist.

J-Rock screamed again, this time a wordless sound combining rage and pain, and collapsed on the ground clutching the stump of his arm. The pain and the damage caused by the previous injuries caused his concentration to slip and he reverted to human form, the transformation shooting new waves of pain through his body and rendering him almost comatose from the shock. Owsen grabbed J-Rock by the hair and pulled him roughly to a kneeling position.

Owsen stared at the broken Maenad with the same distant cheerfulness he had started the battle with. J-Rock, battered and bleeding on the edge of consciousness, looked back at Owsen, eyes barely focused.

“You should thank me, you know,” Owsen mused.

Even in his condition, J-Rock’s face flickered with utter incomprehension. He managed to croak out “...why?”

Owsen’s stance shifted, readying his blade for the coup de grace. “Because I am the Herald of the Scourge, and now you won’t live to see it.” Owsen lunged, driving his sword through J-Rock’s collarbone down into his chest. The Maenad convulsed for a second, then slumped. Owsen yanked the blade out of his opponent’s body, carefully wiped it clean, then sheathed it. He strolled away from the corpse, whistling nonchalantly as he went looking for his next target.

“You really should have thanked me,” he called over his shoulder.

**LAS VEGAS, NEVADA**  
**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10, 2004**  
**11:47 AM**

“Ugh, good god... what happened to my head?” Dee groaned and quickly downed the Advil and glass of water some thoughtful person had set on the end table to the left of her hotel bed before flopping back down. Really, a rhetorical question... she remembered exactly what happened, of course. As she waited for the pounding in her head to ease off and the world to stop being so utterly wretched, she punched up the internet to check for news. Her arm computer had automatically found several wireless networks to tap into and combined the bandwidth, so it was only a matter of a few seconds to find that the gun expo had been canceled. No fatalities, miraculously, though there were quite a few people hospitalized... both because of the nutball and because of people accidentally shooting each other. Damo must’ve woken up early and gone to pack up the rest of the stuff.

“Shower,” she muttered before sliding off the bed and getting to her feet. “Shower, then food.”

It was a couple hours later, and she and Damocles were in the shop van heading back towards Athena Heavy Industries, in Arizona. They’d been more or less silent for the last half hour, Dee curled up in the passenger seat and Damo driving down I-93.

“That was pretty much your first time with that sort of thing, wasn’t it.” Neither of them had moved, and Damo said that in an even tone of voice.

“Yeah... pretty much.”

“It gets better, in a way.”

“That’s horrible!”

“Yeah, probably. At least no one died this time.” There was silence for another few minutes.

“I sent a request for info through the JihadLinker last night... figured that they’d know if anyone did, especially with as weird as this was. Still no reply.”

“Patience. There’s probably not too many people with working Linkers anymore, and they probably don’t check too often.

“Yeah, I guess... it’s probably unrelated anyway.”

**SPIRAL BUILDING  
DENVER, COLORADO  
SATURDAY, MARCH 13, 2004  
7:50 AM**

Despite Owsen’s sudden reappearance on Tuesday, the rest of the week had proceeded without incident. That alone was enough to put Mal’s nerves on edge. So far Owsen hadn’t made any attempt to contact the Jihad; he hadn’t been seen near the old watch stations or the site of the TRES base, and the rudimentary reestablishment of the JihadLinker network hadn’t seen any sign of Owsen’s Linker signature. After his performance in Vegas, Owsen had simply faded out of sight. Easy jokes about Vegas and obscurity aside, for somebody as naturally flashy as Owsen to vanish like that worried Mal, and he had spent the last week waiting for the other shoe to drop.

When Minerva came in carrying the newspaper, he knew from the expression on her face that the shoe had finally dropped.

“Take a look at this,” Minerva thwapped the newspaper down unceremoniously on Mal’s desk. “Page 6.”

Mal turned the page and quickly found the article Minerva was referring to. The headline said it all: “Mystery slaying in Austin leaves police baffled.” The content was par for the course, part AP wire report, part local reporter trying to spice up a story. Mal scanned the lead for details as to where Owsen fit in with the murder. His eyes came down to a name he hadn’t seen in a number of years, the civilian identity of one of the oldest Jihaddi at the time of the stand-down.

“J-Rock?” Mal murmured, eyes going wide. He looked up at Minerva, who nodded grimly.

“I raided the police database after I read that,” she said. “There’s no doubt about it, that is... was J-Rock.”

“Shit,” said Mal, leaning back in his chair. “Shit shit *shit*.”

“At least now we know what Owsen’s up to.” Minerva offered.

## HOUSTON, TEXAS 9:00 PM

Owsen stood at the back door to the house and contemplated his options. Should he go in subtle, like a thief in the night, or should he be loud and cause lots of damage? Decisions, decisions. Owsen pondered, then kicked in the back door with enough force to shatter the lock, the doorknob and break the door clean off the hinges. “Honey, I’m hooome!” he called.

Subtlety, Owsen thought wryly to himself, is highly overrated.

The inside of the house was dark and quiet. Owsen stalked through the kitchen and towards the master bedroom. He was puzzled; the amount of noise he’d made coming in should have awakened somebody. Hell, the sound of the door breaking should’ve had every neighbor for three blocks calling the police. So where was BlackBlood?

Owsen threw open the door to the master bedroom, only to find it empty. A quick check of the adjoining rooms indicated that the place was unoccupied. Stopping for a second in the living room, Owsen noticed a picture hanging over the fireplace. On closer inspection, it was a photo of the TRES and Doberman command staff during a meeting. From the look of things, it was taken before the X’hirjq invasion.

So, this was BlackBlood’s house, but the Maenad in question wasn’t in. Owsen’s rage, already simmering on low during the search, finally built to a boil as his frustration increased. Roaring, Owsen drew his sword and proceeded to rip apart everything in his path. Fragments of house and furniture flew everywhere as Owsen unleashed his frustrations.

Finally, the faint sound of approaching sirens pierced the red veil of rage that covered Owsen’s mind. He stopped in mid-demolish, listening to the sirens for a few seconds. Realizing that he’d overstayed his welcome, Owsen sheathed his sword and fled the house.

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## ***11: Catching Up With The News***

NEW YORK CITY  
TUESDAY, MARCH 9, 2004  
9:00 PM

It had been something of a long day for KillJoy... it turns out that it wasn't all that easy to turn over half of one's bank account to a charity, plus the day before some press people had been asking him about all sorts of things... plans to come back to the WWF and things like that. He stayed in character for all of that, of course, and said that he'd be watching everything and would be back when he thought that there were other people who were his equal. Of course that wasn't true; he barely watched TV at all and even then not much besides the news.

The dinner that had been provided at the meeting had been large, even for someone who ate as much as he did, and he sat in the hotel room that had been provided for him and got ready to go to bed early. He pushed the button on the TV first though, and the news came on.

"... and in other news today, an unknown man attacked crowds at a Las Vegas gun expo with, according to reports, a sword. The number of peop..." he turned the TV back off as soon as he saw the picture of who it was. KillJoy then casually walked over to the end-table by his bed and picked up his cellphone, dialing the number of the lady who was in charge of his travel while he was with the WWF.



“Hi, Jessie? I need a flight to Denver as soon as possible... yeah, I'd like this off-record. Thanks, the red-eye would be perfect... sorry to bother you this late. Thanks again.” He hung up, and started packing the meager amount of belongings he'd brought with him.

It was quite obvious to anyone looking at him wedged in the seat for the flight out that airliners were never intended for people of KillJoy's size. Nevertheless, he bore the flight without complaint. He'd slept in a cheap motel for a few hours afterwards, paid in cash. He'd ended up pulling a lot of money out of his bank account, actually... the kinds of things he was going to be buying would *not* be approved of by nearly anyone.

The first though, was a truck. The one he found was an '80s Chevy, though he didn't bother to look into things even that far. There was more than a bit of body rust, but that really didn't matter. It ran, and ran well, plus the owner had been an avid off-roader so the truck had many modifications to that end. The owner was sort of annoyed at waking up that early in the morning, but being paid his asking price in cash allayed that. He even pretended to not recognize KillJoy, though the trailer the man was living in did mark him as likely to be a wrestling fan.

Next were the remainder of the normal supplies; a heavy 4-wheeled cart, a water carrier, an independent air supply, a pair of heavy duty drills, flashlights, and “food” in the form of a couple boxes of concentrated energy bars. This seemingly random assortment of gear went into the bed of the pickup truck, and KillJoy roared out of the city, heading west.

London Mines, Colorado was a ghost town, about an hour south-west from Denver. Opened in 1861 during the gold rush, it was now completely empty, nothing but a scattering of deserted buildings, thrown together out of rough planks. KillJoy pulled up to one of the buildings in particular, sitting over the main shaft. He got out of the truck and stood in the fierce wind for a moment before walking towards the building. It was less windy inside, but not much... over the years, there had been many gaps made in the wooden walls and obviously no one to repair them. The floorboards creaked ominously beneath his weight before he was onto bare rock.

The entrance to the mine was easy to find, and finally out of the wind. KJ clicked on the flashlight every so often as he strode through the inky darkness of the mine shaft, but he could see no sign that anyone had ventured this far down inside. Subtle markers he had left years before told him this; a seemingly accidental scuff here and there on the main path standing out from where he'd cleaned his tracks more than four years ago. Finally, he found what he'd come for; a side-shaft that was blocked off by a series of large boulders, deep in the mine after an uncounted number of twists and turns. Each of them probably weighed in the neighborhood of 200 pounds, far more than any casual visitor would deal with even if there had been any. KillJoy walked up to them and started moving them, grunting with the exertion of

moving almost a ton of rock in a matter of minutes. Eventually though, he got to what he'd come for. He opened the large duffle bag and turned on the flashlight to check.

The beam of light played off of a smooth ceramic breastplate painted in camouflage. TRES-issue body armor, with the light blue and forest green highlights marking it as Omega squad. Pulling the armor out he checked his issue X-Rifle, which he probably wasn't supposed to have. It was loaded of course, and even had a pair of spare magazines, but there was no charge in them, the electricity long used up to keep the hydrogen fuel cooled. The grenade magazine *was* loaded, with a quartet of high explosive armor piercing rounds, but there had been no chance of sneaking any others out. Of course, there was the general issue JihadLinker, but it had no more charge than the plasma magazines for the rifle. Of more immediate use were the conventional firearms, both a pair of the large issue Heckler and Koch sidearms and a pair of semiautomatic shotguns cut down until they were a foot and a half long; oversized pistols to someone strong enough. The boxes of ammo for both of those were still sealed, and various other lesser tools were there as well. He grunted as if satisfied and examined the axe leaning against the wall of the tunnel. A full sized fire axe, with an axehead on one side and a pick on the other and a steel haft, the edge seemed to be unaffected by the storage.

KillJoy grunted again and zipped up the duffle bag before setting the axe on top of it and dragging it all back out into the sunlight, heedless of the fact that the path through the mine wasn't obscured any more as he wouldn't be using it again. He put the bag in the back of the truck with the axe underneath it, and drove off to his next stop.

"Is it too late to get something to eat? I'm starving." KillJoy was at the Buford Saloon, pretty much a small, dingy bar. Not that he was here for the food or ambience.

"Nah, I can do that. Whaddya need?" The guy behind the bar was more than a bit on the side of obese, and was wearing a flannel jacket over a grey shirt. A shaggy grey beard covered his face, and he was wearing a faded black baseball cap. He didn't seem to take any note of the giant who had walked into his bar as anyone special.

"Two of the half-pound burgers, fries, and a coke."

"Shit, you are hungry... gimme a bit on that." The man started up the grill and got to work as KillJoy glanced around the bar. It was completely empty other than the two of them.

"You Eddie?" The man glanced back.

"I know you? Big bastard like you I'd remember."

"Are you?" There was a slight edge in KillJoy's tone, and Eddie chose to not push things.

"Yeah, that's me... why?" he replied, a little nervously.

"I need some stuff from you."

"Who the hell are you, feds? Cops? You have to tell me if you are, you know, it's

entrapment if you lie about that.”

“Templi Resurgentes Equites Synarchici. Omega.” Eddie froze where he stood, and KillJoy helpfully made flipping motions with his hand to remind him of the burgers.

“I thought all you fuckers retired,” he commented after a few moments of silence aside from the sound of sizzling meat.

“Some more than others. Or are you unable to get fireworks anymore?”

“Do you have any bonafides?”

“I’ve got an X-Rifle in the truck, plus a couple mags and issue body armor in my size. That work?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I can still get stuff,” he replied as he set a pair of plates on the table in front of KillJoy. KJ quickly got to work on the food as Eddie cleaned up. “What do you need?”

“M118 Composition 4 blocks. I need two cases; 40 of them, and don’t tell me you can’t get a hold of them. Also, a bunch of commercial-grade stuff... blasting gelatin or the like, around 200 pounds. Blasting caps too.” He started devouring his second burger.

“Holy shit. I’m not even going to ask what for... you guys don’t have a line of credit anymore you know, even if you were good backers.” KillJoy pulled out the wad of money he hadn’t spent and set it on the counter as he ate, a fat sheaf of hundred dollar bills.

“Two more of those when you deliver.”

“Two days.”

“Of course. See you then.”

**OUTSIDE BLANCA MOUNTAIN  
COSTILLA COUNTY, COLORADO  
FRIDAY, MARCH 12, 2004  
1:00 PM**

The pickup truck was starting to make funny noises, which maybe was why the owner had sold it in the first place. It had been a drive of quite a few miles, over broken mountainous terrain, so it was understandable. And, in the end, it didn’t matter at all. KillJoy stopped the truck and got out, unpacking the drill from the back. It was a hard couple hours of work making a line of holes in seemingly arbitrary locations, but eventually it was done. He carefully filled the holes with charges of blasting gelatin and set up blasting caps and fuses for the whole system... before finally lighting the sucker off at around 4pm.

When they were built, it would have been nearly impossible to get into any of the access tunnels to the Mt. Blanca stronghold of VRDET. Things changed though, when much of the surrounding area was collapsed to seal the base. In this particular instance, there was a slope near one of the tunnels, a ravine actually, with much of the rock covering protecting the tunnel having been eroded. The charges exploded

and separated that chunk of the landscape, sending yet more rock and dirt sliding downhill. Gravity cleared the debris out of the way more efficiently than bulldozers would have.

Of course, that was nowhere near enough to get close to the tunnel. It would take at least three more sets of charges. Even before the landslide from the first blast had stopped, KillJoy was working on boring the next set of holes.

### INSIDE BLANCA MOUNTAIN

Aris put down the instructions and stared at the half-repaired fuel cycler. "Damn," she muttered. "So much broken stuff, so little of it actually my fault."

The diagnostics, at least, were complete. She didn't need to putter around in the computer any longer to determine what the problem was. She just needed to rebalance the loading chute and adjust the pin widths, and reconnect three circuit boards. It wouldn't take very long, but she'd been working all day and her head hurt.

"Shower first, I think," she said. "Then finish this."

She'd gotten back into the habit of talking to herself, too.

"Warning," the base computer announced.

That startled her. "What?"

"Warning," the computer repeated in the inflectionless female voice that was all the backup AI could handle. "Seismic activity detected just offsite of Blanca Mountain."

Aris scowled. "Okay, what flavor of seismic activity? Do you mean explosions?"

"Explosions detected."

"Great." Aris headed to the stairs, taking the steps two at a time until she reached her office. "Show me," she said, plopping down in her chair and tweaking her monitor.

The monitor displayed a graphic interpretation of the blast, its force, and its epicenter. The results didn't make Aris any happier. "That's... right above the garage access tunnel, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Someone's trying to break in."

The computer didn't answer.

"Are there video cameras in that tunnel?"

"Confirmed. Three cameras operable."

"What's the status?"

"Standby status."

"Okay, bring them to active. Hey, what security did Mal leave down there?"

"Maximum security systems active."

"Great." Aris shook her head. "Well, whatever it is, hopefully it'll convince our friend to give up."

**SATURDAY, MARCH 13, 2004**  
**2:00 AM**

It had been quite a bit of work to crack open the access tunnel, even with most of the work being done by high explosives. The last of the blasting gelatin was setup to collapse the tunnel behind him. Now, wearing his body armor and KillJoy made ready to head down the tunnel. Most of the weaponry and gear was on the heavy duty 4-wheeled cart pulled behind him, only the pistols and shotguns being in holsters attached to his armor. This was fortunate, as all the rest would have been rather bulky. But it would have been well into the realms of the absurd to carry all of his supplies in a backpack, considering that he not only had enough powerbars for 3-4 days, 5 gallons of drinking water and a 100 cubic foot capacity air tank, but also 80 pounds of C4 plastic explosive, in 2 pound blocks.

Of course there would be security systems, thus the preparation. The initial hole in the side of the tunnel seemed to have knocked out a few cameras and things around it, but there hadn't seemed to be much else in that section of tunnel. KillJoy was being careful to watch for more though as he unrolled the fuse for the charges at the entrance, but it seemed to be a harmless section. He lit the fuse and a matter of a few seconds later there was a crump of the explosion, his ears popping from both the explosion and the rock filling in that part of the tunnel. Continuing to watch for traps, he pulled his cart through the tunnel. There was plenty of room, as it was around ten feet diameter with a flat floor. A slight bend in the tunnel, probably to go around some terrain feature, and he came to a blast door. Solid steel and completely unmarred by the passage of time, it must have been several inches thick and looked like it would be impassable. After knocking on it a few times with his fist and listening to the reverberations, he went back to the cart and started precisely packing explosive on it.

“Security systems engaged.”

Aris put down the welding torch and frowned. “What security systems?”

“Hangar tunnel security systems engaged.”

Aris stood, brushed her hands off on her lab coat, and headed up to her office. “What’s happening?”

A display of the hangar tunnel came up, with a big blinking red box labeled “1”. “Blast Door 34 Closed,” flashed a warning right underneath it.

“Any chance I can see what countermeasures are in that big red box?”

“Classified,” the computer said.

Aris spelled out her name, rank, and personal code. No dice.

“Thanks, Mal,” she grumbled. “How many blast doors are there?”

“70,” the computer answered.

Aris blinked a couple times. “So there are 36 more in between this guy and us?”

“Affirmative.”

“Fine. Tell me if he gets through this one.”

Striding through the smoke and debris thrown up by the explosion, KillJoy immediately smelled something beyond the normal acrid fumes from the explosive. Gas poured out from hidden ports on the ceiling; tear gas he would have realized if he were affected by it or if he cared.

“Attention intruder,” came a synthesized voice from a hidden speaker. “Unauthorized entry is prohibited. Further incursion will be met with deadly force, up to and including nerve agents. This is your final warning.” KillJoy kept striding forwards as the voice spoke, ignoring it and the gas. There was a sharp corner, and then an electrical whirring sound. The tunnel after the next bend had several cylindrical shapes pop out of the ceiling and walls; his first shotgun slug impacted one before it had completely extended and made it freeze there, but the others immediately started shooting.

Strobing muzzle flashes lit the tunnel for the first time in years, a deafening cacophony as machinegun fire raked the area. KillJoy stood his ground, ignoring the bullets whining past or smacking divots into the concrete tunnel around him as he fired his left hand shotgun now, hitting a turret in the joint between the body and gun. The volume of bullets was reduced but tracking closer, now rounds actually impacting KillJoy himself, first one in the shoulder and another in the right leg and several in his abdomen. None penetrated the armor and none prevented his next shot, eliminating the targeting sensor on the next turret. The final turret managed to pound five more rounds into his torso armor before both guns vomited lead at it and silenced it.

The first of the shotgun shells bounced off of the concrete floor of the tunnel at about the same instant the final turret was silenced and the others followed shortly, the whole firefight having taken less than a second. The speaker ironically gave another warning, this one no more useful than the last.

“Attention intruder. Deadly force has been authorized and VX is now being released. Have a nice day.” More gas was vented out of ceiling ports as KillJoy fed spare shells into his guns and walked down the tunnel, oblivious to excessive amounts of one of the most deadly chemical weapons invented by man filling the tunnel.

Aris stripped off the heavy chemical protection gloves and adjusted her monitor. “He’s made it through another door?”

“Affirmative.”

“Do we have any camera footage yet?”

“Affirmative.”

Aris sighed. “Display camera footage.”

A blurry few seconds of video played. Aris watched it a few times, then froze a frame and ran enhancement. “Well, at least it’s not Owsen. Run this face through the entire Jihad and look for a match, starting with VRDET and then TRES, the Doberman Empire, and all the others in order of greatest enrollment at time of

disbandment.”

Aris put her feet up on the desk and rubbed her eyes as the computer fed through the data. After a minute, she sincerely wished Minerva was still onsite.

“Match found.”

“Whozit?”

“Lieutenant KillJoy, TRES Corps, Omega Squadron.”

“One of Felton’s.” Aris stared at the tunnel display and the big blinking red box. “He’d probably be mad if I let this guy die. Can I turn off the intrusion countermeasures from here?”

“Negative.”

“Why not?”

“Countermeasures cannot be disrupted from this workstation.”

“Can they be turned off at ALL?”

“Negative.”

Aris sighed. “Dammit. I’m going to finish loading the caustic and see if the Gate turns on. How many more doors does this guy have to break through?”

“Five.”

“He should be here by this evening, then. Right. I’ll tell Mal.”

Hours passed. How many were unimportant, really; the only breaks in the tedium being every hundred yards or so when he came to another blast door and had to blow it open. He had come to a section that was literally laced with claymores, their tripwires crisscrossing the area in an impassable maze. After pausing to eat a couple of the wretched tasting energy bars and drinking some water, he set about disarming them. All of them in fact, placing the dozen plastic covered fragmentation mines on the cart as well.

It was another right angle bend before the next blast door, obviously more to make things harder to break in than anything else. Like so many times before he set the charges and backed off to a safe distance of 20 yards before lighting it off. A CLANG and the door had a rectangular hole blasted out of it. He slipped the mirrored goggles he always wore down over his eyes for no reason he knew and strode through the hole.

A burst of flames washed over him, not just flames but napalm. He very quickly ducked backwards through the hole and threw his shotguns back away from him but a further twist in the plans happened when a heavy machinegun turret, much large caliber than the previous ones, opened up on him. The thumb-sized bullets added insult to injury by punching through his body armor in several places... some of them finally being stopped by his unnaturally tough skin, but two continuing on, one into his left lung.

Very concerned with all of this, KillJoy propelled himself around on the ground to try to smother the jellied petroleum flames coating his body, eventually succeeding. Grumbling, he got up and dusted himself off, poking a finger in the holes in his body armor. His blood was dissolving the ceramic slightly around the edges of

the holes, but both were already sealed over. He coughed a few times, spitting out some gobs of blood and pieces of bullet fragment, already starting to dissolve. He coughed again to clear the last of the blood and retrieved the shotguns, before taking the X-Rifle off of the cart and racking a grenade into the action...



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## ***12: Stirrings In The Shadows***

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON  
SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2004  
4:30 AM

The Undisclosed Location was one of who knew how many smoky little hole-in-the-wall bars scattered around the greater Seattle area. The bar was reasonably well-appointed, keeping with the owner's desire to allow the patrons to have a drink without anybody bothering them. It also allowed the patrons to conduct business that might not go over as well in the harsh light of day, or the overly homey lighting of the upscale, yuppified bars elsewhere in the city.

The owner was, in fact, concluding a bit of business just along those lines when the early-morning hum of activity was interrupted. A man dressed in a razor-creased black suit - looking far too sharp and confident for four-thirty on a Sunday morning - stepped through the front door and into the glare of the pinlight which illuminated the Location's only well-lit area. The bar's owner looked over the suit and came to a certain conclusion.

"Guys," he said, turning back to his guests, "we're going to have to finish this later. I think," he added, "I have a visitor." The two men nodded and got up. As soon as they passed through the light and out of the bar, the suit turned around from his spot at the bar and, smiling like he was in love with the world, ambled up to the

owner's table.

The man in the suit slid into the chair and locked eyes with his quarry for a brief second. "Hello, Mr. Yearnshaw."

The man sitting opposite him kept his face carefully neutral as he replied, "No."

"Associates of mine asked me to contact you," the suit continued, blithely ignoring the denial. "I believe you were... formerly acquainted? They have a job for you."

Yearnshaw shook his head. "War's over," he muttered.

"The job is something they feel you are... *uniquely* qualified for, given your particular talents and past." The suit flashed a quick smile as he said it, noting the sudden glimpse of irritation in his target's eyes.

"What is it about Illumination," growled Yearnshaw, "that affects the ears so you people can't hear things like 'no' or 'get the hell out, you son of a bitch' anymore?" He sighed. "This is about Las Vegas?" he inquired.

The suit nodded, his smile slightly strained after Yearnshaw's outburst. "Good, you can still keep yourself informed. This is exactly why my... associates requested I contact you." The suit's smile vanished again. "And please, this isn't a place for language like that."

Yearnshaw suppressed a smirk. The suit and his people never liked it when he used the 'T' word in a public place. "The answer's still no."

"My associates are offering compensation," the suit pressed, "compensation similar to that which you received for your previous service." He pulled a PDA out of his coat pocket and placed it on the table in front of Yearnshaw. "Quite handsome compensation really, for the scale of the service my associates need performed."

Yearnshaw picked up the PDA and browsed through the files stored there. The "compensation" was indeed quite handsome, money and technology that wasn't available to most militaries, much less on the street. He studied the information on the device for several minutes, half of which he spent trying to make the suit sweat.

**Max** Yearnshaw sent on his communications implant, **you get all this?**

**It appears viable,** replied Yearnshaw's AI companion, **and it is highly probable that it would have at least one immediate benefit.**

**I thought so.** Yearnshaw grumbled mentally, keeping his thoughts hidden behind a mask of blank concentration. **These bastards always did know where to come at a person.**

Yearnshaw put the PDA back on the table and slid it over to the suit, who was still waiting expectantly for an answer. "This could be worth my time after all," he said. "Just what is it that the Five want?"

The suit twitched slightly as Yearnshaw invoked the name of the true rulers of the planet, and in doing so chalked up another score on his imperturbable facade. "It's a small thing, really," the suit replied smoothly. "My associates would like you to contact a former colleague of yours. He has closed their normal channels of communication, and they wish to press the issue." The suit picked up the PDA, twiddled the controls briefly, then set it back on the table. Yearnshaw picked it up again to find,

instead of columns of text on the display, a single still picture of a bearded man.

Yearnshaw goggled at the sight for an instant, then let out a short bark of laughter. “Him?” he demanded, “You’ve actually lost contact with him?” He handed the PDA back to the suit, who swiftly pocketed it. “Yeah, sure. I’ll do it.”

The suit nodded and stood up. “The issue is somewhat... time sensitive,” he said. “My associates will want a report within a week.” And without another word, he turned on his heel and strode out of the bar.

Yearnshaw sat there for a few minutes, sipping his beer and apparently lost in thought. **Is Stack still at Spiral, Max?** Yearnshaw inquired of his AI. **I’m going to need some updated intel.**

**Ms. Sewell is still employed by the Spiral Corporation, Max acknowledged, though she may be reluctant to provide any data.**

**Of course she’ll be reluctant, but she’ll still come through. Get in touch with her.** Yearnshaw ordered as he went back to the bar for a fresh pint and to tell the bartender to keep people from bothering him, the beginnings of his plan already starting to gather.

**OAKLAND TRIBUNE NEWSROOM  
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA  
SATURDAY, MARCH 13, 2004  
2:00 PM**

Miranda Delgado returned to her desk, throwing her notebook the last few inches onto her blotter and sighed. She hated her job. Well, that wasn’t quite true, she didn’t hate the job, per se, it’s just that she hated the drudgery of covering grand openings and other events of that nature. Even getting to interview the former California governor turned mayor of Oakland, a normally interesting and delightful task, had seemed like simple drudgery today.

Delgado wondered if the events of Tuesday had contributed to this latest round of ‘I hate my job’. It was true, being a newspaper reporter was nowhere near as interesting or fun as being a Jihad intelligence officer had been, but it paid the bills. And, thankfully, her editor was pretty good when Delgado called randomly and said, “I won’t be in this afternoon; I’m chasing a lead.” as long as she made her assigned deadlines. This suited Delgado perfectly, because it allowed her the freedom to react to crises that needed the attention of the Ancient and Honorable Order.

She looked back down at her notebook and the rest of her workspace. She wasn’t sure how she was going to balance this latest crisis with her job. Shelton was flying in, supposedly for a sudden business trip, but Delgado suspected that was simply Shelton trying to cover his tracks. His wife didn’t know about his Jihad career, and while Delgado approved of the secrecy, it made juggling this crisis that much harder.

She sighed again and sat down. To relax herself, she decided to check the AP wire for any interesting stories, and so she cleared the screen saver and sat down to poke.

Usually, after poking at some of those stories, it helped her clear her head enough to be able to write even the most boring of stories. It was a comfort that, while the world was falling apart at the seams, it was doing it under its own power, and not that of B'harne and the Lyrans.

She poked through the feed. It was the usual assortment of crime, politics, and human interest stories she had come to expect. It made Delgado feel somewhat better that the world was still as predictable as ever. She scrolled through the list of stories when one jumped out at her — “Mystery slaying in Austin baffles police”. It wasn't so much that the headline was so unusual, it was just that the synopsis of the story contained a name she knew. It took a second before she placed it, and she stared at it in horror, willing the name on the page not to be the name she knew.

The name stubbornly stayed the same. Delgado shook her head and read the article the feed attached to, trying not to let the emotions she was feeling show on her face. A grand opening wasn't the sort of thing to feel shock and horror over, after all. But if the other shoe had dropped Tuesday — then this meant awful news for the home team, of course.

She printed a copy of the story for Shelton, and then settled down to write. It wasn't her best work, she thought, but who would expect one's best work in the mood she was in? The world needed saving, again, and the only ones who knew and were in a position to do something about it were a newspaper reporter and an IT consultant.

It would have to do.

**KINCAID'S BAYHOUSE  
JACK LONDON SQUARE  
OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA  
6:00 PM**

Delgado walked into the restaurant, scanning for Shelton. The maitre'd stopped her and she explained who she was looking for. The maitre'd smiled at her, and escorted her back to the table that Shelton was occupying. Well, Shelton and another man, whom Delgado instantly recognized as Curtis. What was Curtis doing here?

She was struck once again by the contrast between the two men. Shelton was tall, with black hair and an angular face. In contrast, Curtis was short with a rounded face, grey-haired, and starting to go bald on top of it. It struck Delgado that none of them were particularly young anymore. She refrained from sighing at the thought.

Curtis looked up and smiled at her. “Good evening, Miranda,” he said, with a bit of a southern drawl to his speech. “Tis good to see you again, it's been a while.”

Delgado took a seat across from the two of them. “It's good to see you too, Curtis. And you, Shelton. I take it you called Curtis after all.”

Shelton stiffened a bit before speaking. “I wanted his opinion. You and I didn't have a clue what to do,” he said in that familiar baritone Delgado had been so used to hearing in the offices at TRES. “Not that we have any other information.”

“We don’t?” Delgado asked. “What about McAllister?”

“The number was disconnected,” Shelton said. “I couldn’t get a hold of him. Youngman was, as I predicted, not useful to this situation. And no, I asked him if he’d heard from McAllister, and nothing.”

Delgado frowned. This was even worse. Did she dare depress them all with her news? Probably best to put it on the table so that Shelton and Curtis had all the facts. “I hate to be the bearer of more bad news,” she said. “But I found this on the AP wire today.”

She handed the piece of paper over to Shelton, and watched Curtis pull out a pair of glasses so that he could read it as well. Shelton, who had never been quite as good at hiding his expressions as Delgado was, had a look of sudden horror on his face before he could hide it. Curtis took the piece of paper and read it himself, only frowning slightly.

Shelton took a sip of water. Finally he said, “So Admiral J-Rock is no longer among the living.”

Delgado nodded. Shelton looked around the table. “Damn, I wish I had some wine now,” he said. “That’s a bitter pill to swallow.”

Curtis put down the printed article. “I am still not seeing where y’all think I should be involved in this,” he said.

Delgado glared across the table at Curtis. “Yes, that’s right, he wasn’t a Dove, so thus you don’t have to care. Thanks, Curtis.”

Curtis looked up at her and blinked, his eyeglasses magnifying his eyes. He looked puzzled. “That didn’t come off quite right. My condolences to you two and to what’s left of TRES, but so far this involves two TRES officers, neither of whom hold commissions in the DE, and thus I’m not sure why Shelton called me the other day. My apologies.”

Shelton sighed. “I called you, Curtis, because neither Delgado nor I had a clue what to do. I still don’t, and this just makes it worse.”

Curtis looked at the article again. “Well, let’s start with the obvious question. What makes you so sure that Admiral J-Rock’s death is directly attributable to Lord Owsen? That’s the question that needs to be answered before we can get anywhere.”

“Maenads are hard critters to take out. You know that, Curtis.” Delgado thought for a moment. “I mean, their mission is taking out Lyrans, and you know Lyrans are tough critters. And if it wasn’t Owsen who took J-Rock out, then we have to figure out what did. And frankly, that possibility scares me.”

“Me as well,” Shelton said. “And we know Maenads are capable of taking one another out, so Owsen as J-Rock’s killer would make sense. And there’s a bit of what Delgado said. If it isn’t Owsen, then what is it? Are the Lyrans back?”

Curtis twitched at the mention of the Lyrans. “There’s a scary thought — there’s no way we could take on the Lyrans now. But there’s no evidence that an invasion’s on. I think we’d notice. So, I accept your hypothesis, but that brings me right back to

my first question. I don't see my place here. What do y'all want me to do? Because right now, with this not involving the Dobs, I'd like to get back to Atlanta and my work."

"We have to do something," Delgado said. "We have to get rid of Owsen. Or at least find out why he killed J-Rock. Because something tells me, it's a guess based on limited evidence, but Owsen's after Jihaddi for some reason. Sure, it's J-Rock today. But what if it's Samhain tomorrow, Curtis? What if it's you or me?"

Shelton looked frightened. Curtis took off his reading glasses, folded them neatly and put them back in their case, and then looked back at Delgado. "Those are all hypotheticals, Miranda. I can't do anything unless I have real proof that there's a threat to Dobe personnel. Y'all agreed to that when we set up the Order."

"Fine. I'll keep that in mind the next time some Dobe goes crazy and goes after another Dobe," Delgado snapped. "Shelton? Are you in?"

Shelton's eyes darted around the restaurant. Finally, he started fiddling with the fork on the table. Delgado waited for him to say something, and Shelton finally spoke up. "No," he said. "I have a wife and a six month old daughter, and neither of them know about this. I can't put my life on the line at the moment."

Delgado sighed. "Fine, fine. This is only the biggest threat to everything we've worked to keep so quiet and neither of you want to do anything about it. I, on the other hand, am not going to sit around idly. You two just sit quietly and go back to your lives."

Curtis looked up at her. "So, you're going to get a sniper rifle and go after Owsen?"

Delgado stood. "No. But I'll find some way. You two enjoy dinner, I have things to do."

She grabbed the printout that she had brought to the meeting and left her two fellow intelligence officers sitting there blinking, wondering what fire had gotten into Delgado as of late. Delgado frankly didn't care. Something had to be done about this Owsen situation, and she was the only one who wanted to bother.

As she walked to her car, her mind flashed back to Wraith worrying about something about to happen a week ago. Wraith had mentioned having another Jihaddi's phone number in that talk. Who was it? One of the VR folks — right, Malaclypse. She'd stop in after church tomorrow, since she would be in Berkeley for that, and see if Wraith had a way to contact him.

She hated bringing non-Intel officers into this matter, but it was over her head. Way over. But something had to be done.

**BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA  
SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2004  
2:00 PM**

It was a quiet Sunday afternoon at the new home of Katze and Josh. Katze was in the room they'd established as the library listening to Selection Sunday basketball

news and working industriously on her thesis before she headed out to Colorado for the afternoon. Josh was in the living room, making his way through the Sunday paper section by section. The rain was pouring down outside, which made both of them happy that they were safe inside.

There came a knock at the door. Josh looked up from where he was reading the paper, and went to answer it.

There stood Miranda Delgado, soaking wet from the downpour. Josh quickly let her in and had her sit down. "I'll go get Katze."

Katze came down rather quickly. "You hear the news? Cal women's hoops got the five seed in the East."

"Not bad. Not as good at the three seed we found back in 1996, but not bad. What's the chances?"

"Hmmm. Well, Tennessee got the one seed in that division, so not good. But I think we can hang on until then."

"Figures. Vols got us in 1996 too."

"Don't have to tell me that. Granted, part of that might have been the power forward sleepwalking that day."

"Yeah, yeah, you'd think some officer of some secret paramilitary organization had kept her out all night or something."

Katze smiled at Delgado. That had been both the start of her Jihad career and her friendship with Delgado, and she was appreciative of both. But Delgado probably didn't come over unannounced in the rain for this conversation. "I'm guessing you didn't really come over here to talk about the state of Cal woman's hoops."

"You're right. I didn't. But..." Delgado looked around. "I hate asking Josh to leave, it's his house too, but..."

"I know about the Jihaddi who went nuts," Josh said, without looking up at his paper.

Delgado blinked and then glared at Katze. "Why does he know that?"

Katze sighed. "Miranda, I am going to marry the guy, which means that I think he's capable of keeping his mouth shut. Besides, it isn't just you Intel folks who can identify faces — Owsen did pin my ensign pins on."

"Okay. And you know that Admiral J-Rock's no longer among the living?"

It was Katze's turn to look shocked. "Wow. Fuck. Owsen?"

"Can you think of anybody else that might be able to take out a Maenad?"

"Right. Gee, I hope Mal knows this latest."

"Mal's on this?"

"Yeah, I drug him into it back on the ninth. Don't worry, I'm sure we've got everything under control."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Delgado got up and paced across the living room. "The problem is, this is too big for the Ancient and Honorable Order; we've been panicking since Tuesday, and Shelton and Curtis finally decided it's over our heads. So I need to get you non-intel folks in on this. As much as I really don't want to trust

you, I'm going to have to hope. Because somebody has to do something. But..."

"But?"

"If things get too hot, Wraith, I want in on it."

"Okay, then. There's a rudimentary JLink network back up, I want you on it. If we can use you, I'll get in touch."

"Best I can ask for, I suppose."

### BLANCA MOUNTAIN 4:00 PM

Aris' linker rang as she was surveying a VTOL aircraft in the hangar, the only major VRDET vehicle still in storage. She unclipped it from her belt, checked the incoming signal, and answered, "Hey, Katze. What's up?"

"Nothing major. I just thought I'd come by and see how you were doing."

"Sounds great," Aris said. "I haven't actually seen a human being for far too long." Pause. "Well, close enough to count, right?"

Katze chuckled. "Close enough to count. How's the Gate coming along?"

"It's calibrating right now. Call it two more days to fully functional, but all the mechanics are in place. Oh, and you know, you're a TRES-ie... we've got a Lieutenant KillJoy on his way into the base."

"Hmm. I don't know him personally, but... what do you mean on his way into the base?"

"He's breaking in through the access tunnel to the garage. So far he's managed to get past all the security stuff Mal put there, whatever it is."

Aris could hear Katze facepalming. "Aris... why didn't you just ask Mal or me to come down and turn off the defenses?"

Blink. "That never actually occurred to me."

"Argh. Okay, I'll be there in a minute."

"I'm in the hangar."

"Okay." Katze signed off the other end, and Aris clipped the 'Linker back to her belt.

"Why don't I just turn those off now," Katze said from behind her a few seconds later.

"Katze!" Aris said, turning around and sweeping her CO into a hug.

"Urk," Katze said, then "Good to see you too, Aris. How about getting me to a console so our Lieutenant KillJoy doesn't get messily dead?"

"He's been taking good care of himself so far," Aris said, putting Katze's feet in contact with the floor again.

"Still, we should be polite to our guests," Katze said, heading for one of the small desk clusters in the central pathway of the hangar. "And the less of our security he destroys, the better."

"Point."

Katze woke the computer and typed in her identification and an override. "There,



that should take care of the actual defenses. We'll need to go upstairs to open the door."

Aris gestured overdramatically at the stairs. Katze grinned and led the way up.

Another set of charges crumpled, blowing caustic chemical smoke past KillJoy as he stood waiting, munching on a powerbar. He swallowed the remainder and kicked the tottering segment of steel over; he was doing his best to conserve explosive now, as even after sitting and picking the steel BBs out of the claymore mines, he was just about out. The steel CLANGED into the tunnel and he stepped out, snapping off a shotgun blast and the turret that had just started to extend... but for some reason, that turret and the others retracted back away. Not trusting them at all, he fired into each one in turn as he passed and came to yet another door. He walked back to the cart and took one of the claymores, picking steel BBs out of it with a leatherman pliers as he walked back towards the latest blast door, and was about to place it when the door clunked loudly and started opening.

"Good afternoon Rear Admiral Brenner, Commander Merquoni," he said before the door had completely opened. "I apologize for the mess, though the tunnel is resealed back where I got in."

The sight that greeted the two women when the door opened the rest of the way was staggering; a giant man, clad in body armor and festooned with guns who looked to have been through a war. His armor was pocked with bullet scars, some opening to reveal not the expected bloody results of projectiles but undamaged skin. His uniform was charred, and much of his hair was either gone or ragged, blackened ends. Still, he seemed in once piece, and he cracked a grin as he added, "Sorry it took so long to get here."

### OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA 4:30 PM

Miranda Delgado dug through the boxes she hadn't bothered to unpack in several years. She thought it funny, really, how she'd been quietly helping coordinate what was left of the Jihad, but yet hadn't bothered to unpack the boxes she'd had shipped to California for fear that if she did, the Wyrms would return. And now, while the Wyrms himself wasn't back, Owsen was, and it didn't look good for the home team.

Besides, she had to go through these boxes. Her Linker was buried somewhere in one of these boxes, along with everything else from her quarters at TRES. The last bit of packing had been done in a hurry, and she didn't quite remember in which box she put her Linker and the cabling to connect it to her computer.

She pulled her jackknife out of her pocket and slit the first box open, smiling that the box was addressed to Wraith. She hadn't had a Bay Area apartment at that point yet, and Wraith did, so they just shipped everything there. And when she'd gotten a place, she'd just put these boxes in the closet, counting on them to protect them all by staying contained.

It had to have been luck that the Linker was in the first box she opened, and all its cabling contained in a small container next to it. First order of business, she decided, was to get a charge back on it. Four years in a box, even though she made sure it was off before tucking it in, probably meant that there was no charge left on the thing.

So she drug it in the kitchen and sat it next to her laptop, letting it charge as she made her dinner. As she sat down at the table, the Linker beeped as if she had waiting messages. That surprised Delgado, the only person who knew she was on the network was Wraith, and Wraith would just pick up the phone and call her.

She flicked the Linker on, dinner forgotten, and flipped through the messages — it looked mostly like random chatter from Wraith and Malaclypse and Captain Houben and Commander Merquoni. She thought of adding her two cents, but decided it was better to watch at the moment and only make her presence known when Wraith asked her to join in.

She flipped upwards to see the earlier messages, and was surprised to see one marked “ATTN: INTEL” with a date stamp of that prior Wednesday. That seemed strange. Who would invoke Intel when they knew there was nobody on the link? The name attached to the mail — Dee Greist — wasn’t ringing any bells with her, but TRES folks usually attached their rank, which probably meant she wasn’t TRES. Still, it was interesting it was on the link, and Delgado went ahead and opened it.

The first thing she noticed was that there were picture attachments. She could view them on the little screen of her Linker, but it was probably best to hook it in on a bigger screen. She pulled the cables out and quickly hooked everything together. Delgado was slightly surprised the network could still recognize when a computer didn’t have the proper software and install it, but tonight she wouldn’t worry about it. It saved having to dig her old laptop out.

She pulled the pictures up, and was shocked to find they were pictures of Grand Admiral Owsen at the Vegas Gun Show. This Dee Greist person must have been there and had thought to grab a few shots. Delgado whistled as she flipped through them. If there had been doubt before, it was erased now — Grand Admiral Owsen was definitely back. And one of the photos had a clear shot of the sword as well, and Delgado gasped. It looked like the Barney Slayer. But the Jihad had the Barney Slayer, or so Delgado seemed to remember, and Owsen’s blade was the wrong colour for it to match.

She looked closer at the sword, and frowned a bit more. She enlarged the photo a bit to check her suspicions. It was hard to tell from the grain of the compression, but it looked like there was writing on the blade? Did the Slayer have writing on it? She couldn’t remember, it had been a very long time since she’d seen anything but pictures.

But this, added with J-Rock’s death, meant that things were very bad for the home team indeed. She saved the shots, and decided that Wraith couldn’t wait to know about this. She started to go hunt for her cellphone when she realized she had

a much better way to contact Wraith connected to her computer.

And sure enough, Wraith responded right away. "Katze."

"Hey, Wraith, this is Delgado. Got something for you."

"Is it important? I'm kinda in the middle of something."

"Well, I found some pictures of Owsen sent to the intel alias, and you might want to take a look at them. What happened to the Slayer?"

There was some silence on the other end, and then Wraith responded, almost as if she was hedging, "It went with JPV when they left."

"You sure?"

"I said goodbye to it before it left."

Delgado frowned. It wasn't like Wraith to out and out lie, she tended to tell as much of the truth as she thought she could get away with. And something smacked of 'not the whole truth' here. "Why do I suspect there's a piece of the story you're not telling me?"

Wraith sighed. "Believe me or don't believe me. I don't care. But yes, for your information, there are some things I know that you don't, and you know damn good and well there are things I'm not supposed to tell — even to you, even now. Let me get to a computer and I'll have you throw those pictures at me."

"Where are you, anyway?"

"Blanca. Give me five minutes, and I'll be back. Turn on video when I ring you."

Katze clicked her linker shut and looked at Aris. "That was my friend Delgado. I have to go upstairs and do something. If you need me, I'll be in my old office."

Aris looked at Katze, and then back at their guest. Killjoy stood there, rather unperturbed despite what he'd been through that afternoon. Aris said, "What do you want me to do with him?"

"Ummm...good question," Katze said. "I don't quite know. Keep him busy or something, I really need to deal with this."

Katze closed the door to her office, and breathed a deep breath. Things were dusty in here, but they were still familiar, and it was hers. She collapsed in the chair, flicked on the terminal, and adjusted the video camera. She then rung Delgado.

Delgado appeared in the upper right corner of her monitor, the kitchen behind her, and an ignored dinner off to the side of the picture. "Whatcha got for me?"

Delgado reached forward, towards where her keyboard was. "Check this out."

A window popped up on Katze's computer, in which the message with forwarded attachments appeared. Katze pulled up the pictures and just stared for a second before finally muttering, "N'kanyu tiri, we're really in it deep."

"Wraith?"

"Your kitchen clear? As a landing space, I mean?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

"Something I need to discuss with you, but I don't want to do it over the Linkers."

Delgado blinked. "Okay..."

"Coming through..." Katze shut the connection down, locked her terminal, and leapt, landing in Delgado's kitchen. She watched Delgado blink. "I'll never get used to you doing that," Delgado said, "even though I know what you're capable of."

Katze smiled. "Good. It means you're thinking of me as a mundane, which is always good." She sat down across from Delgado. "What I'm about to tell you...you're technically not supposed to know. But it might help things make more sense."

"So why are we in it deep?"

Katze took a deep breath and said, "We suspected the other half of the Slayer ended up with Charn'El, but we couldn't prove it. Not until now."

"Err, slow down, Wraith, what do you mean 'other half ended up with Charn'El'? There's two...oh, no. No."

"Yeah. That battle where Owsen died, in Pacifica? The Slayer was busted in half. The Maenads salvaged most of the blade, and that's what's with JPV. They couldn't find the hilt."

Katze watched Delgado's facial expressions. They weren't usually this expressive, she noted. Delgado finally sputtered, "And you all chose to keep this a *secret*?"

"Yes. I didn't find out until I found myself in the Adjunct's chair. And I reacted mostly the same way you just did."

Delgado shook her head. "So now what?"

"Now? I think we tell Mal."

And the two friends and former Jihad officers looked at one another before Katze rose from the table. "I'll go tell Mal. You eat your dinner."

Delgado looked down and blinked at the plate. When she looked back up, Katze was gone.

**SPIRAL BUILDING  
DENVER, COLORADO  
6:00 PM**

"This is a new complication." Mal dropped the photos on his desk, scattering color shots of Owsen's rampage all over the polished wood surface. "So that explains what happened to the rest of the Slayer, at least. Remarkable," he added thoughtfully. "I'd read the reports from JPV that the blade seemed to be regenerating, but I hadn't thought to extrapolate it to the hilt. We'd all thought that it went to the bottom of the ocean along with the rest of Pacifica. I wonder where it's been since then..."

Katze frowned. "I thought it was obvious."

"Not necessarily. Since we assumed the hilt sank with the island, it was possible that someone else recovered it. Though seeing as it's now in the hands of our erstwhile comrade..." Mal looked closely at one of the photos. He rummaged around his coat pocket for a second before pulling out a magnifying glass. "Hm," he hummed, "this is interesting. Here, take a look at the blade, near the hilt."

Mal offered the photo and the magnifying glass to Katze. The shot itself was a picture of Owsen in mid-swing. When Katze looked at the blade through the magnifying glass, faint lines and impressions could be seen running up the center of the blade, almost like... "Writing?" Katze said, glancing up at Mal.

"So it would seem," Mal replied. "And I've seen that writing before."

"Oh?"

Mal nodded. "We recovered several books with writing just like that during the Pacifica mission."

Katze blinked. "*Oh*. I guess that's confirmation."

"Probably, though I'd like a second opinion, just to make sure my memory isn't going strange." Mal sighed. "Felton was the resident Lyran expert, I've only got the basics. Dammit, we're going to need him if this *does* turn out to be Lyran-related." He leaned back in his chair and looked at Katze. "Still no word?"

"None at all. For all we know he's on the Moon."

"Ah well." Mal thumbed through the photos again. "So where did we get these from? They're a hell of a lot better than the security videos."

Katze blinked. "You know, I didn't think to look at who sent it; it came in to the Intel dead-drop alias, but beyond that..."

Mal turned to the computer on his desk and quickly called up the mailbox for the dead-drop in question. "Well that's easily checked. Let's see, the mail came in the middle of the night on the 10th, lucky us that we'd gotten the network up then, huh? And our mystery witness is..." Mal trailed off. "Well," he said, "wasn't expecting that."

"Huh?"

"It's Dee."

"Dee?" Katze blinked, trying to remember who Mal was talking about. The only Dee that she could remember was... "Wait a minute, Dee *Greist*? The quiet kid who hung out with R&D?"

"The one and the same." Mal smiled. "Knowing Dee, she was shopping when the deal went down. Well," he said, opening his Linker's phone tools, "ought to let her know that her pictures are being put to good use."

"If you're going to do that," said Katze, standing, "then I'm going to head back to Blanca and help Aris out with getting stuff working." Mal nodded absently, and Katze jumped back to the VRDET base.

**ATHENA HEAVY INDUSTRIES  
KINGMAN, ARIZONA  
12:00 PM**

"About time some of the toys showed up," Dee muttered as she worked on cleaning grit out of the silencer baffles of one of the toys in question. It was a VSS Vin-torez, a highly unusual Russian sniper rifle. Silenced and with a specially designed subsonic bullet, it was highly sought by special forces because unlike most weapons

that had silencers grafted on later, it retained all the power of a real rifle.

Unfortunately, some bastard hadn't cleaned this one in ages. Athena Heavy Industries had received a crate of half a dozen of the sniper rifles and half a dozen SR-3 Vikhrs, a very short assault rifles using the same round. There was also a lot of the special ammunition and magazines, which was fortunate as there was nothing close in this country. Best of all, it was even perfectly legal for Athena to receive them.

She and Damo had immediately tested the things out, and one of the Vintorez rifles jammed incessantly... and now she knew why.

"Look at this thing! They threw in a demo model. With the way the silencer is, I should just build a new one."

"Not a bad idea anyway," Damocles commented from where he was assembling a custom pistol. "Baffle design's not bad but dated."

"Yeah, point. Hm." She considered for a moment and shrugged. "Ah well, I'm going to the clean room to get a start on the engine now that the parts are all finished."

"All right," Dee's partner replied absently. Dee stood up from the workbench and walked over to a heavy door set into part of the wall. She pulled open the latch and swung it open, walking into the first clean room. It resembled nothing so much as a small workshop; a steel workbench against one wall with tools all in their proper places, concrete floors, work lights, sink, and a few compressed air fittings. The only really unusual features were the heavy doors on either end, the filtered air circulating around, what looked like a dishwasher, and the impeccable cleanliness.

Dee closed the first door and carefully washed her hands before opening the thing that looked like a dishwasher. It *was* a dishwasher actually, but modified to use a separate water source, one with additives such that it wouldn't rust anything. She carefully took engine parts out one by one, checking for any remaining dirt from machining, or any tiny imperfections before hand drying them and setting them on a metal cart.

People might think of this sort of thing as obsessive, Dee thought as she stripped out of her shop coveralls and donned a set of disposable tyvek scrubs. They didn't produce as good of engines as she did though, she thought with a smirk, so they could think whatever they wanted. She pulled the inner door open and a series of fans came into action, blowing air down across the doorway to form a barrier to dust and dirt.

The second room was a testament to the extent of her obsession with putting things together perfectly. A white cube, metal walls and concrete floor providing nowhere for dirt, parts, or spills to remain hidden. Fluorescent lights and vents ringed the top of the walls providing, she knew, the only air circulation when the door was shut. She held the room to tighter standards than many surgical suites, as much work as that was.

Wheeling the cart of engine parts ahead of her, Dee closed the door and paused before wheeling it over to a fixture in the middle of the room. To this she bolted the

engine block, threading bolts into it and then picking up a wrench from the workbench without needing to look. She returned it to the spot where she picked it up, a precisely aligned row of tools comprising exactly what was needed to assemble the engine, all of them clean enough to perform surgery with... if one could perform brain surgery with a wrench.

“Okay,” she muttered as she considered the parts with a certain amount of trepidation. This engine was unique, a design from scratch to compete at the top levels of motorcycle racing. The parts were either made from scratch or obtained from favors. There were enough of them for three engines and no way to get any spares beyond that; the bike would have to win races and attract sponsorship for that. Thus, she was more than a little concerned about making any error whatsoever in assembly.

This contemplation took about a minute before Dee nodded to herself and started the mp3 player in her right arm’s computer. As the first notes of the song were piped into her consciousness she opened up the checklist file. Though her memory was perfect and she knew every last detail of the engine, she was taking no risks; every single operation to assemble the engine was documented.

Turning the engine upside-down on its stand, Dee took the first of the main journal studs from its place on the cart. She applied two drops of thread locker to the end of it and started screwing it into the block. The torque wrench she picked up transmitted readings directly to her arm computer which superimposed the image on her vision, but for redundancy’s sake pressure sensors in her arm’s hand also computed the torque. Going as exactly to specs as the readout would display and marking off each step as she went, Dee then repeated the process on the next one.

Quite a few hours later and the engine was becoming more and more complete. Dee was maybe a third of the way through the checklist, but all the big bits were in the beginning. Right now she was taking what amounted to a break, sipping a liter bottle of Powerade.

It was good timing actually; the ‘incoming message’ icon blinked on the lower edge of her vision, which had happened a few other times that morning. Damocles was handling the phone traffic, but some people had motorcycle questions he didn’t know the answer to so he transferred them. Or maybe he was asking about dinner, she thought as she noticed the fact that the time had mysteriously advanced to the evening, also realizing she’d forgotten about lunch. She opened the comm function with a thought, not bothering to check the sender.

“Athena Heavy Industries, this is Dee,” she answered. The communications went straight from thoughts to the network, allowing her to do such things as answer the phone while drinking something.

“Hello Dee, it’s been a while,” said a voice that she instantly recognized. It was a good thing that the link didn’t pick up sound as it would have transmitted the sound of Dee choking for several seconds on a mouthful of blue flavored quasi-juice.

“Malaclypse?” she asked in the midst of coughing, again fortunately not transmitted. The sender ID checked out too now that she looked, and it was from a

JihadLinker source. "... uh... er... hi?"

"We got your JihadLinker message," Mal said simply. "A lot of other people noticed that on the news, but you send a lot better quality pictures than they did. Were you and Damo okay?" Oh gosh, he actually asked if she was okay, and he went and called...

"Uh, oh... yeah. Yeah, our booth was away from that and... I... ran away pretty fast." Stupid, why'd you put it like that?

"Sensible thing to do, given. Well, to get to the point, we know who that was as he's someone fairly famous in the Jihad. That 'fuckstick', as you so colorfully put it, is Owsen." There was a pause for a moment, as Dee processed this information.

"Lord Tilden Owsen. Who died on Pacifica."

"Apparently he didn't."

"Why the hell did he go and trash a gun show?!?" Dee sputtered.

"We don't know. There's more though; he's also been killing Maenads. We don't know why about that either. The writing on the blade of the sword in the pictures you sent might provide a clue though."

"I have higher res stereo versions if you want," she replied in shock.

"That wouldn't hurt. We're getting a hold of some people but haven't managed too many so far."

"I'm in. Damocles too probably." Jihad business being as close to family business as she had, of course she was involved.

"Okay. We're probably going to have a meeting in Blanca within a week. I'll send a gate." With that he cut off the connection, leaving Dee to ponder this bizarre new turn of events. Eventually she opened up a connection to the shop's phone network.

"Damo?" she said as he picked up the phone. "Something odd has come up..."

Katze had said goodbye and popped back to Berkeley an hour ago, and Aris had decided to bring KillJoy in on her pet project: trying to get the busted VTOL craft working again.

In the meantime, they'd all eaten, KJ had cleaned himself off and buzzed away the rest of his charred hair, and found a spare set of Omega fatigues in his size. *Where* he'd managed to find them Aris didn't know. He'd also fixed the elevators.

"I can't really fix this," KillJoy commented as he poked around inside the fuselage of the gunship. "Could you hand me a 10 millimeter socket?"

"Why do you need a socket if you can't fix it?" she asked as she handed the enormous man the tool. He pulled out the ratchet wrench he was using and swapped sockets, then snaked his arm back inside the access panel and worked on unbolting something hidden from view of either of them.

"Well, the main flight control computer's fried, and I can't fix that. But it can be replaced."

"Ah, okay. Do we have spares?"



“Yup. Actually, could you go get one? Black box about the size of a hardcover book, part number TZ53279 dash v... should be in storage room 203, right over there.” He gestured with his left arm at some of the reinforced doors around the perimeter of the hanger.

“You’re making that up,” Aris commented.

“2 rows left from the door, then 5 racks away from the wall the door’s in. Should be on the 3rd shelf from the top.” Aris looked even more incredulous and KillJoy chuckled slightly. “5 bucks says it’s right there.”

Aris just shook her head and walked off towards the storage room to retrieve the control box. Astonishingly enough, it was exactly where she’d been told to look. Then again, he’d been able to find everything else around the place without asking. And of course there was the incredibly improbable matter of his finding the one access tunnel that had shifted towards the surface in the first place. None of this was made any better by the fact that records showed he’d never been to Blanca before.

“Thank you,” he said as she handed him the replacement module. There was one looking exactly like it, though dirtier, on the floor. “I told you,” he commented with a faint smile as he started bolting the new part in place.

“How do you do that?”

“Hmm?”

“Well, you knew where the control module was exactly, and that it was what was burned out. You knew your way around here perfectly, you know who Katze and I are... you found the access tunnel in and there’s no possible way you could have known that.”

“You’re right, I didn’t.” Aris looked at him sideways, as if trying to figure out if he was being sarcastic. He shrugged. “I just do these things.” No one said anything for a moment.

“What, that’s it?”

“Yup.”

“Haven’t you wondered how you can do that?” Aris asked, exasperated.

“Nope.” As if sensing that elaboration was needed, he added, “I just do things, like I said. I don’t think. Brain doesn’t work that way... some of the TRES techs that did the standard psych evaluations said I’m probably not even sentient. I get by though, which really made them mad.” There was an awkward pause at that because, really, how do you reply to that? The relative quiet made Aris notice something, a faint whistling that had been showing up every few seconds.

“What’s that sound?”

“When I breathe?” KillJoy asked in response. Aris nodded. “I had a couple machinegun rounds hit me coming in here. One went through a lung.”

“Holy shit! And you’re working on this and haven’t bothered to patch yourself up first?”

“It’s just a hole, it’ll close up in a day or so.” He took his arm out of the access panel and set down the socket wrench before reaching back in to attach some wires.

“Argh... just... what the...” KillJoy nodded to himself and stood up.

“I’ll go patch myself up now. The VTOL just needs the access panel and insulation put back.” He started to walk off.

“Hey, the medbay’s not that way.” Aris commented as she started putting the panel back on.

“I know.” He went out of view and a few moments later there was a distinctive sound of tape being peeled off of a roll.

“Are you just using duct tape on yourself?”

“Yep.”

**DOWNTOWN DENVER, COLORADO**  
**SUNDAY, MARCH 14, 2004**  
**2:32 PM**

Joseph Lacroix wandered through downtown Denver, trying to collect his thoughts.

Since the news a few days before, he had attempted a few times to try and find some other former Jihaddi to get in touch with. There wasn’t much luck in that, of course. His Linker was, he confirmed, quite dead from a few years of non-use, and a few phone numbers for old war buddies he’d kept in touch with had since fallen out of use as people moved across the country trying to find civilian life again.

After a few days of effortless trying, Lacroix grew frustrated. He knew he wanted in on whatever was going down (despite the obligation to Skyview; he was going to have to figure out what to do about that if he did make contact with anyone), but there wasn’t much luck happening at the moment. Rumour had it that one of the senior VRDET emeriti was running a high-tech firm somewhere in town. Lacroix was pretty sure it was Spiral Corporation, which had gone up like a rocket in the past four years or so, but he wasn’t sure enough and didn’t quite feel up to taking the chance of being wrong and written off as a mental case.

So here he was, taking his usual Sunday walk through the downtown core. Lacroix did that every week anyway. It was a habit he’d built up since returning to civilian life, ending up as something of a weekly affirmation that he could be blatantly out in the open without anyone giving him a second glance. Anyone who did notice him would see the consistent and appropriately Mundane history given to him by one Jihad intelligence plant or another.

So even if he was looking around now and then to see if he recognized anyone, he was taking comfort in the fact that he was anonymous. The walk had become part of his routine, a comforting reminder that the war was over.

Too bad it seemed like one might have just started up.

Lacroix was lost in thought as he kept walking, so he almost didn’t notice the odd-looking man on the other side of the street. When he did, however, he pulled to a stop for a second to double-check.

The man walking the other way across the street would stick out in most cases

anyway, as he was both taller than usual and dressed almost entirely in black. That happened now and then anyway; there were only so many combinations of clothes people could wear. His walk, however, was... different. The man didn't walk so much as glide along the sidewalk, with an unusual, curious motion that wove him through the crowds with more grace than most people could muster. Lacroix had seen that stride before, in his other life. Maybe this guy was someone who would have a better idea of what's going on, Lacroix thought, as he changed direction and tried to catch up with the guy.

It took a few minutes; the other man kept a quick pace, considering the other pedestrians didn't slow him down at all. Eventually, though, Lacroix caught up with him, coming up alongside his right side. The glove on his right hand seemed to confirm suspicions.

"Excuse me, sir?" he asked.

The man slowed a bit to let him catch up, but didn't stop. He sized up Lacroix with a pair of dark blue eyes. "Can I help you?" he asked, with a hint of a European accent Lacroix couldn't place.

"...Captain Houben?" Lacroix ventured cautiously.

This time the man *did* slow to a halt. "A veteran, mm?" he asked - rather lamely, Lacroix thought, before realizing that they *were* still in something of a crowd.

Lacroix nodded. "Yeah; Ensign Joseph Lacroix, Alpha," he volunteered. Houben nodded more this time, finally having a face and name to tie together. "I was wondering if you'd heard."

"Oh, you could say that," Houben said, nodding up the sidewalk to get them moving again. "Those of us who're still on the network have been chatting up a storm about it the past couple of days, but there's a whole lot of silence from some people who should be talking. I came to Denver on a hunch that I'd find *someone* in the know. Things seem more than a little confused as is."

"That's what I was guessing, although it's not like they can just call us all back again," Lacroix said. "How many people are in the know so far?"

"Aside from everyone who was watching CNN last Tuesday?" Houben asked. "I couldn't tell you. There's about a half-dozen of us who're actually in contact with each other so far, though."

This time it was Lacroix's turn to stop in his tracks. "Half a dozen? You've kidding." At its height during Operation Phoenix, the Jihad fielded sixty thousand men, women and equivalents; by its dissolution five years ago, it still boasted a third of that total. Only a few of them took their Linkers with them, and most of *those* were almost certainly dead by now, since Mundanes couldn't quite reproduce the power cells yet, but even so...

"I wish I was," Houben replied. "We've got a few senior folks, mostly VR, a couple guys with TRES connections, but that's about it. No Maenads in sight - except for, well, you know."

"So just what are we gonna -"

“Not here,” Houben interrupted, “it’s a bit public for that. Know anyplace out of the way?”

“My apartment’s a couple blocks from here,” Lacroix said. He gestured in the right direction, and they started walking.

## 2:50 PM

“I was starting to wonder if anyone was out there at all. I haven’t been able to get in touch with anyone I worked closely with in TRES or VR, not that many of us kept much in the line of contact information.”

“Mm,” Houben mmd. “For the most part the upper echelons sorta stayed in touch - even that’s been drifting off, though - and most of the rank and file just went off to look for a home. Between that and folks not taking good enough care of their Linkers to make sure they were still working -” Lacroix winced a bit, and hoped the Zeta Squad alumnus sitting across the room from him didn’t notice - “we were probably lucky to get as many people as we have so far. Oh, I’m sure thousands of us have heard about Owsen by now, but not many of the veterans are going to be in a position to do anything.”

“Right,” Lacroix agreed. “Who has answered any pings so far, anyway?”

“We’re sort of lucky with VR,” Houben said. “We managed to get a hold of most of the command staff, and so everyone’s starting to gather back at Blanca. Other than that, not much. Myself, of course, and two or three others from TRES and VR. That’s pretty much it.”

“Maenads?”

“Not a one,” Houben replied.

“Merde,” Lacroix said under his breath. “I suppose at least it isn’t Windigo or Shardik who’s out running amok. But still. That’s all we got?”

“That’s what it looks like. It’s still early yet; we’ll probably find some more Jihaddi who haven’t completely fallen off the map. Anyone we can get a hold of who we can also pull out of Mundane life will be needed to deal with this.”

“I want in,” Lacroix said. Houben nodded approvingly as he went on. “It’ll take a bit of doing to figure out what to do about my life here, though,” he finished, gesturing around the living room.

“Problem?” Houben said. Lacroix couldn’t tell if it was annoyance at having any caveats about coming back to the Jihad, or genuine concern.

“Well...” Lacroix said, casting about a bit for words. “I’ve taken years after being demobilized to build the life I’ve got going now. See, I’ve become a teacher. High school English, three classes this semester. We’ve all got responsibilities in our Mundane lives, yeah, but there’s eighty-eight minds over at Skyview, most of whom are doing pretty damn well right now. This gives me a bit of a problem. See, the Jihad was a fight to try as much for the planet as the minds on it. I’m still in that second part right now...”

“...And you’re worried about blowing it for seven dozen people in case this turns

out to 'just' be Owsen going stark raving nuts, and not B'harneii coming back by proxy," Houben finished. Lacroix nodded.

"I've got a feeling it's not the first of those two," Houben continued. "You and I both know that Owsen shouldn't be here to go nuts in the first place. You've heard the stories, and Admiral Felton and the other Maenads witnessed it - Charn'El took Owsen down on Pacifica. The man's supposed to be dead, and yet here he is, somewhere in Nevada, raising hell.

"What's worse was the fact that the last time Owsen was seen, Charn'El was in the room, putting a spell on him or striking him with his staff or something. If he's back now, it has 'Lyran' written all over it." Houben sighed. "And that means the war is probably back on."

"Don't get me wrong," Lacroix said. "I'd had most of that in mind already. I'm just trying to figure out what to do about getting in contact with what's left of the Jihad without leaving my students hanging. I have responsibilities on both sides of this line, and my Mundane ones aren't worth dismissing totally out of hand." Lacroix was a bit surprised with himself at the fact that he was actually wavering on the issue. The kids in his classes had become important to his life, and in a way more meaningful than simply a paycheck like so many of the other teachers out there. Whichever side of the line I'm on, I always seem to have a stake in the future, he mused to himself. "If they'll be okay, then you've got someone here."

Houben thought for a moment. "You have a point there. I'll pass word; we should be able to do something, but either way the kids should be taken care of. If the guys can pull something off, are you in?"

Lacroix pondered just a moment. "I'm in."

**BLANCA MOUNTAIN**  
**MONDAY, MARCH 15, 2004**  
**2:00 PM**

Aris was spending a lot of time eyeing Lt. KillJoy sideways. It wasn't that he minded staring, it was that she felt self-conscious about how much of it she was doing.

He was big, for a human; that was one thing. And he was built. And his eyes were creepy as hell, which made her glad that he kept his goggles on almost all the time.

But he was a wizard with machinery; he got the VTOL online in an afternoon. And then the autorepair. And then figured out how to boot up the nanofacs. Then he'd gone to attend his sucking chest wound and left Aris scratching her head.

Now, a couple days later, Aris was watching the clock tick down on the calibration for the Gate and watching Lt. KillJoy out of the corner of her eye. He was standing, relaxed, in the middle of the stage, dressed in slightly rumpled TRES fatigues with all the required tagging sewed onto the shoulders. Aris had pulled a pair of dress khakis and a vest over her leotard, figuring that she wasn't going to spend

much time in dragonform for a while.

Bother. And it had felt good to have claws for such a long time.

"Here we go," Katze said from her other side. Katze had teleported in at one o'clock, fresh from Berkeley. Aris looked down at the readout, the numbers rapidly spiraling down from ten seconds. Katze was grinning. "Cross your fingers."

The seconds ticked down. Three... two... one...

Bink! Aris held her breath until the green light came on. "Calibration successful. Gate fully operational."

"HELL yes!" Aris crowed. "We got ourselves a GATE, boys and girls!" She flipped open her 'linker and sent a signal to Minerva. "Good news, Min: Blanca is back online!"

"Great!" Minerva said. "I'm going to connect with the relays over there. Mal will meet you in a couple minutes, soon as I double-check everything."

"Okay." Aris suddenly noticed her body complaining that it hadn't had anything to eat yet. And it was two in the afternoon. "Uh... actually, have Mal meet us up in the situation room? I need to grab something to eat, and that way we'll have all the data in front of us."

"Sure, I'll tell him."

Aris looked at Katze inquiringly. "Lunch? I'm paying."

Katze snickered and gestured at the elevators grandly. Aris turned to look at KillJoy straight on. "Er... join us, Lieutenant?"

"Sure." KillJoy shrugged, resembling a mountain rearranging itself. Aris nodded and wondered if they'd all manage to fit in the elevator.

Mal stepped through the Gate and back into Blanca for the first time in nearly five years. The first thing he noticed was the dust. Everything in the Gate room had a thin layer of greyish dust covering it. Apparently the automated maintenance systems either had failed since the closeout, or somebody - read: Mal - had forgotten to turn them on in the first place. Still, despite the shabby housekeeping, it felt good to be back home. Mal stepped off the portal entry stage to keep it clear for the next arrival, and surveyed the room.

The dust was the only thing that seemed out of sorts with the room. Even if the housekeeping systems hadn't worked, there weren't any signs of water damage or structural problems. All the equipment had worked perfectly, and nothing seemed out of order, even after five years of inactivity. The only thing missing was the background hum of the Rangers going about their daily duties.

Mal sighed. Some things changed and didn't change back. But there was no use in moping endlessly about the past, so Mal strode off towards the elevators in the rear of the Gate room, bound for the upper levels and the situation room.

Katze had already shown up and was chatting amiably with Aris, who was nursing a Coke and a sandwich. Off to one side stood the biggest white guy Mal had ever seen, just sort of leaning against a console and doing his part to keep the wall

upright. The two women looked up as Mal came through the door and waved him over to the long table in the center of the room. "Afternoon, ladies," said Mal as he walked around to the end of the table. "It's been a while."

Aris gestured towards the wall-propper. "Mal, meet Lieutenant Killjoy, TRES Corps. He's been a big help in getting stuff running again."

Killjoy nodded his head ever so slightly. "Sir," he said. Mal nodded back.

"I hear you caused a bit of trouble in the old access tunnel."

"Wasn't much, really."

"Uh-huh. And how did you know to open it up right there, anyway?"

"I didn't."

Mal blinked. "You... didn't," he said, nonplussed.

"Nope. Just did it."

Aris shook her head. "Forget it, he's always like that."

Mal gave both Aris and Killjoy odd looks, then shrugged and sat down. "Okay, so what's our status?"

"The base is in good shape. The surface tunnel's pretty much shot to hell, but other than that all the major stuff is operational and powered up. The nanofacs are running on idle, so if we need gear that's all good."

"Good, good... we'll have to seal off the tunnel a bit more permanently, but that shouldn't be too difficult. How about our externals?"

Aris sighed. "That is a totally different story. Most of our orbital stuff is long gone; there's maybe two communications relays still working, everything else burned up years ago."

"What about the ground sensor network?"

"Don't know, haven't tried it yet. I've been a little busy, remember?" Aris added pointedly.

"Hm. Let's see what's working at the moment." Mal typed a series of commands into the console in front of him. The view on the main screen changed as he did so, shifting from a global view to a close-up of the desert on the California-Nevada border. "Back when the Road was open, we had a whole bunch of sensors placed around it. It was an early-warning system; if somebody had tried to make a move through we could know about it and counterattack before they oriented themselves. Now, if the sensor net is still... aha!" Flashing red brackets appeared on the screen, just west of Las Vegas. "The detectors are pretty degraded, so that's as good as it gets, but," Mal said with some satisfaction, "that is our boy's entry point."

"Great," said Katze dryly, "so how does that help us?"

"The entry point isn't on the Babylon Road," replied Minerva. "Which means that the direct line between us and the Lyrans is still closed. Considering we're short on anti-Lyran defenses at the moment..."

"Okay, I suppose that qualifies as a good thing, then."

Mal shrugged. "Any good news is still good news, no matter how small," he said. "So, how are we doing for personnel?"

Aris shrugged. "Well... once we had the network up I started pinging as many Linkers as I could. So far I've gotten about two thousand positives. Of those, half are coming from inside the old bases - I figure people just dumped them in their quarters and forgot they were still running or something. Anyway, out of all the folks who still have their Linkers, so far the only ones who've responded to the ping are, well, us."

"We're not quite that bad off," said Minerva. "Shadur's out there, remember. And we managed to get a hold of Dee Greist and Damocles. And Shad said he'd run into another Ranger, so that's four more. And I'm sure we can scare up a few more people before too long."

Mal nodded. "Okay, so we're dangerously short on personnel, but we've picked up some of the better ones. And at this point, we don't have to crack out the droid soldiers or anything," he added with a faint grin. "It's just Owsen we have to deal with, not a full-fledged invasion force."

Aris snorted. "Just' Owsen, he says. Yeah, right."

Quiet settled on everyone for a few moments.

"So how are we assembling this elite team?" Aris said, trying to get around the death of conversation. "And when? We've got the Gate set up, but somehow I don't think everyone wants to just vanish from the real world for however long it takes to fix this."

"Right," Katze said. "And I have a prior engagement back in the Old Country that I have to meet on Sunday. Other people will have their own priorities. Seeing as it's just Owsen..." she sent a glance at Aris, who raised her eyebrows but stayed quiet, "I think we can mostly stay outside the base for now."

"But what are we going to do? Just wait and see what happens?"

Mal shook his head. "No. Aris, I want you to keep fixing the base and monitoring the 'Linker network. See if you can't dig up anyone else. And keep trying to call the other Maenads and warn them." He glanced over at KillJoy. "Lieutenant? Mind helping?"

The mountain shrugged and grunted.

"The rest of us have business in the real world to take care of," Mal said. "Until then, fragmentary reports and half-assed attempts to do anything will be more of a hassle than anything. What say we reconvene here on Saturday, Gating in everyone else who has responded, for an all-hands meeting?"

"No objection here," Aris said. Katze and Minerva nodded. KillJoy grunted again.

"All right." Mal stood. "In that case, I have a corporation to run. Keep your eyes open, all of you. We need to figure out what Owsen is doing, and right now, we need all the help we can get."



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## ***13: Investigations***

**TAYLOR, MICHIGAN  
8:00 PM**

The man who the Jihad knew as Ozzy the Feral strolled down through the hall of his office building with a song in his heart. After retiring from the Jihad six years before, Ozzy had been at something of a loose end for a while; retiring from the ultimate battle of good versus evil to a mundane life took some getting used to, but he'd adapted. Putting his experiences to good use, Ozzy had signed on as a freelance writer of role-playing games. His star took him to the top of that (admittedly niche) market, and now Oswald Feralson (The alias he'd decided was appropriate after much deliberation.) was the top writer for Palladium Books, churning out book after book to the acclaim of powergamers the world over.

Life was good for Ozzy the Feral, yes indeed.

As he stepped out of the side door to the building on his way to the parking lot, Ozzy heard a familiar voice call out "Hello, goodbye, hello, goodbye!" Ozzy turned, and his brain had just enough time to register Tilden Owsen's grin, a flickering shadow, and the feel of something touching his neck before his consciousness switched off forever.

DENVER, COLORADO  
TUESDAY, MARCH 16, 2004  
12:00 AM

\*click\* “Yeah?”

“We’ve got another one, Boss. Guy in Michigan got his head chopped off coming out of work. The police IDed the guy, and it looks like it was Ozzy.”

“... Allright. I’ll grab somebody in the morning and go check it out. Thanks for letting me know, Min.”

“No problem, Boss. Pleasant dreams.”

“Tell me about a decapitation and then tell me ‘pleasant dreams.’ Cute. Good-night, Min.”

“Night, Boss.” \*click\*

TAYLOR, MICHIGAN  
TUESDAY, MARCH 16, 2004  
7:00 AM

“I really, really hate this,” grumbled Aris as she adjusted her clothes. “This cheap government-issue polyester itches.”

“Oh relax,” said Mal as he straightened his tie and adjusted his Ray-Bans. “We’re going to do this nice and quick, check the scene out and see if Owsen left any clues behind.”

“I still really, really hate this.”

“Hush.”

As they approached the crime scene, they were stopped by a uniformed cop guarding the area. “I’m sorry folks, police only,” he said, holding out a hand.

Mal took off his sunglasses, locked eyes with the cop and held up a blank square of paper. “Special Agent Charles, FBI, this is Agent Taylor. Our *{number/date/official/see numbers}* ID. We’re *{trust-worthy/a little strange/to be expected}* here to investigate the crime scene as we think there might be a connection to terrorism involved. *{recent memory/old Tom Clancy novels/happy to be a little scared}* It’s probably nothing, but you know how the bosses can be *{affable/understanding}* sometimes. We’ll just be a few minutes *{appropriate}* and be on our way *{confidential/tell nobody}*.”

The cop blinked a couple of times, then smiled. “Of course, happy to help out the feds,” he said, stepping aside. “Most everything’s already been carted away, but it hasn’t been cleaned yet. You just yell if you need anything.” Mal assured the officer that they would call for assistance if need be, and then the two “FBI agents” entered the taped-off crime scene.

“What the hell was that you used on the cop?” Aris asked.

Mal smiled slightly. “Old Injun trick.”

The scene of Ozzy the Feral’s demise was like much any other crime scene anywhere else in the country. The area was blocked off with the traditional yellow tape,

and the spots where the bisected Maenad had fallen were also taped off. Like the cop had said, the evidence — consisting mainly of Ozzy's corpse — had already been removed, but there were still plenty of bloodstains scattered about the area.

Mal dropped down and examined the bloodstain on the pavement. He pulled a small sampling device out of his jacket pocket and used it to scrape up a bit of dried blood. "Here we go, this should take care of the ID," he said. Aris, meanwhile, examined the cut in the wall where Owsen's sword had glanced off.

"Guy's got a hell of a backhand," she noted.

"Mm," agreed Mal. The sampler pinged softly. Mal picked it up and hooked it to his JihadLinker. "Let's see, got enough DNA for a match, and... yep, it's Ozzy all right. Or was, anyway."

"So, what now? Do we go and check out the body?"

"No, that might cause more problems than it's worth, especially if the real Feds take an interest. Let's case this for another minute or two, then we'll head back and get some actual breakfast, deal?"

"Deal." That settled, the two checked out the general area of the crime scene. Mal surveyed the cut Aris had been looking at earlier, when he noticed something stuck inside the furrow. It was a tiny matte-black sliver of metal that had gone unnoticed in the initial investigation. Mal got out a pair of tweezers, carefully pulled out the sliver, and deposited it in a sample tube. He whistled and waved Aris over.

"Got something?" Aris asked.

"Yeah, I think I got a chunk of Owsen's sword. Let's get this back to the lab and us to a Denny's or something."

"Denny's" turned out to be Chicago deep-dish pizza picked up in person between a stop in the Blanca R&D lab and crashing in the situation room. Minerva joined them as they waited, stealing a slice of pizza every few minutes and looking into the middle distance while she chewed and monitored the analysis simultaneously. Aris attempted to ask Mal about what Spiral was doing, but got lost halfway through the first answer and asked about recent politics instead.

"Wait a minute. So you're saying they found out who was behind the attacks, got a good idea of where they were based, then gave up after trashing the place and invaded Iraq? Why?"

"Many reasons," Mal said dryly, which was his standard setting, "most of them having nothing to do with terrorism or the attacks on the World Trade Center. The biggest reason was because they could."

"Auuuuugh," Aris gurgled, head in hands. After a few seconds, she looked up again. "Anything good happen? Did the Giants win the World Series?"

"They lost in Game Seven to the Anaheim Angels," Minerva said without looking.

"Never mind."

"I'm getting some results," Minerva said. The status board flickered, changed to

show an enhanced image of the sliver, overlaid in several different colors. “It definitely isn’t Owsenite any more.”

“But it was?” Aris asked.

“As far as I can tell, it used to be. But these stress responses are all wrong. And here,” a section of the view was enlarged, to show a piece of the sliver riddled with holes like a particularly choice mafia informer, “See these? They’ve got residue from a lot of magic being poured through them. So much, in fact, that there’s no particular signature, just noise. But this extends enough that it looks like the entire blade must have been bathed in it.”

Mal looked completely unperturbed at this perturbation. He turned to Aris and raised an eyebrow. “Theories?”

Aris shrugged. “Some enterprising Lyran picked it up and tried to destroy it, causing it to... do whatever it did?”

“Possible.” Mal looked back at the screen and frowned. “That is possible. It could be a remnant of a growth medium, also.”

“Bwah?”

“Well, the Slayer we have — had — wasn’t growing very fast at all; a small fraction of an inch every month at most. If Owsen’s Slayer was regenerating at the same rate, an enterprising Lyran would have had to try and force-grow it back into an actual weapon.”

“Huh.” Aris shrugged again. “I guess we’ll have to ask Owsen when we catch up to him.”

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS  
THURSDAY, MARCH 18, 2004  
1:00 AM

J. FoxGlov grunted as he slammed up against the brick wall. Battered and bleeding, the former Jihaddi had been surprised when he was jumped by a kilted madman, and even more surprised that, despite all of J’s parahuman abilities, the kilted madman was *winning*. Attempting to get on the offensive, J pulled his strength together and let fly a barrage of lightning from his fingers.

His opponent parried the lightning easily, almost languidly, his sword absorbing what he didn’t dodge outright. The flashes lit up the kilted figure’s face, and J was stunned to see Tilden Owsen’s features, twisted in mockery, on his attacker’s face.

“Owsen!?” J said. “The HELL!?! Where, how, why..?”

“Why?” Owsen said. “They always ask that question... Does it really *matter* why? Because I was *bored*. Because you left me to ROT on that stinking island so many years ago. Because a great dark voice on the edge of nothing spoke to me and said you all have to die.” Owsen lunged forward like a cobra, driving the point of his blade through J’s throat. “THERE IS NO WHY!”

**SPIRAL BUILDING**  
**FRIDAY, MARCH 19, 2004**  
**9:00 AM**

“Sir, I’m sorry,” the receptionist repeated for what felt like the hundredth time that morning, “but you can’t see Dr. Fnord. He’s cancelled all appointments and requested that visitors be turned away. Now,” she added flatly, “if you don’t leave, I’ll have to call security.”

Jim Yearnshaw looked over the receptionist and quietly collected the admiral’s rank pin he’d set on her desk as his “invitation.” He concentrated, tapping his cane on the hard stone floor of the lobby for effect as he worked his magic on the wires and chips inside the phone. The hard SMACK of the cane hitting granite blended nicely with the loud BANG coming from the receptionist’s phone.

Distracted by the noise and the smoke, the receptionist turned away from Yearnshaw, who smoothly slipped around the reception desk and towards the bank of elevators at the back of the lobby. A moment later, the receptionist realized her visitor had given her the slip, and she called out behind him. A moment after - that-, the on-duty security attachment, attracted by the smoke and noise, moved to intercept.

Just as the first security officer managed to touch Yearnshaw’s elbow, and that worthy was preparing to send Spiral’s insurance premiums skyrocketing, the last elevator door opened to reveal Jonathan Fnord, stepping out calmly as if altercations happened in the company lobby every other day.

“Sir!” the receptionist called, sprinting up behind Yearnshaw and his security escort. “I’m very sorry sir, my phone... I don’t know what happened, but I’ll have Security escort him out.”

Fnord shook his head. “That’s okay, Janet,” he said reassuringly, waving the guards back, “no need to do that. This won’t take long.” Fnord gestured towards the still open elevator. “Shall we?”

Yearnshaw was silent through the ride up to Fnord’s office. Reaching the office, he dropped into a chair and stretched out. “So, what’s up, Doc?”

Mal smiled thinly. “Jim,” he said. “It’s been a while. I haven’t seen you since the stand-down conference.” Mal’s eyes flicked for an instant to Yearnshaw’s cane, the question obvious in his eyes.

Yearnshaw’s face remained carefully neutral. “Well,” he replied, ignoring the questioning look, “some mutual friends of ours wanted me to get hold of you. Seems,” and here he chuckled slightly, “you haven’t been checking your voicemail.”

Mal blinked, surprised more at the nature of the messenger than the message. “I had wondered who they’d send after me,” he mused. “Why you, though? You never had any special loyalty to the Five or the Project. As I recall, you wished a plague on all our houses and vanished into thin air. Quite vocally and with the appropriate special effects, to boot.”

“I hope you liked the toads,” Yearnshaw said with a sardonic grin. “Designed ‘em

just for you.”

Mal gave his guest the same thin smile. “They were a nice touch.”

Yearnshaw shrugged. “Why they picked me? You’d probably know that better than me. We did manage to reach an agreement, though. Goods for services, that kind of thing. Now,” he said, leaning forward, “You have something I can tell them?”

The former Jihaddi turned Illuminatus turned Jihaddi again looked at his erstwhile comrade for a minute, weighing all the options before mentally shrugging and saying “Our old friend Owsen’s back... somehow, and he’s been causing some trouble.”

Yearnshaw nodded. “Yeah, I watch the news too. That’s it?”

“No, that’s not it. He’s carrying around a Lyran artifact — or a very good knock-off of one — and he’s already killed two Maenads with it, as far as we know.”

Mal sighed. “I’ve been looking into it. If this was just Owsen behaving loopy, I’d have passed it on up to the Five and to hell with him; this project-” Mal gestured at the office “-is more important to the Project than one supernatural nutbar. But... I have a feeling that the War may have just restarted.”

Yearnshaw raised an eyebrow. “Offing Maenads, huh? Well, let’s just get up as quick as we can and stop him, then.”

“This could run deeper than that. Either way, that should be enough to let your make your report and get the Five off your back.”

“Yeah. I’ll keep in touch.” And with that, Yearnshaw stood and made his way out of the office. Mal watched him go, then leaned back in his chair with an explosive sigh.

Why do these things keep getting more and more goddamn complicated?

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## ***14: Council Of War***

**BLANCA MOUNTAIN  
SATURDAY, MARCH 20, 2004  
3:28 PM**

**This is almost everyone,** Minerva told Malaclypse as Damocles and Deidre Greist walked into the conference room. **Houben and Lacroix are coming through the gate now.**

**And then there were nine,** Mal replied, more to himself than anything. **Wonderful! We'll have ourselves a little fellowship! Send them up here as soon as they're through, of course.**

**Right, Boss.**

Mal made sure not to let his emotions show as he surveyed the group. The Jihaddi present came from most walks of the organization. Some members of the senior staff were present; Katze and Damocles were VRDET Directors, Merquoni a commander and former member of the Triumverate Council (with another member en route to the room at that moment), and of course Mal himself. Some of the Jihad's newer blood was present as well, with Killjoy, Delgado and Greist present, and another VRDET junior officer coming up with Shad. A nicely varied mix of ranks and talents, to be sure.

Too bad there weren't a few orders of magnitude more of them.

At that moment, the door to the conference room opened, and the last two members of the meeting walked in. Houben simply nodded at those he knew and beelined for a seat as Lacroix double-took, realizing how many members of the Brass were present and snapping to attention.

“You might want to use less starch,” Mal said dryly as Katze chuckled and waved him to a seat, “the uniforms are all in storage. Besides, we’re a bit few for hierarchy right now.” Lacroix nodded, endeavoured to look a little less pollaxed, and took a seat next to Captain Delgado.

“Now that we’re all here,” Mal said with a hint of a rolled eye, “we might as well get started. Min?”

Minerva set into a summary of what had been up for the past week and a half, giving a report that involved a lot of speaking without saying much. Suffice to say, everyone was pretty sure Owsen was alive and acting even odder than he traditionally did. Most of Minerva’s information was piecing together confused news reports and theorizing. At last she came to the pictures Dee had taken, displaying them on the conference room’s main viewer.

“I’m kind of curious about the sword,” Lacroix said after a moment. “It looks almost like a copy of the Slayer, but I know that thing isn’t it. Any ideas?”

“There’s, um, a few,” Katze said after a moment of uncomfortable silence. Lacroix looked at her questioningly and found her looking another question at Mal. After a moment, he nodded and straightened in his seat.

“Our best guess,” he began, “is that Owsen’s weapon *is* the Slayer — or at least is derived from it. This probably goes back to the Pacifica operation, where the Maenads battled Charn’El. When Charn’El struck Owsen down, he also snapped the Slayer in two.” Mal ploughed through the choking sounds from Damocles, Dee and Lacroix. “We recovered two feet of the blade, which are in Pupp’s care at, uh, wherever he is right now. The section we recovered has been slowly regenerating since it was broken, and we’ve assumed the other section is doing the same.

“Unfortunately, the hilt and the bottom foot of the blade vanished with Charn’El. Even crippled, we can’t even guess at his power; he could probably have rebuilt the Slayer in a matter of months if he escaped. And, well,” Mal sighed, “we were never sure if Owsen died at Pacifica. Now we are.

“Owsen might have gotten the Slayer on his own, wherever he was sent to when Charn’El was exiled, but he also might not have. All we know for sure is that he’s here and has a weapon that looks to be made from what the Slayer’s hilt. I’ve got some guesses as to what’s going on, but they’re only guesses.”

After a few moments of silence, Damocles straightened in his seat. “Just who was in the know on this? I know I wasn’t. When did you plan on telling -”

“The Triumverate and the Maenads knew,” Mal interrupted, “as did a few of the command staff present at Pacifica, and select members of the Admiralty.”

“So what you’re telling me is that the War came to an end with the ultimate weapon broken, with the other half not lodged in B’harne’s chest? What the fuck?”



“What would you have us do?” Mal shot back. “Drop a secret that would send the entire goddamned Jihad’s morale into the pit by telling them the one sure way to win the War was gone?”

“I’d at least let the senior JAO staff know!” Damo responded. “Obviously we have to keep some things from the rank and file, but -”

“And just as obviously, some things have to be kept from even the brass,” Mal replied. “Security was a sieve back then. We’d lost forty percent of our manpower, another ten or twenty was messed up in one way or another, and we couldn’t predict where a Jihaddi would be in six weeks, much less a few years down the road.”

“He’s right,” Captain Delgado spoke up quietly. “Things were too chaotic to be sure who we could trust that kind of information with. Keeping it to the Maenads, who have most of the Lyran-related experience, and the Triumverate makes sense. I only found out last week myself.” Damocles glanced at Delgado and then glared at Mal a moment, obviously wanting to continue the argument, before letting out a sigh, nodding, and settling back in his seat.

“What are our resources, sir?” Lacroix asked, desperately trying to wrench the subject back onto something practical. A few of those present shot him a grateful look.

“Welllll...” Mal said, before waving vaguely about the room. “There’s us, for starters. As well, the resources of VRDET HQ are at our disposal; the nanofacs should be up and running by now. We’ve got a couple of other contacts as well - a Dobe intel guy is on his way in, and we’re trying to get a hold of Felton.”

“There’s no one else?” Katze asked.

“It doesn’t seem that way,” Minerva interjected. “Obviously we weren’t the only people who put two and two together - anyone who made it into the Jihad isn’t going to be that blind about the rest of the world. So yes, there are others, but for one reason or another we can’t get in touch with them. I would guess there are somewhere between a few hundred and a few thousand Jihaddi out there, trying to figure out what’s going on with their own devices, but who can’t get in touch with anyone else. In short, we’ve got to assume that we’re it.”

“So,” Captain Houben said, “let me see if I can get this right. Right now, we’ve gotten a hold of maybe one Jihaddi in a thousand, our resources are all but gone, and one of the most powerful Jihaddi to exist has gone rogue. I suppose it’s not all that bad, then - I was worried things were starting to spiral out of control.”

“The situation is already out of control,” Malaclypse said, his “cut the joking” tone restrained yet obvious. He paused a moment to let the sentence sink in.

“Owsen is out there somewhere,” he continued. “He’s killing every Maenad he can find, and we don’t know why. Let that sink in, boys and girls - he’s hunting Maenads like game, and taken out at least four that we know of so far. He’s either gone rogue, or someone else -” he let the implication hang in the air without pausing, somehow - “has been giving him both power and resources. B’harne and the Lyrans have been gone for five years, but this has either or both of those groups

written all over it.”

Mal almost sighed. “I hate stabs in the dark and wild guesses, but I’ve got to assume that Owsen is working for the Enemy, either directly or indirectly. Whatever’s going on, he’s a threat to all of us right now.”

“Well,” Dee said. “That’s all. For a moment I thought we were in trouble.” Mal looked at Dee, seeming unsure whether to smile or glare at her and settling on an ostentatiously expressionless expression. Dee smirked nervously.

“So,” Houben added, trying to match Dee’s tone of voice, “what do you expect us to do about it?”

“It’s simple, really,” Malaclypse replied. “We’ll just have to do what we do best. We’ll track him down, figure out what he or his patrons want, and then...” he trailed off.

“And then...?” Katze prompted. The answer was obvious to everyone. But it was still Lord Tilden Owsen they were talking about. It was still a man who was a living legend to all but a few of the Jihaddi since the Hidden War started. Every time in the past where Jihaddi turned on Jihaddi, both sides were perverted by B’harnate or Lyran influence. This time, Owsen seemed a tool - but the men and women crowded into Mal’s office had total control of their own perceptions right now.

Mal nodded to Katze, confirming what they all knew to be the answer. “And then,” he said softly.

### RIGHT THAT SECOND...

Owsen looked up from his chess game with Ferg the Feral and blinked. “My ears are burning,” he announced. “Somebody must be talking about me somewhere. Something wicked this way comes, perhaps?” he added with a sly grin.

Ferg didn’t answer. Owsen shrugged. “Ah well, I suppose I should be happy that people remember me. Being away like I was for so long, well... it’s nice to know I still make an impression in people’s lives.”

Again, Ferg remained silent.

Owsen leaned forward over the chessboard. “You know,” he said with sudden intensity, “I’ve really enjoyed our time together, I really have. We never did talk much back in the old days; I was too busy and you, well, frankly I thought you were a bit of a prat. But absence does indeed appear to make the heart grow fonder. All of the others didn’t want to converse, but you! Oh, you have been so helpful in getting this confused old man up to date with the rest of the world. For that,” Owsen continued, rising to his feet and sketching an elaborate bow, “I thank you.”

Ferg continued his impassive silence. Owsen cocked his head suddenly, as if hearing a distant sound. “Hm,” he mused. “It appears I have overstayed my welcome in this town. I do so apologize for having to run, but duty calls!” He leaned over the chessboard and moved his queen off to the side slightly. “Checkmate.”

Ferg didn’t say anything as Owsen gathered up his guns and sword and ducked out a side door. It would have been difficult for him to say something, after all, with

his head sitting upright in his lap, eyes still looking quizzically towards the edge of his dining room table.

### BLANCA MOUNTAIN 4:06 PM

The meeting continued well into the afternoon, as a mix of tentative briefings and less-tentative speculation became the order of the day. The analysis of Owsen's sword seemed to settle it for most people that something Lyran was involved, but what specifically was more up for grabs, as was what to do about it.

"Even if Owsen's the only enemy we've got on the planet right now," Lacroix said, still sounding slightly hesitant to call his former commander a foe, "He's still an enemy here on behalf of the Lyrans of all people. I know this is everyone we could get together in a couple of weeks so far, but why do we have to stop now? Shouldn't we go all-out trying to track people down and try to reform the whole organization?"

There was murmured agreement, but Mal shook his head. "If we could do so easily, I'd be for it. However, a lot of us, especially the senior staff, simply don't want to be noticed by the general public."

"Right, Mister CEO," Minerva chirped.

"Hush, you," Mal responded. "The fact is, a lot of the officer corps is probably hidden well enough that we'd have an easier time finding Owsen. To make our time worth it, we'd have to get a good fraction of the whole organization, and I can't think of a way we can quickly do that which doesn't involve making the Jihad public. We don't want that. Unless anyone else can think of a way to get more of us in here...?" The question was asked with genuine concern. Those present in the room glanced at one another and slowly shook their heads.

"There's another factor," Mal continued. "Owsen may not know — and if he doesn't, the Lyrans certainly don't — that the Jihad has been disbanded. This could be a scouting mission as much as an actual invasion. If their scout — powerful as he is — is sent to Earth only to go silent after a few weeks, they just might assume that we're still a going concern and stay away longer.

"What this does show us is that the Lyrans want to come back, and that we can't dismiss them like we did back in 1999. However, unless they actually do arrive in force again, we have to push them onto a backburner for awhile. Owsen is here, now, killing off some of the best among us. We have to deal with him first, and then worry about what to do next."

"So we've got to try to track down Owsen," Houben said, speaking into the silence. "How do we go about doing that? The man's hit Maenads in Texas and Michigan in a single 24-hour period. If he can hit two guys in opposite sides of the country in two days —"

"That we know of," Minerva interrupted. Houben Looked, rather than merely looked, at her as she continued. "The United States is not the smallest and most-organized country out there, and a lot of things can slip through the cracks. We know

these two for sure, but...”

“Owsen hasn’t been subtle so far,” Aris noted. “These aren’t drive-by shootings or whatever. Both Slider and *Ozzy* were obviously done in with a sword, and that sort of thing catches more notice than other types of murder here for some reason. Between stuff like a slice being taken out of the wall where *Ozzy* died, and the scorch marks on Slider’s body, even the feds wouldn’t think these were everyday things.”

“You’re right, I think,” Mal replied, “which is why we’re going to be focusing on that so far. We can’t predict where he’ll be yet. All we can do is wait for the next hit and see what we can learn from it. Aris and I have already taken a look at *Ozzy*’s scene in Taylor; Slider’s was cleaned up by the time we got there. We’ll have to get ready for the next ones and see what we can do from there, which means some of us will have to spend some time impersonating the Feds. See if we can get a look close up at some of the scenes, catch things they wouldn’t know to look for.”

“Who’s going to be doing that?” Lacroix asked.

“Why, Joseph! Thank you for volunteering!” Mal said brightly. Houben feigned stifling a yawn to hide his half-grin, something Aris didn’t even bother to do. “You can help Mr. Houben and Ms. Merquoni see what they can see!” Lacroix snorted as his two co-conscripts groaned.

With that assignment, the last major item of the meeting was out of the way. As meetings are wont to do, however, this one kept going a little longer, with assorted administrivia and some generic catching-up. When the Jihaddi realized they had little else to cover with what they had at their disposal, they decided to call it quits for the day. With a reminder to keep their Linkers handy (“And charged,” Houben grumbled at all present), the fellowship dispersed.

“All right,” Aris said, plopping down behind her computer at her desk. Lacroix perched on a chair some distance away, and Shad leaned over her shoulder to watch her type. “Obviously, it would be a lot nicer if we could find people before Owsen does, and failing that if we could find them before the local law enforcement does. Our best resources are the Gate, of course, and a four-year-old listing of where all the Maenads were going at the time of The Big Shutdown.” She sighed. “So far, we have *Ozzy* and Slider confirmed dead, Slider in Austin, *Ozzy* in Michigan. Taylor, Michigan. I... should really be doing useful things with this computer.”

“Let me,” Rens suggested helpfully.

Aris poked him in the ribs, then brought up a map of North America, scattered the last known Maenad locations on it in yellow blips, red blips for Slider and *Ozzy*, ran a line between the cities and drew a big circle with that radius around *Ozzy*’s death point. “That,” she said when she was done, “is how far Owsen got in three days.” She looked up at Lacroix. “Can you see from over there?”

Lacroix sheepishly dragged his chair closer, and Aris adjusted the screen. The three of them stared glumly at the picture. “And this is assuming that he can’t teleport or whatever,” Lacroix added, which just made the situation more depressing.”

“Aris?” Minerva’s voice came over the speaker on her computer, causing everyone to jump.

“Yeah, Min?” Aris asked when she’d regained her balance.

“More news. You’re going to want to see this.” The police report popped up on top of the map. “J-Fox is dead.”

**CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**  
**SUNDAY, MARCH 21, 2004**  
**8:30 AM**

“...Really, really -”

“I expect you’ll live,” Houben said, interrupting Aris’ tirade against the evils of Suit wear. “Besides,” he added brightly, “it looks good on you.”

“I didn’t ask your opinion,” Aris grouched. “I can’t understand why you two aren’t complaining about these things.”

“We’ve all been voluntold to go along with this,” Lacroix said, “so let’s just get it over with and see what we can find. So, who’s taking the lead here?” he asked, looking at his fellow Jihaddi.

“You’re the American,” Houben said don’t-pick-meingly. Lacroix looked over at Aris.

“You’re the Terran,” she said, in a similar tone. Lacroix threw up his hands.

“Rank hath its privileges, indeed,” Lacroix sighed under his breath. “Okay, let’s do it.”

The three took a moment to straighten their gear and airs of authority, and strode around the street corner towards the scene of Foxglov’s death. To Lacroix’s mild surprise, there were still a couple of police officers around the scene despite the murder happening on the eighteenth. Swallowing any surprise and not a little nervousness, he walked up to the ranking officer, Houben and Aris flanking him. The police officer looked torn between dismissal of, and intimidation by, the three people approaching.

Lacroix pulled some excellently-forged identification and documents from inside his jacket, presenting them to the cop just as he was opening his mouth. “Good morning, officer,” Lacroix said, barging on into his shtick, “I’m Special Agent Quinn, FBI. These are my associates, Agent Mackenzie -” a gesture to Aris - “and Agent Black. We’re here to take a look at the crime scene.”

“Uhh,” the cop uhhd, “you’re more than welcome to do so, but we’ve already gone over the alley with a fine-toothed comb. Anything you need to look at, we already have covered top to bottom.”

“I think I will be the judge of that, son,” Lacroix said, carefully failing to note the fact that the cop had at least ten years on him. He tossed a couple pages he had produced from his pocket at the cop, who caught and began looking at them right when he was about to get flustered. “There’s something going on here the Bureau wants to take a very close look at, and we need to see in person. Now, if you’ll excuse

us..." Not waiting to see if he'd be excused or not, Lacroix walked around and past the police officer and into the alley where Hanover the Feral, a.k.a. Admiral Foxglov, TRES Alpha, had died.

"Smooth," Houben muttered as they began looking over the alleyway, the two cops watching them from the sidewalk.

"Mal's was cooler," Aris said, taking a sample of the dried blood from the ground to test as Lacroix and Houben looked around further.

"Speaking of people who lack subtlety," Lacroix said, pointing at the wall above Aris. A gash - more of a pit, actually - was dug into the brick wall, between two of the bricks in a way that it wouldn't be noticeable to most.

"Guy seems to hate walls too," Aris mused, confirming Foxglov's DNA in her sampler.

"Here's something else," Houben said. Lacroix and Aris turned to where he was pointing vaguely at the walls of the alley, and a dumpster down one end. Scattered scorch marks played up and down the walls further down the alley, A section of the dumpster was hit by whatever caused the marks, too — it was actually welded shut at two points along the closed lid. Lacroix paced down the alley slowly, running a finger along one of the scorched patterns (and, as an afterthought, taking a small sample, just in case) before coming to a stop at the dumpster. Two inch-wide spots were molten shut along the side of the lid, with fainter patterns along the side where the paint had bubbled or burned.

Lacroix looked at the scorched dumpster for a long moment and sighed. "At least he went down fighting," he said. "I think Owsen must have deflected something big from the admiral. The place he would have been standing is the only part of the alley without *some* damage."

"Well, we've figured out that he can deflect something like Hanover's lightning," Aris said, "but almost every mage or TK in the Jihad could do that to an extent. There's no more slivers of the sword in the wall - at least that I can see, that hole's a foot deep - though. I'm not sure if we've really found anything new here."

"We've found one thing," Lacroix said bitterly. "We've found that Admiral Foxglov is dead for sure."

Aris nodded, looking a little pollaxed herself. Houben looked at Lacroix for a moment before it registered. "You were - you served under the admiral while in TRES, didn't you?"

Lacroix nodded. "Calisse," he said under his breath, as he began walking out of the alley, the other two Jihaddi following. He only just remembered to slip back into FBI mode long enough to get his papers back from the cop and stress the confidentiality of the federal part of the investigation. If Agent Quinn seemed more aggravated coming out of the alley than he did going in, the police officer didn't even bother to ask why.

They found J's body in the morgue, nicely toetagged for identification. Aris pulled

out the drawer and pulled down the sheet.

“Well,” Shad said a moment later, “I’m no specialist, but my guess is single sword thrust to the throat.”

“Mmm,” Aris agreed, slightly green around the gills.

Lacroix frowned. “I’m no expert, but wasn’t Admiral Foxglov... well, a fox?”

“Yeah, some sort of kitsune,” Aris agreed. “But if he was in human form when he died, I guess he stayed this way.”

Lacroix had the camera out, one that Minerva and Dee had both assured him would record in as many spectra as they had use for. He took a couple wide shots and three of the throat wound from different angles. As he looked for more nicks to photograph, Aris poked around the stab wound magically to see if she could find any more traces of the sword.

“Well, it either didn’t shed any more pieces, or the cops picked everything out,” she said when she didn’t find anything.

“Speaking of the cops, we should probably get out of here,” Shad said. Lacroix pocketed the camera, Aris replaced the corpse, and the three investigators high-tailed it back to Blanca before anyone noticed they were there.

“I couldn’t find anything in the soot you collected,” Minerva told Lacroix over the intercom as the once-and-now-again Jihaddi collapsed into a convenient chair with a sigh. “It’s just scorched brick.” Lacroix nodded.

“It might not have been, though,” Minerva continued on, not quite taking the hint. “It was worth a shot.”

“Yeah,” Lacroix said noncommittally. “I should start getting my stuff together, anyway; I still have my civilian life to deal with on Monday. Could you get the Gate up at noon?”

“Sure thing,” Min replied, closing the channel.

At that moment, Aris came into the room, back in her usual attire (Lacroix remained in the suit, as one of the few Jihaddi who didn’t despise them; Katze had considered recording Lacroix saying that as proof that such a Jihaddi could exist.) and obviously still in a foul mood. Lacroix began to rise to his feet, both to greet someone who was still, nominally, his superior, and to save a second or two getting to the door if she didn’t want company. Houben came in a few moments later, as Aris sat at one of the workstations, pulling up the map the three had consulted the previous evening.

Aris simply stared at the map for a few seconds before deleting J. Foxglov’s old location in Raleigh and adding a new red dot and date next to Chicago. “Shit,” she said. “I mean, shit. We have to take this bastard down.”

“Like there wasn’t any incentive before?” Shad said.

“This is personal.” Aris shook her head. “Okay, I didn’t really know Slider. And I met Ozzy once or twice when I was in TRES—”

“You were in TRES? Wait. You were in TRES. I keep forgetting.” Shad shook his

head. "Sorry. Go on."

Aris gave him a look before continuing. "Anyway, *Ozzy* never made much of a good impression on me. Neither did *Deadlock*, for that matter. *J-Fox* was the only guy who really made me feel at home there. And now this asshole's gone and killed him. I am not happy."

"You and I both," Lacroix grumped. "The admiral was my CO through my entire time in the Corps."

"You're at least a homo sapiens," Aris said, still glaring into the monitor. "Didn't have to worry about people like Admiral Bond or - *JFox* managed to keep that shit down, at least." (Lacroix shot a question at Houben, who winced at the mention of Admiral Bond, but mouthed "I'll tell you later" at him.) "And now Owsen decides to go traitor and - argh!" Aris suddenly came to her feet, causing both Lacroix and Houben to jump slightly.

"I know," Lacroix said. "We need to figure out what to do about this. I know *I* just felt a little more personal incentive slip into all this." He shook his head. "I think this crime scene stuff just became a lot more voluntary. I want to find this guy and - well, we'll figure that part out when we get there. I think I want a piece of this, though."

"I called dibs, so you can just wait your turn," Aris said curtly, though it was obvious she had cooled at least a little from earlier. Lacroix found himself wishing his own fuse burned that quickly.

"Oh, of course - rank hath its privileges," Lacroix said. "Let's get what we learned this morning together, anyway, and then we can see what has to be done next."

"If you're serious, we should probably figure out some way to get you unshackled from your day job," Houben cut in, speaking to Lacroix. "Owsen doesn't strike me as the type to stick to evenings and weekends."

"Augh, yeah," Lacroix muttered. He knew about his obligations to *Skyview*, but with the past day his priorities were getting rattled. "I'll see if I can figure out something inconspicuous, and if not I'll talk to you guys about any better ideas." He sighed. "Just one more thing on the plate."



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## ***15: Catching Up With Old Friends***

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SOMEWHERE IN KANSAS  
WALKING ALONG I-70 HEADING EAST  
TUESDAY, MARCH 23, 2004  
12:00 AM

Owsen strolled along the edge of the highway, whistling a happy tune. Traffic this time of night was nonexistent, and Owsen was making the most of the isolation. His mission had taken him on some unexpected turns, but it wasn't anything he couldn't handle. For the moment, there was just him and the road, and that was more than enough. He finally knew where his next target was, and that he'd be stationary for a bit longer.

Then all of a sudden, Owsen was joined by another presence.

OWSEN.

The voice echoed hollowly in Owsen's skull.

OWSEN. ATTEND.

Owsen immediately dropped to one knee, bowing his head. "Great One! You honor me with your presence!"

THE HUNT?

"It goes well, Great One. I have already eliminated a number of the Ferals. The eldest and her mate still elude me, though. No matter; her time will come, now or during the Scourge."

INDEED. AND THE SWORD?

"I do not know as yet, Great One. None of the prey have given me any hints as to where the Jihaddi hid it."

YOUR HUNT TAKES UP MORE TIME THAN YOU WOULD LET ME KNOW, I THINK. Owsen seemed ready to object, but the voice cut him off. NO MATTER. ATTEND, OWSEN. YOUR SOLDIERS WILL AWAIT YOU IN THE NEXT TOWN. YOU WILL SEND THEM TO LOOK FOR THE SWORD, WHILE YOU CONTINUE TO HUNT.

"Of course, Great One. I thank you."

OF COURSE YOU THANK ME. AM I NOT YOUR LORD?

Sure enough, when Owsen walked into the mostly-empty truck stop at the next exit, they were waiting for him. Seven of them, standing in a loose semicircle outside the main building, each one keeping their backs upright and eyes forward with a vaguely military bearing. Owsen chuckled softly as he approached; these new soldiers of his reminded him of the soldiers he used to command, so very earnest in their presentation.

The man in the center of the semicircle noticed Owsen first. He took three steps towards the swordsman, then went to one knee on the tarmac. Behind him, the other soldiers followed suit. "Lord Herald," the soldier said formally, "We are charged to aid you in your quest by the High Mage himself. Will you accept our aid?"

Owsen gestured for the soldiers to rise. "I accept with gratitude," he replied. Owsen took the opportunity to look his new charges over. "Are there more of you?" he inquired.

The leader nodded. "We were the closest to your position, but there are another two dozen of us scattered across the continent. They will gather when you call for them, but for now we will relay commands if you see fit."

"Good, good." Owsen looked his new troops over. "We have a lot to do, and not much time to do it in if we're going to be ready for the Scourge." He motioned towards the truck stop. "So let's get some coffee and start making plans. Your job will be to hunt for the light while I eliminate the Albino's pups..."

SIoux CITY, IOWA  
THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 2004  
6:45 PM

He had to admit, he was a little disappointed. It was, after all, common courtesy to show up after you'd accepted an invitation. He would make a show of checking his watch, had he worn one, to make sure he was here on time since his prey obviously wasn't. Instead, a dozen robed figures stood in Owsen's path, and one lay at his feet in a spreading pool of crimson. One of them spoke.

"Lord Owsen... what you are doing is madness."

"Ah, the priests of Grimace," Owsen said, fidgeting with his sword as he looked them over. "It's a pity that Blackblood sends someone else to do his fighting for him. I always recall him being more of a trodair, but people change over time. Of course,

time is not something we have when the Scourge is coming.” He bright his sword up, flexing his fingers around the hilt as he prepared to strike.

“What is the Scourge?” the lead priest asked, interested in any hint at Owsen’s motives.

“The Scourge?” Owsen lowered his sword and relaxed. It was always nice when someone took an interest in your work. “Oh, that’s when the Earth will be purged of the wicked,” he said cheerfully, more than happy to notify the priests of their impending demise.

“Purged?” asked one priest.

“At what cost?” asked a second.

“Who decides? Who is wicked?” asked a third.

“Hm? Yes, I suppose that most of the population qualifies as ‘wicked’ to one degree or another. Oh well, you can’t make an omelet without breaking six billion eggs...”

One of the priests shouted angrily. “We will defend the Earth from whatever threatens our world!”

“Oh, no, there is no defending against the Scourge. You’re all going to die, and really soon now. Sooner than soon, in your case. It is easier for you this way.” There was a flicker of calculated malice in Owsen’s eyes as his lips broke into a mad grin. “Even Grimace can’t save you from the Scourge, you know. Has he helped you at all here?” he asked.

The lead Brother’s voice faltered. This wasn’t part of Grimace’s fight against B’harnii, but an intra-Jihad matter. Grimace was unlikely to show himself again until B’harnii did. The priest shut away his doubts and tapped an inner well of resolve. “We will stop you, Lord Owsen!”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. Like I said, it’s easier this way. You’ll thank me when you’re dead.”

The priests gripped their staves nervously. On the leader’s signal, they rushed forward. Owsen raised the dark Barney-Slayer high and charged into the morass. The priests were talented but no match for Owsen, his great sword-slashes breaking staves and their wielders in two. While invigorating, the fight was over all too briefly, and he looked over their fallen bodies with scornful disappointment.

Behind him, a human shape stepped out of a shadow wherein the keenest observer would have sworn there was nothing. Owsen sensed the footsteps of someone approaching him from behind, but he didn’t need to turn around to know who it was; the stink of one of the Albino’s chosen permeated the room, and he smiled, turning around slowly. “Blackblood. I’m glad you could make it. You’re a little late to be late, but better late than never.”

“Tilden. I’m sorry I couldn’t be here. I had some things to take care of—” Samhain looked beyond Owsen at the crumpled forms of his brethren, and the glistening red film coating the Jihaddi’s sword. He stared aghast, jaw working in a futile attempt to loose the words of some sort of response. “What are you doing?”

“Killing you.” Owsen charged forward. Samhain sidestepped the coming attack, bringing out his own swords with a singing of steel. Owsen pivoted, bringing his sword around, and the Slayer clanged into his wakizashi.

“Tilden. Jace. End this,” Samhain demanded.

“Oh, I’m trying, but you’re not letting me.”

Owsen swung the dark Barney-Slayer with such force that Samhain needed both swords to block the overhand chop, opening a hole in his defense. He saw this weakness and continued hammering against Samhain’s crossed blades, raining great blows that pressed him back. Samhain gave ground, deflecting the kick aimed at his abdomen with his wrist. The dark Slayer came down again, but this time Samhain was prepared. The blades clashed again, and the black Barney-Slayer leapt from Owsen’s hands, tumbling end-over-end through the air and clattering on the ground.

The assault had the intended effect, though. Samhain had been driven outside into the sunlight where his strength would be lessened, and with his rage reaching the boiling point at his precious sword being removed from his grasp, Owsen charged at him bare-handed. The fury of his attack caught Samhain off-guard, and Owsen struck blindly, loosening a couple of Samhain’s molars with his fist. Owsen leapt at him, fastening his fingers around the Fleet Commander’s throat, and then he felt the pain in his abdomen. He staggered back, eyes lowering to the sight of the wakizashi struck through his torso.

He grimaced, and wrapped his fingers around the hilt, pulling the blade out with some effort. It hadn’t seemed to pierce anything extremely vital, and on the upside, it left Samhain with only one sword with which to defend himself. Owsen smiled. “Touche,” he said, and struck again, this time with Samhain’s own short sword. Samhain deflected the slash with his katana, but with the daylight beating down on him his reactions felt sluggish. He glanced skyward as he parried another attack; there was potential in the scattered cloud cover, if it could be nudged...

He reached out with his mind, probing the clouds, a muttered incantation rolling off his tongue. As he refocused, he realized a lull in the assault, but too late; Owsen charged up, swinging at him with his great black blade, and Samhain parried. With a ringing snap, the ancient-forged steel of his katana was broken.

The sky darkened, urged into a piling storm by his spell. He was without his swords, but with the sunlight blotted he was not defenseless. Owsen slashed and hacked at Samhain, but the dark Slayer met only shafts formed of the stuff of the shadows themselves. Each swing splintered the vague dark forms, and Owsen pressed forward through the defenses, until the blade of his sword swept through the Fleet Commander’s neck.

Except that Samhain was no longer standing there. The head toppled off of the illusion formed of darkness, and a shadow scuttled beneath Owsen’s feet. He turned as Samhain’s form rose up from his own shadow, and as it did, its fingers lengthened into long Claws. As shadows coalesced into Blackblood’s obsidian Maenad form, a

cold win began to blow in, and a light rain began to patter on his glassy skin.

“Your parlor tricks are growing tiresome,” Owsen said. He raised his hand and muttered a few harsh syllables, and the area was bathed in a bright, diffused violet light that chased the shadows away. “Your shadow puppetry won’t work with no shadow. You have nowhere to hide now, so why not make this easier on yourself?”

“Why not you?” Blackblood retorted, flicking his Claws as he waited for the Irishman’s next attack.

Owsen smiled. “As you wish.” The air shimmered bluish-purple as Owsen’s magic reacted with the remnants of Blackblood’s storm spell. Suddenly, the obsidian Maenad was engulfed in violet flames. The increasing rain beat heavily upon them, but did nothing to quench the magical fire. Owsen stepped forward and casually thrust his sword into the quivering inferno. “Pity,” he said. “I was hoping you’d be more fun, but you asked politely and you are my friend.”

Samhain slumped forward as the sword was twisted and withdrawn from his sternum. Owsen raised the black Slayer to deliver the coup de grace, and as his flesh cooked away, the last of his life draining from his body, Samhain sought with his mind and touched the sky...

The air was torn asunder by a streak of blue-white lightning, drawn to Owsen’s uplifted sword. It slammed through his body, vaporizing the soles of his boots, and he was hurled, smoldering lightly, through the air. He hit the ground hard, rolling limply into a heap. His sword bounced to the ground a few yards away where it stopped, clinking softly as the metal cooled.

When the thunder peal had died away, a surviving Brother came out into the rain and stepped carefully toward the two bodies laying on the ground. The Fleet Commander was lost, there was little doubt of it. He looked over to Owsen.

The fallen Maenad was pushing himself to his feet, stunned, but not defeated. Unbelievable. This could not be permitted. The Brother rose up his staff, running forward to bring the length of oak down upon the base of Owsen’s skull.

A gunshot rang out. A puff of blood erupted from the Brother’s throat, followed by a crimson trickle from the hole left in its wake. He staggered forward, dropped his staff, and collapsed.

Owsen looked up. A short distance away, voices spoke Lyran words.

**FAIRBANKS GENERAL HOSPITAL  
FAIRBANKS, ALASKA  
MONDAY, MARCH 29, 2004  
11:30 PM**

The man in room 2401 of the city hospital was simultaneously the most famous and most anonymous man in Fairbanks. Nobody knew who he was; he’d been dumped outside the emergency room by persons unknown in the late spring of 1999, comatose and horribly injured. The local police had gone completely crazy trying to find out who had beat this man to within an inch of his life and where it

had been done; they never did figure it out. He had remained in a coma for the last five years, completely unconscious despite showing no signs of extended brain injury. The doctors couldn't figure it out. Some series of anonymous benefactors kept paying the hospital for the mystery man's room and board, so they kept him there.

The man in room 2401 had slept through the last five years, and continued to sleep through the sight of the man in black silently opening up his window and climbing through. Owsen reflected that the last time he had seen Deadlock, the Maenad had been a great deal livelier. "No, this won't do at all," he muttered, his eyes flashing violet. "I need him able to talk."

Owsen placed his hands above Deadlock's head and concentrated. His hands glowed and sent a pulse of energy into the comatose Maenad. Deadlock stirred for the first time in years, his eyes opening. Still unfocused, their gaze fell on Owsen's face.

"Hiya, Deadlock," Owsen said happily, "did you miss me?" Before the Maenad could reply, Owsen lunged, grabbing Deadlock by the throat and slamming him up against the outer wall. "We need to talk," Owsen continued, his tone never changing.

Deadlock, still not entirely conscious, could only stare, eyes wide, at the grinning apparition in front of him. "Wha?" he croaked.

"You and I need to talk," said Owsen, "about my sword."

"Your—"

"My *sword*, Deadlock. The Barney-Slayer. You know where it is, don't you?"

Recognition finally flooded Deadlock's memory. "Owsen? How—" he began, but Owsen cut him off with a rough shake.

"How isn't important, Deadlock. What is important is you remembering where you put my sword." Owsen gave him another shake. "I don't really want to make this as painful as I could, my boy. But if you don't start talking, I'll make you wish that you were still in a coma."

"I-I don't know, dammit! They took it away from me... the sword, my rank, everything. Go find those damn loose cannons, *they* ought to know!"

Owsen's grin widened. "Not a good answer, my boy. Now I'm going to have to get... rough."

Something in the back of Deadlock's mind realized that, no matter what he said at this point, Owsen (or whoever it was impersonating him, since Owsen was supposed to be dead) was not going to let him get out of this unscathed. With this realization in mind, Deadlock concentrated furiously. As he did so, Owsen's clothing began to smolder.

Owsen blinked. "That's right, I had forgotten you had that neat little trick," he noted, his grin never slipping. "But I've picked up a few tricks since you sent me into Limbo..." Owsen's eyes flashed violet once again, and flames the same color began to lick around Deadlock's torso. The pyrokinetic tried to absorb the flames and use the heat against his opponent, but to Deadlock's shock, the purple fire refused to

obey him. Moreover, it hurt him!

Gritting his teeth, Deadlock continued to will the flames to attack Owsen. The flames continued to disobey him. Owsen continued to hold Deadlock pressed to the wall, grinning. "Come on, Deadlock," he urged, "tell me where the Slayer is, and I'll stop hurting you."

"Don't - aigh - know..."

"Have your way, then." Owsen's purple fire increased in intensity, covering Deadlock's entire torso, slowly covering his arms and legs. Deadlock gasped in pain as the fire began to consume him. "Last chance."

"I - IIIIIIEEEAAAAA!"

Owsen shrugged. "Oh well," he said, as the flames covered Deadlock's head, "so much for mercy." The Maenad shrieked in Owsen's grasp, thrashing around as the magical fire burned away his flesh. The thrashing lasted a few seconds, ceasing as the fire finally burned the life out of Deadlock the Feral. Once the thrashing had stopped, the purple fire vanished, leaving only a charred ruin in its wake.

A second after the end, two orderlies burst through the door, attracted by the screaming coming from inside Deadlock's room. Owsen gave them a jaunty wave, dropped the Maenad's body and threw himself backwards out the window. By the time the orderlies could get there, he had vanished in the night.

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## ***16: A Short Dalliance With The Police***

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**THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 2004  
8:51 AM**

Tangaroa poked a few buttons on his Jihadlinker and dug into his personal notes. Fleet Commander Samhain's address, at least as of four years ago, was there. He pushed a few more buttons and checked the link to see if there was any information about why the Jihad was reactivating. There was nothing new, at least nothing that his permissions gave him rights to read.

He put the Linker back in his pocket and stared out the bus's window at the desert expanse. He had hoped to find leisure, not duty, upon his return to the States. He might have scrambled to get here today, but come to think of it, this trip was years in the making. He would relax and enjoy it.

**HOUSTON, TEXAS  
12:55 PM**

Tangaroa walked down the row of houses until he arrived at what he thought to be the right address. He stopped and checked this against the address he'd copied to his JihadLinker four years ago. This was the right place. Time to see if it still was.

There was no answer to Tangaroa's knock on the door. It was the middle of the day. Perhaps they were out. He tried looking in a window, but the shades were down.



He walked around the house, looking for a sign that this was still the right place.

When Tangaroa reached the backyard, he knew something was wrong. There was no back door. The remains of one were in pieces under the doorframe, which still bore the telltale signs of having been barricaded with police tape. Tangaroa dodged a fleeing cat as he stepped into the house to find the insides were torn to pieces as well. Furniture was chopped open and walls were ripped into. The place was a mess and from the look and smell of it, had been a mess for a few weeks. Whoever or whatever had done this had to have been very powerful to get away with it in Samhain's own house. It didn't look like a battle scene, though. There was no blood, and things were smashed where they stood rather than being upended and tripped over.

The glint of glass on the fireplace mantel caught Tangaroa's attention. It was the pieces of a demolished picture frame which someone, after the fact of its destruction, had placed on top of the photograph it once held to keep the picture in place. Tangaroa pulled out the near part of the photo, which had apparently been cut in two pieces with the frame. It showed a young Samhain sitting alongside former Fleet Commanders Augustus and Serbeus and some TRES and MAUL officers who Tangaroa didn't recognize.

There was a soft padding noise as the cat jumped back into the house, drawing Tangaroa's attention away from the picture. He looked up and heard the heavier sound of footsteps outside.

"Sam?" Tangaroa called out.

It wasn't Samhain. "*This is the FBI! Come out with your hands up!*"

Damn it! Tangaroa had just started thinking he didn't need to run away from the police anymore, but here he'd stumbled into them. Or were they even looking for him in particular? He wasn't going to stick around to find out.

The worst thing he could do was to try to fight his way out. If he started leaving a body count, that would just get him in more trouble. The next dumbest thing he could do was go out the front door, but with the back exit covered, the only other options were to surrender or go out a window, which would be just as bad. He ran for the front door, hearing someone start running after him. If there was little chance of getting away from whatever was out there, then he might consider giving up.

Tangaroa swung the door open and ran out, expecting the worst but seeing nothing. The coast was clear. He ran out into the street, thinking escape a possibility. A black car with tinted windows turned a corner on his far left and drove towards him. Tangaroa looked back over his shoulder and saw it. Bad news. He ran away from the car, looking up just in time to see another car shoot out into the intersection in front of him and turn in his direction.

The driver saw Tangaroa in the middle of the road and tried to spin away from him, but it wasn't enough. With only a second to react, Tangaroa quickly cast his shield spell at the oncoming vehicle. The spinning car slammed its side into the

shield and stopped with a rocking bounce. Tangaroa turned and ran down a side street, glancing back. The car that had been behind him stopped to avoid hitting the one he'd just nearly been creamed by, and people were getting out to asses the damage. Good.

Tangaroa got off the street and started going through properties and side roads, intending to get out of view of everybody so that he could calmly walk onto a main street and disappear into the crowd. Someone's backyard gate was padlocked. Tangaroa cast his fire blade spell and chopped through the lock, then ran through the yard. A pair of dogs charged and barked at him, and he waved a flaming sword to keep them at bay. The shorter one stayed clear of the fire, but the larger one looked willing to be broiled to defend its territory. It also looked...

"Heel, soldier!" Tangaroa shouted at the dog. It stopped its charge and sat down. Tangaroa saluted and kept going. They didn't call it the Doberman Empire for nothing. That dog was one of theirs, trained well and sold or given away to a good home.

Tangaroa kicked a hole through the decrepit wooden fence at the far side of the yard and ran down a side alley, only to find it blocked off by a chain link fence. Not that that was a problem.

The alley opened to a main road. Tangaroa crossed it as calmly and quickly as possible and took the first side alley he came to. Then he started running again, but it wasn't long before his breathing grew heavy and he stopped. After living a sedentary life the past three years, he wasn't in a shape to run like this.

He heard footsteps behind him. From the sound of it, it was someone who was very much in a shape to run like this.

Tangaroa started running again and turned a corner. Whoever was chasing him was closing the distance quickly, but it was only one person. He might be able to take him. He looked around. This was a quiet place between tall buildings. There would be no witnesses, but if he killed the guy, he'd be in a pile of trouble.

He had a spell that might work. He formed a ball of energy, putting more and more power into it as it grew to the size of a beach ball and larger. The footsteps were getting closer. When he thought it was enough, he rose the ball several feet up into the air and waited.

His chaser turned the corner, saw him standing nonchalantly, and drew a gun.

Tangaroa smiled at the agent. "That was a nice jog. Let me catch my breath a minute and we can go on for another lap."

The agent wasn't amused. "You're under arrest, smartass."

Tangaroa didn't resist. He was amazed at how quickly and efficiently he was taken down, but didn't have time to admire it. He commanded the energy ball to strike. It hit the agent squarely in the back of the head, and the man's heavy body collapsed on him.

"Get off of me." Tangaroa pushed the unconscious agent away and stood up. He heard new footsteps approaching. It was someone much slower, but he didn't want

to wait around to see who it was. Besides, he didn't know how long the agent would be out. He ran out the alley into the street, and if he'd been a little more careful and less panicked, he might have been able to dodge the car.

Tangaroa rolled off the side of the hood that hadn't been crushed when it hit his shield. This time the car had actually hit him — while the shield took the brunt of the force, the bumper bent under the shield and struck his ankle. It didn't feel broken, but there was sure to be a bruise.

The driver, a nerdy-looking little slip of a guy, came around to look over the damage to the car and gawked at finding the person he hit still in one piece after a collision at that speed. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Tangaroa looked up. "I'm still thinking it over." He rose to a knee. Didn't seem too bad.

The driver spoke into a little handheld radio. "I think the guy I hit is all right."

Another voice spoke back. "That might be him."

The driver stepped back, drew a gun from his jacket, and aimed it at Tangaroa. "Sorry. I am a federal agent, and you are under arrest. Please make no sudden moves."

Tangaroa grumbled and lifted a hand at the driver. "Another one." He fired a force beam at the agent, knocking the man on his back and sending his gun and radio skittering across the road. "Sorry."

Tangaroa got up and tried running. His ankle held. Behind him, the befuddled agent sat up. "Hey! Stop!"

Tangaroa's ankle was getting worse, but he finally got to a main street and slowed to a walk. Safety... then he saw a very familiar car screech around a corner and speed in his direction. Damn it again.

He couldn't run far with the bruised ankle. He looked around for a place to hide or escape. There was a McDonald's a short distance away. Given the design, it had been built by the Brothers of Grimace. Every McDonald's built since 1994 has either an old-fashioned tunnel or a teleporter somewhere in the back, and Empire soldiers are trained to recognize McDonald's architectural styles. This would be his escape.

Tangaroa dashed into the building and rushed into the kitchen before anyone could confront him. "This is a surprise inspection!" he announced, adding "I'm an inspector." He looked around for signs of the escape passageway that should be somewhere around here. He tried the walk-in freezer. Here it was... damn it.

It was a teleporter. Tangaroa hated teleporting. His natural magic defenses played havoc on attempts to teleport him, and it was only a matter of time before he was dumped off in the middle of something or at a fatal height. If that wasn't bad enough, it hurt like hell.

However, he didn't have much of a choice here. He summoned his powers together and started casting the teleportation spell as all Doberman mages are trained to do. Glowing runes appeared in a circle on the floor. Tangaroa stepped inside and

continued spellcasting. He felt the first twinges of discomfort as the spell began to wrap around him and his body fought back. He tried to feel out for destinations. Home base should be a magical bright spot, clearly visible to a mage, but it wasn't there... that's right. Delta had been closed down. In fact, there weren't very many spots at all. Tangaroa picked one at random and finished the spell. A twinge of sharp pain came over him. He tried to dampen his resistance and maintain the spell at the same time, but the pain was getting worse and he was losing focus on the destination. He didn't know if he could hold on...

SCOTTSSLUFF, NEBRASKA  
10:55 PM

Tangaroa blinked his eyes.

"He's awake", someone said.

Tangaroa looked up and found himself in what appeared to be a hospital room, with people who appeared to be doctors or nurses watching over him. His initial disorientation faded within seconds and he sat up, surprising his keepers.

"How are you... how are you feeling?" one asked, startled to receive a non-verbal answer so soon after the patient woke.

"You should lie down." another said, putting a hand on his shoulder. Tangaroa obliged for the moment.

He was still not sure whether this was really a hospital or a set created by people who had captured him. One man who appeared to be a doctor began asking questions. "What is your name?"

So many to choose from! Tangaroa spoke the first one to become clear in his mind. "Jack Cole." Oops. That one had an arrest warrant attached to it. However, "Jack" and "Cole" are common enough names and the doctor wasn't speaking Czech, so it was unlikely that this name's past would catch up with him here.

"Are you homeless?" the doctor asked.

"Yes." Tangaroa had abandoned his apartment in Japan without any plan to continue payments. Within the next two months he could expect the landlord to notice he wasn't there, pawn the items he left, and rent it out again. His quarters at Base Delta, at last report, were under a few tons of rubble.

Tangaroa felt it was time for him to start asking the questions. He reared up on an elbow, surprising the nurse who had earlier begged him to lie down. She did not argue this time.

Tangaroa's first question was, in fact, two. "Where am I, and how did I get here?"

The name of the hospital was unfamiliar to him. For the second part, they gave him a line about finding him in a McDonald's freezer and how he was lucky he hadn't caught hypothermia or frostbite. Did that mean the teleportation spell hadn't worked, or had he been teleported to another McDonald's constructed by the Dobermans?

There was no mention of a police chase, criminal investigation, or anything like that. In fact, there was a conspicuous lack of an officer present in the room or by the door. This suggested to Tangaroa that the spell had worked, but he still didn't know where he was. He could find that out later. For now, he wanted to get out. Asking the name of the town might make them question his mental competence, as if being found unconscious in a fast-food freezer didn't already do that. He had to play it straight and confident.

"Am I free to go?"

Technically, he was. The hospital's policy was that they could not force anybody to submit to treatment they did not want. From a medical standpoint, however, his leaving did not seem like a good idea, and the staff tried to persuade him to stay.

"We'd rather you stay the night. We might want to run some tests to make sure you're alright."

"I'm fine."

"But.."

"I'm fine." Tangaroa repeated, stepping out of bed to press the point. The medical staff had not changed him into a hospital gown but had kept him in his clothes for fear of hypothermia, and this became a great symbolic support in arguing for his discharge. "Get me a bill and I'll send the money to you."

"It's the middle of the night. Do you have a place to stay?"

"I'll find a place." Tangaroa looked around and felt his pockets. He was still in his clothes, but...

"Where are my things?"

After talking the local police out of his JihadLinker, Tangaroa stepped out on the street and reported in on his present location and what had happened in Texas. "FC not home. House ransacked. Cops all over. Was seen. Used magic. Not sure how serious. Where to now?"

A reply came quickly. Someone was burning the midnight oil. "Get out of sight and stand still. I'll portal you in to Blanca."

Tangaroa responded in the extreme negative. "Like hell you will. I'm taking the bus."

Tangaroa knew that Blanca was in Colorado, but didn't know where. He'd just take a bus into the state and call in or directions from there. He wasn't aware that there were no directions, as Blanca was under three miles of mountain with no entry points other than a hidden, seven mile long tunnel rigged with booby-traps, but it was a nice plan in theory.

His JihadLinker rang. Being back in full civilian mode, he had left it turned on and on receive. It was a message telling him to go to "Spiral". What's Spiral? Tangaroa started typing out such a response, and paused to look up. He saw a billboard advertising a high-powered low-power laptop computer from Spiral Corporation, with their inspiring slogan: "Limitations are Obsolete".

That's right. After disbanding, someone at VRDET had pulled together a bunch

of the Jihad's R&D shops into the technology business. He had forgotten about it, but evidently they'd made it a success. Using his Linker to access the Web, he found that Spiral headquarters was located in Denver. He was already headed right towards it.

**SPIRAL BUILDING**  
**FRIDAY, APRIL 2, 2004**  
**10:13 AM**

Maria Juarez was a recent addition to the Spiral Corporation family, having only been on the front reception desk for the last three months. She'd been enjoying her job; one of Dr. Fnord's quirks was that all his visitors had to check in at the front desk before going up, which meant that the fresh-out-of-college receptionist got to buzz in famous people of all stripes, up to and including movie stars, the governor and Vice President Robinson.

Recently, though, the visitors had been... different. A seemingly steady stream of people had been moving in and out of Dr. Fnord's office at odd hours, and most of them had been slightly strange themselves. Her supervisor had told Maria that this sort of thing was normal for Spiral, that the Old Man had bouts of weirdness and that this too will pass, but Maria had her doubts about the whole thing.

Those doubts were magnified as a young man dressed entirely in black walked in through the big glass doors, looked around, then marched straight up to her desk with a decidedly military bearing.

The man cleared his throat and inquired, "Excuse me, but I'm looking for a Dr. Fnord. I understand you could direct me to him."

Maria just looked at him blankly for a second. How could somebody walk into the offices of the Spiral Corporation and not know who Dr. Fnord was? "I'm sorry, but Dr. Fnord is very busy, and he doesn't take visitors without an appointment." She fixed the stranger with an icy glare. "Especially people who just walk in off the street and don't even know who he is."

"I do have an appointment."

Maria stifled a derisive snort, instead choosing to roll her eyes at the statement. "No, you don't."

"I was invited."

Maria pulled up the doctor's schedule on her computer and glanced at it. "I'm sorry, sir," she said, putting as much ironic emphasis on the word as she could, "but Dr. Fnord doesn't have any appointments today."

"I insist."

The receptionist sighed heavily. "And you would be?"

"Mr. Tang."

"You don't look Asian."

"I get that from time to time."

Maria picked up her phone and dialed the number for Dr. Fnord's office. "Hello,

Doctor? There's a Mr. Tang here in the lobby to see you. He says he has a meeting, but I don't see anything on your schedule and he's very insistent, and you've had a lot of guests like that recently... okay."

She hung up. "The Doctor is waiting to see you. Take the elevator to the thirtieth floor, first door on the left."

Mr. Tang nodded. "Thank you."

Tangaroa did as instructed. Riding in the elevator, he was mildly surprised to hear a light pop tune that he recognized as a big hit in Japan. Tangaroa blinked, then shrugged mentally.

He reached the office without incident and cautiously opened the door. Inside, sitting in front of a wide panoramic view of the city and the surrounding landscape was a large wooden desk strewn with papers, and behind the desk was a older man with white hair, intently scribbling on a sheet of paper. Tangaroa entered the office and sat down quietly in one of the chairs reserved for guests. The white-haired man finished whatever he was writing, then looked up. "Ah. Warrior Tangaroa," he said.

Tangaroa nodded once. "Dr. Fnord, I hear that you can get me in contact with Malaclypse the Seeker. I need to speak to him."

To Tangaroa's surprise, the white-haired man sitting at the desk in front of him changed. In the blink of an eye, his hair changed color, wrinkles vanished, subtle angles in the shape of his face changed, and before Tangaroa had time to register the changes, the old man had been replaced by the well-known features of Malaclypse the Seeker.

"I suppose that I can get you in touch with him," Mal said dryly. "Now, I suspect you have questions, yes?"

Tangaroa's jaw flapped open for a second in shock, before he gathered his wits and pressed on. "Sir, I couldn't find the Fleet Commander — from appearances, he was long gone — and I don't have any leads on the other Doberman command personnel. We could try going to WEDJEE and seeing if there's anyone there."

"You've been pulled off field duty for the moment, Warrior." Mal said flatly. "Specifically, I called you here because, as your little escapade with the FBI showed, having field operatives blundering around without coordination is just begging for trouble, especially these days. Also," he continued, "your search has been rendered irrelevant."

The last part of Mal's statement failed to register immediately with Tangaroa, as he was intent on addressing the rebuke of Mal's first sentence. "Sir, I had *no idea* that they were watching the house. How was I supposed to know that..." He trailed off, as what Mal had said earlier started to sink in. "Irrelevant?" Tang said faintly, guessing the answer but still holding onto a small thread of hope that he was wrong.

Mal nodded. "We've confirmed that Fleet Commander Samhain was killed several days ago. The confirmation only came last night, otherwise we would have informed you earlier. For what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Tangaroa stared off into space, not really seeing anything. "Samhain, *dead?*" he

murmured.

“Yes. Samhain, along with — we think — most of the Church of Grimace and a hundred acres of Iowa real estate. I don’t have details, but it’s pretty obvious that he put up one hell of a fight.”

“I...”Tangaroa shook his head and looked at Mal. “We have to find Windigo.”

“Windigo is somewhere else. Exactly where, we’re not sure, but if we can’t find her, neither can anybody else.”

“Cerberus, then. He’s powerful enough to help us.”

Mal shook his head. “He’s offworld, has been for the last three years.”

A note of desperation sounded in Tangaroa’s voice and he said, “The JPV. Puppeteer and his mages-”

“Are likewise unreachable.”

“The Maenads!” exclaimed Tangaroa. “What Maenads do we have?”

“Right now, none. So far, almost all of our casualties have -been- Maenads. We’re still looking, however.

“Will the dragons help us?”Tang persisted.

Mal nodded. “Captain T’Kharn and Commander Merquoni have been with us since day one. As for Zaphyre, we haven’t been successful in reaching her.”

Tangaroa’s brain skidded to a halt, completely out of ideas. “What do you need me to do?” he asked, all the frantic energy of the last few minutes drained out of him.

Mal leaned back in his chair and gazed thoughtfully at the Doberman warrior. “Right now, you’ll need to be briefed on the situation and meet with the rest of the team. From there, you’ll be on call until we need somebody with commando experience.”

Tangaroa nodded once, sharply. “I understand. I need to know what’s going on.”

Mal nodded. He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a manila folder filled with photographs. Mal thumbed through the folder, then selected a photo and placed it on the desk in front of Tangaroa. “Recognize this guy?” Mal asked.

Tangaroa leaned over and looked at the photo. The subject was a man in his late thirties with wild orange hair and beard. He was glaring at something off-camera, and his right arm was raised as if swinging something. What the man was swinging wasn’t obvious from the photo, but Tangaroa judged it was probably the dark blur behind the man’s head.

The Doberman looked up, slightly puzzled. “Isn’t that Lord Owsen?”

Mal nodded again. “It is indeed Lord Owsen.”

“Didn’t he die on the Pacifica mission?”Tangaroa inquired, still uncomprehending. “I mean, that was before my time...”

“We thought he’d died on the Pacifica mission, but apparently we were wrong. He showed up at the beginning of last month; this picture is one of several taken by one of our people.”

Tangaroa nodded in relief. “That’s good. We could use his help fighting whatever-



er's out there killing Jihaddi."

Mal shook his head. "You don't get it. He *is* what's out there killing Jihaddi."

Tangaroa's eyes went wide, but his face betrayed no other emotions as Mal went through the story: Owsen, the copy of the Barney-Slayer, his rampage through the ranks of the Holy Albino, all of it. The shock of learning of Samhain's death had suddenly been compounded, magnified by the revelation that the likely culprit had been -Owsen- of all people! Even the Dobermans knew about Lord Owsen; to think that one of the founders of the Jihad itself and a powerful Maenad to boot could possibly turn on his comrades...

Maybe, Tangaroa reflected bleakly, he'd have been better off ignoring his Linker and staying the hell in Japan.

"..and that's what we know right now," concluded Mal. "As for the rest, we'll have to call a meeting, open up some quarters for you at base, and generally get you resettled."

Tangaroa nodded. That made plenty of sense. "Okay. Where are we holding the meeting? Here?"

"Mm? No, we've got the Blanca base back operational, so it'll be there."

"Great. How do I get there?"

Mal blinked. "The only way into Blanca is through the Gate portals. It's a security measure."

Tangaroa blanched. "Portal?" He asked, swallowing hard. "You mean, like teleportation?"

"Not really," said Mal, puzzled. "It's a spacefold, like stepping through a door."

"Um, are you sure that I can't call on a dragon or something to get in? Teleportation... doesn't agree with me."

Mal raised an eyebrow. What the hell was this cheeseball's problem with teleporting, he thought. "First of all, it's not a teleporter. Second of all, there's no other viable access. Third," he continued, "I'm not going to call a meeting of the entire group elsewhere simply because you've got a mental hangup. Now, are you going to do this or not?"

"I.. um, I..." Tangaroa sat there, looking equal parts nervous and apologetic. Mal swallowed a sigh, and opened up a communications line on his neural lace **Min?** **Open up a gate to the office and send KJ through, would you? And keep the portal open.**

**Sure thing, Boss.**

A second later, just ahead of the door to Mal's office a softly glowing blue disc appeared hovering in midair, and a second or two after that an immense man with black eyes ducked through the circle and walked nonchalantly into the office. "Sup?" the man inquired.

Mal gestured. "KJ, this is Warrior Cecrops Tangaroa, Doberman Empire. Tang, Lieutenant KillJoy, TRES Corps. A pleasure, I'm sure. Now. KJ, can you do me a

favor?”

“Sure.”

“Great. Can you pick up Tang here and toss him through the portal you just came through?”

Killjoy shrugged. “No problem.” Moving swiftly and with fluid grace, Killjoy stepped to Tangaroa’s chair, picked up the Doberman and before he could utter a single squawk of protest, was slung over the giant’s shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Killjoy paused. “You want me to just toss him, or..?”

“You can go on back, I’ll be through in a minute or so. Let ‘em know that I’m calling a meeting.”

“Allright.” With that bit of business concluded, Killjoy took a few steps and ducked back through the portal with his cargo.

Tangaroa expected to be in serious pain when he passed through the portal. Considering what happened the *last* time he’d used a JAO’s teleporting system, it wasn’t a bad assumption. However, he was mildly surprised to find that, instead of feeling the usual searing pain throughout his entire body, the transition passed without complaint or incident. Well, aside from being draped over somebody’s shoulder at any rate. Once the initial surprise of the transit wore off, he made his displeasure at the current state of affairs known at top volume and in all the languages at his disposal.

Killjoy, for his part, walked through the corridors of Blanca Base unconcerned that he had a fully-grown man swearing at him in five different languages slung over his shoulder. Some small part of the tactical expert system that comprised his brain took note of some of Tangaroa’s more colorful expressions, filing them away for future use if necessary.

The pair crossed into the main situation room just as Tangaroa was getting into an extended Korean curse on Killjoy and all his ancestors. Inside, Minerva and Shadur looked up from their card game to see what all the yelling was about in time to watch as Killjoy deftly pulled the complaining Doberman off his shoulder, flipped him around, and dropped him unceremoniously into a seat beside the meeting table.

“Malaclypse said he’s calling a meeting, just so you know,” announced Killjoy, who crossed the room and went back to his favorite leaning spot against the wall.

The meeting itself didn’t take very long; Tangaroa was introduced to the handful of fellow Jihaddi who had answered the recall (that worthy visibly having trouble feeling comfortable with the level of brass in the room), brought up to speed on the latest intelligence (no sign of Owsen after his dramatic execution of Deadlock in Alaska), and then packed off to the BOQ on Level 4 with the instructions to grab a room and let the housekeeping systems get his measurements for uniforms and other clothing. Once Tangaroa was taken care of, most of the Jihaddi turned right around and left, either to cover their mundane lives or to proceed with trying to lo-

cate Owsen. By noon, the only people left in Blanca were the Doberman, Minerva (who had stayed to run a few checks on the Gate systems), Katze (who didn't have much of anything to do that afternoon), and Aris.

### 12:00 PM

"So, Aris, you bored of hanging around Blanca yet?" Katze asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's a nice sunny day in San Francisco, at least it was when I left, and I managed to score these," Katze said, laying two tickets to that night's baseball game. "The heretics have gone and renamed Pac Bell to SBC Park, but it's still the Giants. And they're in the right field arcade."

Aris looked at the tickets, and then up at Katze, and finally said, "And there won't be any fighting over who has to do the invisibility spell."

"Yeah, and we won't have to sit on the coke bottle. And there won't be any sponging attacking us in the Goodyear blimp or otherwise."

"Right. Better not be, Leonard's not on the job anymore." Aris paused for a moment. "Oh, by the way, when were you planning on telling me that the Giants made the World Series and then lost it?"

"I thought you knew," Katze said, blinking in surprise. "And I was depressed for weeks. We should have won the Series, but Dusty couldn't manage his pitchers. And starting Livan in game seven? Just *stupid*. Should have started Woody..." Katze stopped and frowned. "Err, sorry for the rant."

Aris smiled. "Well, at least I didn't miss the Giants *winning* the World Series."

Katze laughed. "True, true! Anyway, let's blow this popsicle joint. The game's not until this evening, so let's just roam around SF. As I said, it's gorgeous out there."

"What if Mal calls? What if something goes wrong?"

"Well, Mal can deal if we decided that we wanted to go on vacation, and you know that Owsen was last seen in Alaska, I really doubt that he's either going to be in San Francisco or be after us. But I guess we could set the computer to forward important messages to our 'Linkers.'"

"Okay, this could work. So are we just going to hang around in San Francisco all afternoon?"

"Yeah, I don't know what all we can do, but I'm sure we'll find something."

### GOLDEN GATE PARK SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA 11:50 AM

Katze backed a bit, trying to get some room in between her and Aris. She kept her sword in a ready position, waiting for the space to make her next attack. They'd been at each other for some twenty odd minutes now, and Katze was starting to feel the strain of large amounts of exercise. That, and it was a bit warm for an early

April day.

They'd gotten a bit far from their backpacks in the sparring too, Katze noted, and somebody probably ought to get them. And just as she thought that, she saw Aris give the hand signal that she intended to stop, which meant that Katze could relax as well. Aris turned to get the bags, and Katze dropped the ready position she held. Katze was about to sheathe her blade when a voice very close to her said, "You and your friend aren't bad at all."

"Thanks," Katze said back, and turned to see who had given the compliment. It was a man, average build, and wearing a kilt and a sword of some kind. Something in the back of her head twinged a bit — this person seemed awfully familiar. He asked, "Do you mind if I take a look at your blade? I have some interest in swords."

"Uh, sure," Katze said, and handed him her blade, not too worried, as she could always call it back if she needed it. The familiarity bothered her, as her efforts to place this person continued to be frustrated.

He looked down the blade, "It looks to be a good blade, but, alas, not the one I'm looking for. Where did you get it, might I inquire?"

"Family heirloom," Katze answered, near automatically. It was the standard answer she gave about her blade and its uniqueness to people who wouldn't understand Marraketh.

He nodded and handed it back, looking at her for the first time. With the first look, she knew, and tried very hard not to give any hint that she recognized him. It was one thing to see the guy on TV when he was very far away and it was another to come face to face with him. She didn't think he'd recognize her, it had been a very long time since he'd met her in the first place, but she was never sure.

"Would you perhaps like to spar with me?" he asked.

Katze tried to quiet the parts of her brain that were gibbering about the identity of this person and the stupidity of getting into a fight with him. Even if it seemed merely a sparring match like Aris and her had been doing, it was probably still dumb. She was talking to a guy who had managed to kill a rather good percentage of the Maenads so far. "Oh, no, sir, I appreciate the thought, but you seem like you would be a far better swordsman than my friend or me."

A smile crossed his face. "Pity, but yes. Yes, I am the very best."

About this time, Aris had wandered back across the field, carrying two backpacks and a water bottle. She came up next to Katze, and took one good look at who Katze was having a conversation with, and nearly dropped everything.

"Ows...OW!" she yelled, as Katze had the presence of mind to stomp on her foot before Aris got the whole name out. "Dammit, Katze, you didn't have to do that!" A string of other interesting sounding curse words that Katze couldn't place followed this declaration.

"It was nice talking to you," the man suddenly said, and he tipped his finger to his head as if he would have tipped his hat, before wandering off across the field Aris and Katze had been sparring on.

Katze sheathed her blade, and Aris, still upset, laid into her. “You know that was Owsen, right? You know, the guy we’ve been keeping track of for the last month?”

“I’m well aware who that was, and I was trying not to hint that I knew! And then you nearly went and blew it! And keep your voice down,” Katze said, pointing down field to where the source of this panic stood, as if waiting for something.

“I don’t like this,” Aris said. She frowned. “Maybe we should kill him.”

Katze sighed. “This is the guy that’s killed Maenads, remember? And last I checked, neither you nor I were anywhere close to being on that level. What chance do you honestly think we’ll have?”

Aris shrugged. “Uh... none. No, really, we can’t even attempt it now. But I want to know how he got here from Alaska so fast.”

Katze couldn’t help but keep the sarcasm from entering her voice. “Yeah, but if we ask him, he’ll know we’re watching him.”

Aris took her chance to sigh at Katze. “Ask him? Katze, I’m not quite that dumb. But maybe follow him? See if he ‘ports out and how he does it?”

Katze thought for a moment. Actually, that wasn’t a bad idea. “It could work. Let’s...”

A crack broke through the air, and a whistling sound passed very near the two of them. Katze froze and Aris yelled, “Shit! That was a bullet!”

The word bullet spurred Katze into action. She started to make a dash towards a low stone wall running across one edge of the field. Aris looked back in the direction only to see Owsen surrounded by a bunch of other people, and then took off running after Katze, carrying both bags and her water bottle. A few more shots whizzed by them as they covered the distance, and before they knew it, they were leaping the wall and taking cover.

“Dammit, I thought the people shooting things at me was OVER!” Katze yelled over the sound of firing.

“Join the freaking club!” Aris yelled back, and pulled her blade out of her bag. Katze was trying to figure out how much good a sword would do until she forgot that Aris’ sword doubled as a gun.

Katze took a deep breath, and traded her blade for her bow and a few arrows. She notched an arrow in her bow, and nodded to Aris. “On three!” Aris said, and Katze nodded. “One...two...three!”

The two popped up from their hiding spot, Aris firing in the rise, and Katze drew back her bow and sent an arrow flying in the direction of Owsen and his friends. Then they both crashed to the dirt behind the wall as the group around Owsen returned fire once again. The two peeked over the wall, and Katze was disgusted to see that she’d missed and gotten Owsen instead of one of his friends, at least given the way he’d just cracked an arrow in half. Probably hadn’t gotten him anywhere close to a vital, either. Rather sloppy, all things considered. “Damn,” she muttered, and notched a second arrow.

“We didn’t get anybody,” Aris said.

"I think I got Owsen. But he didn't flinch!" Katze said.

"Do we try again?"

"We're outnumbered," Katze said, and peeked over the wall again. "And they're charging our position."

"Back to Blanca then? I don't think I want to go to the game knowing he's here."

"Yeah, works for me. Got everything?"

"My bag, your bag, my sword, my water bottle. Go."

Katze reached over, touched Aris and concentrated on avoiding rather large pan-dimensional trucks, and they faded, just as the first of Owsen's friends came tumbling over the wall.

## BLANCA MOUNTAIN

Katze and Aris tumbled to a halt right at the feet of Mal. "How was the game?" he simply asked.

Aris looked sheepishly up at her boss, and Katze shook her head to clear it of the combination of adrenaline and the wonkiness of 'porting Aris. "We got shot at!" Aris said.

"Shot at? At a baseball game?"

"No, the game wasn't until later tonight," Katze said. "So we decided, big open area was a nice place to play with live blades and we went to Golden Gate Park."

"And we ran into Owsen!" Aris said.

Mal groaned. "Why do you two always get in trouble when you decide to go to San Francisco?"

Katze shrugged. "At least I didn't take his offer to spar."

"Okay..." Mal said, trying to handle this disjointed way of telling a story. "Why don't we begin at the beginning?"

This time Katze and Aris managed to relay the story with minimal diversion and interruption. Mal frowned thoughtfully through the retelling, interjecting occasionally to get more detail on specific parts. When the pair had finished their report, Mal leaned back in his chair and scowled at the ceiling.

"Okay," he said, "let me make sure I have this right. He specifically said he was looking for a sword?"

Katze nodded. "He liked mine, but it wasn't the one he was looking for. That's what he said, almost exactly."

"Hrm. Dammit. That's bad." Mal sat up, his thoughts plainly written on his face. "You realize what sword he's looking for, right?"

"Oh yeah."

"You'd think he'd be happy with the one he already has," Aris quipped. Mal looked at her without expression, until the dragon finally ducked her head and mumbled a quick apology.

Mal drummed a quick riff on the desk. "Okay, we're stepping up the alert level a

notch or five. Min?”

Minerva’s holographic icon blipped into existence, hanging upside-down between the visitor’s chairs, her head level with Katze and Aris. “You rang?”

Mal blinked. “... Why are you upside-down?”

Min shrugged eloquently. “I was bored.”

“Ah. Of course. Silly of me to ask, really.” Mal shook his head, then continued, “Min, call everybody back if they’ve gone out. We’ve got some new information and we need everybody to hear it. Also, let ‘em know that we’re going to be doing status meetings daily at this point.”

“Roger roger.” Min saluted sharply, then let her icon fade as she worked the communications systems.

“More meetings?” Aris groaned. “Great.”

Mal shrugged. “We need everybody to know what the hell’s going on. I know it’s not that much fun, but it’s necessary. Hopefully,” he added wryly, “we can figure out a plan of attack before something else goes horribly wrong.”

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## ***17: In The Land Of Me Forefathers***

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OFFICES OF PEGASUS COMMUNICATIONS  
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA  
SATURDAY, APRIL 3, 2004  
12:45 AM

Earl Walters kicked his feet up on his desk in the lobby. The graveyard shift was usually dismally uneventful, and he was preparing to take the opportunity to launch a full frontal assault on an unsuspecting corned-beef-on-rye. At least, until an obnoxiously piercing warble interrupted his after-midnight snack.

Someone was leaning on the door buzzer. Walters sighed— the engineers, when they actually remembered to eat, were always leaving their keycards at their workstations when they left the building. He heaved himself out of his seat, and grabbing his flashlight he made for the lobby door. “I’m comin’, I’m comin’!” he shouted, trudging warily up to the smoked-glass. Well, it wasn’t one of the engineers, nobody he recognized at least. Probably some vagrant, by the look of his dirty greatcoat and long, snarled hair. Whoever it was waved jauntily at him as he approached, never letting up on the door buzzer, even as he opened the door.

“Ease off the button, willya?” Walter said, shining his flashlight in the man’s face. “What’s the problem, buddy?” A slightly manic grin looked back at him.

The vagrant gave the buzzer a few more presses for good measure and then



stepped up to the door. "Wanna buy some Girl Scout cookies, mister?" he chirped.

Great. One of those. "You don't look like any Girl Scout I've seen." Walters scanned the man up and down with his light. "Cept for the skirt. Shove off."

The man in the skirt appeared to wilt, shoulders slumping in disappointment. "Well... I didn't have any cookies anyway." His hand shot out, grabbed Walters by the shirt, and pulled the security guard's face into his outthrust forehead. Walters' world went bright and then faded into unconsciousness as his nose splintered against his assailant's skull, and he slid bonelessly into a heap on the ground.

"It's called a kilt, ye craven bastard," said Tilden Owsen, and he stepped over the unconscious guard.

Owsen whistled as he strolled through the hallway, dragging a deep furrow along the wall with the tip of his sword as he went. His list was nearly complete, and these last four were making themselves very, very hard to find. He was close now, though, to the youngest of his estranged fellows. He could feel him here.

Pale blue-white light spilled from beneath the doorway of the corner office as he came to the end of the corridor. With a manic grin, he raised a boot and applied liberal blunt-force pressure onto the center of the oaken panel, causing it to tear away from the frame and collapse forward into the office.

"Heeeeeeeere's Johnny!" he announced, stomping in after it, sword raised and ready.

The night janitor panicked, looking around frantically for an exit that wasn't blocked by bulk of a grinning, sword-wielding maniac. That failing, he dropped the duster in his hand and bolted past Owsen, the fury of his hasty withdrawal such that it caused the Irishman's coat to stream out behind him as he passed.

Owsen looked around the vacated office with a sigh. He strolled over to the mahogany desk, running his fingers along the finely polished grain. He turned the high-backed executive chair with its supple black leather on its swivel and took a seat behind the desk, sword laid across his lap. He folded his hands together, index fingers tapping pensively together as he assessed this situation.

His prey wasn't here. He tracked the scent all the way to San Francisco from Alaska, and yet his prey wasn't here. This made him... unhappy.

He calmly and deliberately gripped the edge of the desk, and with a sudden roar of unrestrained fury he heaved and sent it tumbling across the room. He snatched up his sword and began to hack blindly at anything within reach. He smashed shelves, chopped papers to shreds, ripped apart the executive chair and hurled it through the broad smoked-glass window in a shower of glass.

He had reduced the desk to splinters and carved epithets into the wall with his blade before his rage began to subside. He dropped to one knee, leaning on the sword for leverage, panting in exhaustion when his eyes settled on a small, smashed picture frame amidst the piles of debris. He picked it up, shaking broken glass off of it; it was a picture of a young man with his lady, sitting next to a pond in front of a stone house in what might have been the Scottish countryside.

And Owsen smiled.

ARGYLL, SCOTLAND  
MONDAY, APRIL 5, 2004  
2:20 PM

The world knew him as Kirk Felton. Another, more secretive world once called him DarkSide. But here, in his home, the land of his birth, he was just Gregor Lamont, Scottish expatriate, born over three hundred and fifty years ago. He was a veteran of many wars, and the latest one nobody ever knew had happened. He was enjoying a long vacation during his well-deserved retirement from fighting the good fight, and currently he was hanging from a stirrup on the second story of his small tower house, levering a stone into the wall.

He smiled. He and Keili, his wife, had purchased the tiny castle on the Cowal Peninsula almost five years ago, but even after the Jihad had shut down life had been busy. He hadn't expected being a full-time CEO would in itself be such a chore, because the operation had more or less run itself when it was just a front for the TRES Corps communications network. At any rate, he was glad to be taking a few months off to do some actual restoration work on the building. It felt good to do simple, hands-on work.

The cellphone hanging from his belt buzzed. He wedged his trowel between two stones and unclipped the phone from his belt. "Felton," he answered. It was Cathy, his administrative assistant. "I'm sorry to bother you on your vacation, sir," she said, "but the board thought you should be made aware... we had a break-in a couple nights ago. Your office was ransacked."

Felton frowned. Tucking the phone under his chin, he started lowering himself to the ground. "Anything missing?" he asked.

"Not that we can tell. Your files were scattered all over, but it looks like they're all there. It's mostly just property damage. But — get this — it looks like whoever it was went through the place with a sword." A sword? Something about that set off alarms in the back of his mind; your average industrial spy didn't go around toting medieval weaponry.

"Alright. Keep me posted on the investigation. Thanks Cath." He hung up, and stared thoughtfully at the phone for a few moments. Well, he had been dragged out of his blissful ignorance of the business world, he might as well check his office voicemail. His mind wandered as he listened to several project reports and numerous requests for charitable donations, and then an oddity struck him. He repeated the last message.

"Hey, it's Aris. Something's come up. Call me at the old home number." He flipped the phone closed. Aris? The name was familiar but... nah, it couldn't be. He shoved the phone in his pocket and went inside.

Keili met him at the door with a kiss. "Something wrong?" she asked, noting his slightly distant look.

“Break-in at the company,” he said, wrapping his arms around her. “Trashed my office. An’ something else...”

“What is it?” she said as he slipped away from her and headed toward the study.

He kept it in a trunk with the other memorabilia of his past lives... hopefully there was some charge left in the power cell, because he hadn’t left it on the charger for a couple years now. He pulled his JihadLinker out from under his TRES Corps dress uniform... just enough charge left in it. And sure enough, the Jihad commnet, at least part of it, was up and functioning. Following the hunch, he got on the old VRDET channel to Blanca.

The channel chirped open. “Blanca. This is Aris. Where the hell have you been? Don’t you check your messages? It’s been a month... a MONTH.”

Kirk blinked. “I’ve been on vacation. That usually implies a general desire tae remove oneself from business calls. What’s goin’ on? Why’s the JihadNet active?”

“It’s Owsen. He’s come back from the dead. And he’s systematically killing every Maenad he can find.”

It took him a moment to respond to that. “... say that again?”

“Owsen’s alive and killing Ferals. We think he’s trying to locate the Barney-Slayer. Look, we hadn’t heard from you and nearly presumed you were dead!”

“...How many?”

“Windigo, Shardik and Maeve are still unaccounted for. Deadlock, Blackblood, Slider... everyone else is dead. Some of us have managed to regroup and we could use all the help we can get to do something about him. How soon can you get here?”

Kirk paled. Nearly all of them...

“...DS?”

“I’m not coming,” he said finally.

“You’re what?!”

“He’s kin, Aris, and right now I stand the best chance of at least slowin’ him down. I’m stayin’ here and lettin’ him come tae me.”

He heard what sounded like a brief scuffle on the other end of the link, and the voice changed. “Are you fucking crazy? What is it with you Maenads and your stupid delusions of invincibility?”

“It’s good to hear ye again too, Malaclypse,” Kirk said. “I’ve made up my mind. Ye’ll hear from me again.”

“Don’t be stu—” Kirk closed the link. As he pocketed the Linker, he turned to find Keili standing in the doorway of the study, her face a mask of abject horror. “Don’t do this,” she pleaded.

He came to her, and cupped her face in his hands. “I have tae. Listen tae me, I want ye tae pack some things and head into Dunoon for a few days. It’s no gonna be safe here for ye.”

“No. I’m not going.”

“He’s a Maenad gone rogue, love. Ye don’t have the power tae stand against

that.”

She pushed from him and turned away. “And you do? Weren’t you listening? He’s killed the other Maenads. Ones that were more senior and probably more powerful than you. What makes you think you can do any better?” She looked at him forlornly. “Don’t do this. Let’s join the others.”

Kirk shook his head. “No. If he’s managed tae kill off all of my kin, then the only way anyone else is gonna be able tae stop him is with full force. At least I might have a chance tae subdue him. Maybe he’s gone bonkers, but he’s still a hero and a brother. I dinnae want tae see him killed if it can be avoided.”

“The war’s over. Hero or not he’s become a murdering bastard. He’s not worth risking your life over.”

“I know what it’s like tae be turned against our own. I have tae try, love.”

Keili nestled her head against his chest. “You’re my world. You know I couldn’t stand to lose you.”

“I know,” he answered, quietly.

“Then you know I’m not going anywhere.”

“...aye.”

They sat in silence in the study, watching the dying flames dance around in the fireplace. The old grandfather clock behind them seemed to thunder in the deathly quiet. An air of impending doom hung around them like a thick woolen blanket.

Kirk moved to get up, but Keili’s arms around his shoulders held him fast. Smiling, he brushed his fingers reassuringly across her cheek. “I’m just going tae fetch some wood for the fire. I won’t be gone long.”

She heaved a sigh and released him. “Hurry back,” she said.

The sky was fading into the deep purple of dusk when he stepped out into the evening air. He padded through the grass, across the tiny courtyard to where several cords of wood were neatly piled next to a chopping block. He wrenched free the woodaxe that was lodged in it, and placed a small log upright in its place. He raised the axe to chop, but paused, and then lowered it again. “I was wondering when ye were going to show up,” Felton said, without turning around. The woodaxe hung loosely at his side. He had scarcely heard the footfalls approach behind him.

“Oh, I didn’t know I was expected. I would have brought something. Maybe a basket of fruit, or a nice Merlot.” There was a silken singing of metal on metal as Owsen drew his sword.

Felton turned around slowly. There was a faint red flicker in the depths of his eyes as his Feral side raged against his restraining will. “I dinnae think ye’ll find me as easy a target as the others,” he said.

Owsen shifted his grip on the sword, and grinned. “We’ll see about that, now won’t we?”

“I dinnae want tae have tae kill ye, Owsen,” said Felton, body contorting and changing into something much more bestial as Nemesis asserted its will on his shape.

The sword came up. "Ah? Pity it's not a sentiment I share." And he charged.

"Bloody thickheaded Irishman," Nemesis said, a tall, gray, spined demon-kin standing where the man once stood, and lunged forward to meet Owsen head-on.

The first punch landed by Nemesis struck Owsen square on the jaw with enough force to shatter a cinder block, but the sudden fire in his side bore testament to Owsen's armored kneecap snapping a rib or two. The two combatants tumbled out of the air with the force of their combined blows, collapsing to the earth. Nemesis was the first back on his feet.

"Look at ye," he said, shifting the woodaxe to his fighting hand. "Have ye been ensourceled, lad? The stink o' the Lyran magick is all o'er ye."

Owsen swung his sword, and Nemesis brought the axe up to parry it without much effort, but the feint had the desired effect and Owsen's boot caught him in the kidney driving him sideways. The sword came around again in the follow-through, this time drawing a long slash across the demon's chest.

Nemesis staggered backward. The bloodflow had stopped as soon as it had begun, and already the flesh of his wound was knitting back together. "I'm not the same grunt ye knew back on Pacifica," he said, looking up from the rapidly fading scar.

"Ah?" said Owsen, advancing forward. He dabbed at the trickle of blood forming at the corner of his mouth with his sleeve. "And I'm not the same man YOU LEFT FOR DEAD back on Pacifica!" he bellowed. He contrived to look almost embarrassed for a moment at the outburst, and then flourished a bow. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Owsen's sword swept in an upward arc aimed at his face, but Nemesis deflected the blow with the axe. Its head landed with a dull thud a few yards to his left, and he held the severed handle up for scrutiny. "Well, shite."

The sword again stabbed at his face, and unthinkingly he knocked the lunge aside with his arm. The black blade slid along his sleeve, slicing easily through the leather of his jacket and into the flesh of his forearm, cutting deeply to the bone. Nemesis roared with pain, eyes flickering with fire as he bared rows of fangs at the fallen Maenad. He clutched the wound, restraining the desire to tear Owsen apart.

"Look at you, the wicked Feral beast," said Owsen, circling around Nemesis. "Where are the claws, the bravado? Aren't you going to go into the throes of your Holy Warpspasm and cut me to ribbons without a second thought?" He stopped, grinning manically. "Here stands one of the mighty warriors of the Holy Albino, his chosen, and yet my limbs are still attached. For all the aggrandization, for all the laud, you're nothing but a useless whelp." His grin turned into a sneer. "I can't believe you were chosen over me."

The daemon flexed his hand as the wound to his arm healed. "I've never born me Claws against a fellow Jihaddi, an' I'm no about tae start now. Ye're kin, Owsen. Ye've had ye mind scrambled, but ye're still kin."

"Well," said Owsen, smiling, "you know how it goes. You only hurt the ones you love." He whipped his sword at Nemesis in a tight arc, but the Maenad moved

quickly, ducking inside his reach and delivering a quick jab which shattered the cartilage of the Irishman's nose. Owsen staggered back in a slight daze, blood flowing fresh from his nostrils.

"You bastard," he said, dabbing it with the back of his hand. His eyes flared with violet light and the bleeding stopped. "You're going to *hurt* for that, my boy."

"Let's be reasonable, Tilden," Nemesis said, fists raised, dancing around like a boxer. "Put the sword away. Let's talk."

"No no no. Talking will just get in the way of dying." Owsen slashed his sword, and with a sound like ripping fabric an arc of violet energy scythed through the air, catching Nemesis in the chest and hurling him backward. He slammed into the stone wall, cloth and flesh alike split open. Owsen charged after him, sword swinging in an overhead chop. Its dark blade sparked against the stone, carving a shallow furrow in the wall where Nemesis had been just a second before he ducked out of the way and behind the Irishman.

He felt a slight tug at his belt as the demon passed, and he turned to meet the dual crack of his pistols in Nemesis' taloned hands. The slugs slammed into either of his shoulders, driving him back against the wall. With a howl of mixed pain and rage, Owsen's boot lashed out at the Feral, catching him just below the sternum with preternatural strength, lifting him into the air and sending him smashing through the small stone arch above the courtyard's entryway. Nemesis tumbled to the earth outside the walls amongst a rain of stone, Owsen's pistols bouncing merrily along the turf outside of his reach.

"That's not a very cordial way to treat a long-lost friend," Owsen said, sauntering though the gate. "Shooting him with his own guns. Not very nice at all."

Nemesis started to push himself upright. His wounds were already healing up again, but slower this time. "Why, Owsen?" he wheezed. That kick had broken several ribs. "What is it you want?"

"What do I want?" Owsen said, tapping his chin thoughtfully. "Oh, I want what everyone wants... a nice, long life, and happiness." He grinned, and grabbed Nemesis by the hair, dragging him to his knees. He drew back the Maenad's head to expose his throat to his blade. "Both of which were taken from me. But I got one back, oh yes, no thanks to any of you, and happiness will come soon enough, once the Ferals are all dead and the Scourge has come and purged this world of its filth. And once I have the light, of course."

"The light?" Nemesis asked. His adam's apple bobbed self-consciously in the air.

Owsen's expression soured. "The sword, you moron. I have the dark, I need the light. Is it really such a hard concept to grasp?" He leaned down until his mouth was mere inches from Nemesis' pointed ear. "You don't know where it is, do you? None of the others did, but one of you must. How could you not? Yes? No? Pity." He stood up, bringing his sword back, and swung.

The dark blade rang out against five feet of ebon steel that had materialized between it and Nemesis' throat. "Enough," Nemesis growled. He rose, pressing Owsen

back. The swords hissed as their blades caressed each other.

"I'm no gontae ask ye again," Nemesis said darkly, taking a few steps back and bringing his massive Claidheam into a ready position. "Lay down yer sword. Let me help ye."

Owsen gave this due consideration. "No," he said politely.

Nemesis growled. "So be it." He struck, and his sword ripped through the air with a feral snarl, but such a weapon was not meant for one-on-one melees and Owsen deftly avoided it. The broad blade struck the ground, kicking up a small cloud of earth and grass. Owsen's follow-through stroke swiped across his back, carving through his thick hide.

The Maenad jerked his sword free and swung it around in a wide arc that would have cleft the Irish warrior in twain at the waist had he not brought his own blade down to deflect the blow. The blades rang out, and the weight of the larger sword sent the impact jarring up his arm and numbing his wrist. He whipped the dark Slayer up and around through a tight arc aimed at Nemesis' neck, but the demon managed to angle his sword to catch it.

And so it went. Each clash of blades sent psychic screams of pain up Nemesis' arms and into his subconscious as the corrupted Oswenite bit chunks out of whatever mystical steel his Claidheam was composed of, such was the bond he shared with it. Neither seemed to gain the upper hand, Owsen apparently tireless and so much swifter the warrior, but Nemesis was older and a more seasoned veteran.

But the combat was wearing on him. Though few physical blows had been landed on him, the damage inflicted on his sword was fraying his nerves, enough that he was caught off guard. Owsen gashed him twice across the chest in quick succession, then chopped onto his right shoulder, cutting in deep and splitting his collarbone. Nemesis' sword dropped from his hand, and even before it had hit the ground, Owsen had spun around behind him. The dark Slayer swept low, and with a silken sound it sliced neatly through his Achilles tendons. Losing the support of his legs, Nemesis toppled onto the grass.

He had barely any fight left in him, and this seemed to disappoint Owsen somewhat as he strolled cheerfully around the prone demon, swinging his sword lazily. *C'est la vie*, though, such was the work that had to be done. A savage kick rolled Nemesis over, and Owsen's boot pressed down on his sternum, causing his shattered ribs and collarbone to scream in agony. The Irishman brought his black sword up for a backhand swing intended to finish Nemesis off. "It's been fun," he said, "but I've got things to see and people to do and I can tell you're not going to be any help. Are you prepared to die?"

Nemesis grimaced up at him. "Get bent."

"Ah. Defiant to the last, even when faced with the inevitability of your own death. Some might find it admirable. Personally, I think it's just a shame."

"I know where it is," Nemesis croaked.

Owsen hesitated. "You what?"

Nemesis smiled inwardly through the pain. That's right, I've got your attention now. Now I've just got to hold it for a minute... An observant individual would have noticed his right hand clenched white-knuckle tight, and the yellow-orange light seeping between his fingers shifting rapidly to white. But Owsen's attention was riveted on his words.

"The sword. I know where it is," Nemesis repeated. "I'm..." His eyelids fluttered as he nearly blacked out. It was going to take all that he had left, and he hoped it was going to be enough. "I'm the only one. Kill me, and you'll never find it."

Owsen's wild eyes glared down at him, and he brought the sword down, driving it through the Feral's shoulder and into the ground. He leaned upon the pommel, and every small motion sent new waves of pain searing through Nemesis' torso. "Tell me. Now."

"Nghrrghh," Nemesis gurgled as he once more nearly passed out. A light breeze was whipping up around them, an artifact of a lot of oxygen being used up in the immediate vicinity. The air began shimmer around them like asphalt on a hot day.

Owsen twisted the dark Slayer in Nemesis' shoulder and wrenched it loose, grabbing the Feral by the throat and slamming his skull repeatedly into the ground as he tottered on the edge of total psychosis. "Tell me! Tell me where it is now, before I SPLIT OPEN YOUR SKULL and RIP IT FROM YOUR BRAIN!!!" he bel-lowed, spittle flying like a rabid dog.

And then he felt a sharp pain, between his shoulderblades, accompanied by the silken sound of metal piercing flesh. Owsen turned, the handle of the dagger still protruding from his back, to face Keili, who was carefully retreating backward.

"That... that wasn't very nice at all," he said, following after her, his sword scything lazily through the air. "I think I'm going to have to make an exception for you, lass, and do something altogether unpleasant." It was then that he noticed the tingle in his fingertips. He scrabbled for the dagger in his back, but found his limbs moving as though weighted with lead as Keili's poison seeped through his body. His advance faltered, and he fell to one knee, sword slipping from his numbing grasp.

"Oh, yes," he hissed, seething with hate and contempt for this insignificant creature. "Very unpleasant INDEED." Gathering his strength, he rocketed back to his feet, scooping up the sword in one smooth motion and bringing it up for an overhead swing meant to cleave the woman's skull in two.

"Tilden," said a voice behind him. He turned.

and Nemesis' fist hit him square in the chest, releasing into the blow the pinpoint of white-hot energy he had been building up. Keili threw herself to the ground an instant before the firestorm which engulfed the two Maenads washed over her.

Keili lay in the grass for some time, trying to gather her wits. The smell of burnt hair and flesh filled her nostrils; rolling over onto her back, she noted with thanks that most of it wasn't her own.

She levered herself upright on the scorched turf, looking around. The damage radiated for several more yards past her, and at its epicenter was the hunched form



of Nemesis, slumped unmoving on the seared-bare earth. She didn't see Owsen anywhere.

He wasn't breathing when she shifted him upright. His clothes, what where left of them, were still smoldering and the artificial fabrics had fused to his flesh. She had never seen this before; never seen him actually looked burnt. Whatever aura it was that had once protected him from fire and heat had to have been nearly drained by all of that energy he channeled into a single blow.

She cradled his head to he chest until she finally she felt him draw one long, stuttering breath. "Welcome back," she whispered, as he tried to focus on her face.

"O..wsen?" he rasped. Each breath crackled as he painfully drew it.

"Gone," she said, checking his wounds. They were already starting to heal, but he'd received a lot of them.

Nemesis tried to get to his feet. The pain was nearly overwhelming. "Got to go," he said.

"You're in no shape for travel," Keili protested, steadying him with her shoulder.

He tried to make a good show of it by straining himself upright. "No time. Gotta go now. Think I can *just* pull it off."

"No, you're not going to—"

*"Unauthorized inbound teleportation!"* screamed Minerva, igniting nerves that were already on edge. The assembled Jihaddi drew weapons, training them on the pinprick of light that was forming on the floor.

"—try to teleport," Keili said, as the swirl of cerulean fire deposited the two of them. She looked at the assorted firearms aimed in her direction. "Oh."

"I think I've slowed him up a bit," Nemesis wheezed, steadying himself against her. "Now, what do we want tae do about him?"

And then he collapsed.

The still waters of Felton's pond began to ripple as a charred, blackened hand scabbled for purchase on its bank. Another hand followed suit, releasing the sword it clutched only long enough for the sizzling, scarred figure to drag itself from the water.

Lord Tilden Owsen grinned. It was not because he was particularly happy, but rather because his face lacked the necessary musculature, or indeed much face at all, to engage in any other expression. His clothes hung from his frame in burnt tatters, and the rest of him hadn't faired much better. He sighed.

This would not do.

A violet aura flared to life around him. With some effort he managed to get upright on legs that resembled raw hamburger but even now were beginning to heal. Bits of charcoal flaked from his fingers as he bent over and wrapped them around the hilt of his pristine sword, which he laid across his shoulder. His other hand opened, revealing a small, black medallion nestled in his palm. The scrollwork on it

was familiar, but he couldn't quite place his finger on it.

Well, that wasn't important. What was important was that he was that much closer to getting back what was his. And this pup of the Albino was going to make it entertaining.

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## ***18: Figuring Things Out***

KINGMAN, ARIZONA  
MONDAY, APRIL 5, 2004  
9:02 PM

“Nemesis,” Dee muttered to herself. She had, in truth, left not long after the Maenad was stabilized at Mt. Blanca. All the people clustered around him highlighted the fact that she had no idea what to do. Being useless had never sat well with her. Fortunately, Minerva knew her well enough to understand, and had opened her a gate back to Athena Heavy Industries after she had slipped away. Right now, she was reclined in a swivel chair, pondering the situation.

“The Slayer’s been... touched almost definitely,” she spoke to herself. Slowing her thoughts to the speed of speech gave her plenty of time to ponder all the implications of every aspect of her words. Besides, it was night and Damo was off... somewhere. “Ergo... them around... likely.” She was afraid to call the Lyrans by name, as if doing so would invoke their appearance. “Thus, definitely need to cook up something to kill them, as one Maenad is only maybe enough.”

Put that way, it was a research problem, which she knew full well how to deal with. She thought a moment, then opened up a direct JihadLinker communication to Minerva. “Konban-wa, Minerva,” Dee thought through the link. “Is there any news on Felton?” She knew that Mina would know from her tone what she needed,

perhaps why. Dee and the AI were very good at reading each other's minds like that, a fact that may have impressed Malcalypse if he knew.

"Konban-wa, Dee," Minerva replied. "Felton seems to be recovering, though he may be out a while. The encounter with Owsen before he arrived seems to have taken a lot out of him. What can I do for *you*?" Dee smiled at her 'sister' cutting to the heart of the matter.

"Well, thinking about some old friends of ours," Lyrans, though she still wasn't going to say the word. "I'm trying to figure out some stuff that I can make in a hurry that would be unpleasant to magic users, so I need to access some of the more esoteric databanks. My files are a bit spottier in that area than I'd like."

"You do realize that we have magic users too?" Minerva asked with the hint of an edge to her voice, as if to warn her to be careful about what she proposes.

"Right, of course. Which is why I'm looking for stuff with experimental data already done, so I don't have the risk of failed field experiments. Mostly just after a force multiplier vs. a single target, not anything with larger areas of effect."

"I figured, but I had to ask. All right, VRDET's back open for your perusal plus some of the boss's private files that are relevant. We don't have copies of JPV's or Zeta's files though, unfortunately."

"And I've got my own sources too, of course."

"Of course."

"Let Mal or I know when you come up with something, and I'll let you know if anything comes up in the meantime. Good luck."

"Thanks, later Min." Dee checked that the computer in her bionic arm was finding the new data over the network before triggering off a smart search to find anything relevant and summarize it. She shifted her feet on her desk, inadvertently knocking some papers to the floor, and semi-patiently waiting. Her arm's mp3 player had only gotten through its first two songs before useful results started trickling in. She scrolled the summaries and blinked.

"Hey, does that work? Whoa, hum, that's just about what I had in mind..." she paused. "Yeah, we have some of that in storage for raw materials from that one guy..." she swept her boots off the desk and flew downstairs to the machine shop, busily getting to work.

"Guh, hell, stupid brittle iron," Dee muttered to herself. The main project she was working on were cold iron bullets, and it just happened that some strange person had gotten ahold of a piece of meteoric iron that he had wanted milled into gun parts. Order never came though, so here she was turning it into bullets. Or rather cutting into rectangles and turning down those on a lathe into bullets. It was the 12th successful one, and would fit the plastic sabots perfectly. There was a lot more metal, but... if it didn't work, not much point.

She sipped her coffee and grimaced at the mess she'd made. Only one beer over the night, but she'd been up a while. Have to pick all that up before Damo gets

home. Or hell, let *him* do it. She started cutting crossed lines on the tips in a star pattern with the computer controlled setup, fine lines that she knew would expand and break into little sharp bits upon hitting something. That process started, she reviewed something that had come up last night in researching mana-reactive metals. Between her own files and Mals, there was most of the analysis of the original Barney Slayer, made back in the day and responsible for Jihaddium alloy among other things, though the Owsenite remained unique. But a comparison of those materials data vs. the data of the new blade fragments would perhaps provide some clue what was going on.

“Hey, Minerva?” She opened up the JihadLink connection without thought and tried to get her sister’s attention. “Found two things.”

“Ah? Which one of them qualifies as the bad news?”

“Heh. Well, the first is I’ve put together some bullets that... well, should cut through magic, or something like that. I don’t claim to understand why, but they should. The second...”

“Spill it.” Dee fidgeted.

“Well, while I was thinking about metallurgy, I was thinking about the Slayer. Between Mal’s files and mine I pieced together most of the reports on its study, and on Jihaddium, the offshoot. Only thing is... well, when that hit its opposite it blew up. And now we have the Owsenite opposite and...”

“We don’t have nearly as much data on it. I don’t disagree about that.”

“Right, but I wanted to know if I could get authorization to take a fragment of the dark Slayer to Spiral; I know the Blanca has most of the good R&D labs cannibalized, and that Spiral should have a big Black department.” There was a pause. Minerva stopping to think, or maybe getting ahold of Mal.

“That could be important. I’ll ask him when he gets in. But in the mean time, *you*, young missy, are going to get some sleep.” Crap, of course Minerva could tell when she had pulled an all-nighter.

“But oneechan...”

“Sleep, at least a couple hours. I’ll ring after I talked it over with Mal.”

“Haiiii...” Dee trailed off before curling up on her desk and closing her eyes.

**VRDET HQ**  
**BLANCA MOUNTAIN, COLORADO**  
**10:00 PM LOCAL TIME**

Aris hadn’t moved her stuff from the dark nook at one end of the hangar, and was starting to think it might be a good idea. Still, while it was there, she wanted to take advantage of having a wide area marked off as personal space and practice a little bit.

Practicing meant casting wards, which took a while. The last thing she wanted was to damage the facility. She was supposed to be its guardian, and Mal would be angry if she broke anything.

Once the walls, floor, and ceiling had been adequately (she hoped) magicproofed, Aris adhered an old powerbar wrapper to the wall, stepped back to the middle of the room, and started launching fireballs at it.

Katze stopped just outside the limit of the chalked wards and watched the dragon's progress. Aris had a slightly befuddled look on her face, and there was a spiraling array of black spots on the opposite wall. None had come closer than a foot to the powerbar wrapper.

Aris looked over and grinned sheepishly. "You know, I hit an acetylene torch on my first try once."

"And they're not much bigger than two meters?"

"Something like that." Aris stared at her target and frowned, almost a pout. "This is getting silly."

"Maybe you need to relax a bit. You know, feel the energy flowing through you."

"Easy for you to say. You've *never* missed with that bow of yours."

Katze grimaced. "I missed that guy in the park."

"Okay. Once. Still." Aris flipped her ponytail back, then reached back and started re-wrapping it in her scrunchie. "At least I'm getting better at casting. I think I can actually be useful in a fight now, as something other than a really bad Third-Gunner."

Katze jerked a thumb at the elevator. "I think KJ got the targeting range working again, if you want to practice with an X-Rifle or your sword... gun... thing."

"Yeah, that's probably a good idea." Aris looked around and sighed. "I should probably clean up this crap, too. I've aired out my old rooms, so there should be room there for everything."

"Want a hand with the videos?"

"Sure," Aris said, as she started to scuff out the wards.

Katze bent down and picked up a couple of the Red Dwarf cassettes. "They have these on DVD now, you—"

*SNARL! THUD*

Katze looked up to see Aris flat on her face a few feet away. "Um," Aris said into the ground. "That was uncomfortable."

Katze put down the tapes and stepped forward gingerly. "What just happened?"

"Uhhh... dragon instinct took over, and I forgot I was human. Overbalanced." Aris looked up, moved her arms around so she could prop her chin on her hands. "I didn't even realize I'd started hoarding stuff."

"Hoarding stuff?"

"Different dragons hoard stuff in different ways." Aris started picking herself off the floor. "My particular race gets it in waves, sort of like brief obsessions. They start coming on after maturity, and the time spent on one hoard gets longer as a dragon gets older. My mom's got the best collection of Phil Folglio porn of anyone in the multiverse."

Katze blinked.

“It can be tragic, too, though, if you hoard the wrong stuff. I remember mom telling me about dad—Galactic dragons don’t tend to keep the male in the family, you know, it’s all matrilineal, so I never knew him—but apparently he was hoarding Hostess snack cakes in the wrong dimension and got captured by a group of superheroes.”

“I... um,” Katze said.

“Here,” Aris said, picking through the Red Dwarf. “Why don’t you take the Series 7 tapes? That should be okay.”

“Why don’t I just get a library cart or something? Or better yet, why don’t we put everything in your backpack?”

Aris brightened at the second suggestion. “That’s a really good idea. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Too busy falling on your face?”

“Right.” Aris took off her backpack, opened it, and scooped the tapes inside, followed by the TV. She zipped the pack closed and shouldered it. “Cool. Dinner?”

### KINGMAN, ARIZONA 10:00 AM LOCAL TIME

That orange marshmallow was beeping strangely, Dee thought... oh no, it was about to explode! But then she remembered that it was just the message dialog telling her that Minerva was calling back. Dee groaned and flopped backwards into her chair, brushing papers off her face. “Braiiiiins.”

“Good morning to you too, zombiehead. Mal wanted to talk to you about the idea in person so I’ll send a gae to pick you up... in 20?”

“That should be enough,” Dee muttered, rolling out of her chair and remote controlled the coffee maker to start through her arm while simultaneously staggering towards the showers in the locker rooms that were set up. “Any objections did he have?” She was still talking to Minerva, even standing under the spray of hot water.

“Minor stuff... some precautions. Normal stuff.”

“Right, normal.” She turned off the shower and stepped out, drying off before getting dressed. Her standard pistol rig went on under her standard motorcycle jacket and she grabbed the important looking briefcase she used when traveling so that people wouldn’t feel put-off at her having no notes or references or anything. It was loaded with something far more useful; a couple changes of clothes, a bag of Cheetos, and a couple bottles of Powerade.

“Also might have a chance to do some testing on the new stuff so pack that too.” Nodding to herself and gulping down the cup of boiling hot coffee, Dee wandered into the shop and boxed up the 2 dozen loose rounds that she had finished making from scratch. Both they and a holstered matte silver Smith & Wesson revolver fit in the case without much problem... a good thing she wasn’t flying. She grabbed the

coffee and took a gulp of the steaming liquid. "Okay, let's do this," she transmitted to Minerva, walking through the gate as soon as it formed.

"All right, Minerva gave me the gist of things. I want to hear it from you." Dee sipped her coffee and tried to hide her apprehension; talking to Malcalypse always made her nervous.

"Well, I was working on metallurgy for another project and the thought came that maybe from analyzing the fragments we could figure out a bit more about why Owsen needs the real Slayer. And what might happen if he had it."

"Right, and you thought there was some sort of 'black' lab at Spiral that would have more working equipment than there currently is at Blanca?" He paused a beat, long enough for Dee to start worrying. "Of course there is. Hidden in plain sight, really."

"Oh... good. Minerva said you had a couple conditions?"

"Right. Keep the fragments near you at all times, for obvious reasons. Don't do anything you think will blow up without precautions... again for obvious reasons."

"Well, that's obvious enough." Mal nodded.

"Don't get the normals involved, they know better than to ask some questions. Take notes in case something does blow up. And be careful." He thought a moment. "Oh, what did you come up with about the other thing?" No question if she had come up with anything.

"Ah, right..." She set the briefcase on his desk and flipped the catches, making sure to open it such that he had no view of the contents. She pulled a bullet out of one of the boxes and passed it over. "Meteoric iron... some weirdo placed a strange order and never followed through with the rest of the payment. Tried various methods of getting it into shape. It's in a plastic sabot so as to not wreck the gun, and is prefragmented." Mal nodded and passed it back.

"We may have a way to test that. But let's get you on with the Slayer analysis first."

The man at the front desk might have wondered why he was giving Dee an unlimited access ID badge to Spiral. The girl was wearing a plain black motorcycle jacket over a plain white shirt, black slacks over black boots that clicked on the floor as she walked. She looked like someone's kid, there on a 'take your daughter to work' day. On the other hand, she carried herself like a suit, someone who knew intrinsically that she belonged there, and the brushed aluminum briefcase lent credence to that.

"I just need you to confirm your identity, maam. Please put your eyes up by the scanner." Not that he was thinking too hard about things. The fact that instructions came down from on-high to issue the pass to this gi... woman, he corrected himself, meant that he probably shouldn't be wondering about it at all. Dee let the machine take a scan of her retinas and then got her badge from the guard. She was



overall pleasantly surprised by the security; she'd expected far worse after Mal had suggested gating in from across the street and walking in the front door. The retinal scanner being fairly standard also impressed her.

The elevators, though... the elevators were just cool. As she stepped in and the doors closed, the transceiver package in her artificial arm picked up a burst transmission and an answering one from her badge. A touchscreen displayed the floors she was authorized for, presumably all of them, but it was obvious that there could well be more and she'd never know. It did make her wonder though, what would happen if people with different security levels were on the elevator. Mentally shrugging, she pressed the button for sublevel 2.

The lab, she was relatively unsurprised to see, was laid out almost identically to how the Verthandic labs had been since... well, it really made sense to clump related research together, and the openness made perfect sense when everyone had the security to know about each others projects as people could go try to lend an idea. What was more surprising was some of the projects she glimpsed as she walked past. Breadboard circuits tapping into systems that used the same carriers as the JihadLinkers had, energy storage setups similar to the power cell designs used in some heavy energy weapons of the Jihad, even some rudimentary pseudo-musculature work. None of it actually Jihad tech, as she could tell from subtleties in the designs, but derived from technology beyond mundane for sure. Not that it mattered much, as she crossed to a separate elevator and descended into the true black labs.

"I could have worked here," she muttered under her breath as she passed by some of the labs. Down here they were a lot more closed off, but she couldn't resist peeking in on a few as she went by and saw some high energy experiments; a refined X-Rifle plasma generator featuring in its capable role of a holepuncher through increasingly durable materials. She was more than a bit tempted to take some time and investigate further but curiosity over that warred with curiosity over the corrupted Owsenite and lost.

The materials science lab was currently unoccupied, as she had been told it would be. Dee considered the gathered equipment and nodded to herself, setting the case with the fragments on a table before taking off her jacket and shoulder holster and folding them on another table. "Let's see what you can tell us," Dee muttered to herself before preparing the first part of one of the samples to go through a mass spectrometer, the first of a battery of tests.

## 7:00 PM LOCAL TIME

Dee stifled a yawn as she walked into Malcalypse's office after a good while spent committing acts of technology upon metal fragments. In the end she'd found out more than a bit, but not exactly what she wanted to know.

"Well, there's bad news and kind of interesting news," she began before being prompted. She'd been up too long and she knew it, so some of the usual modes of

behaviour of being intimidated by Mal and stuff could take a temporary shelving.

"You've no idea what will happen if it's combined with the real Slayer," Mal stated.

"Yeah, that's the bad news. The other news is that it's definitely Owsenite, though it's different in some mundane ways."

"Howso?"

"Well, it's got the same molecular composition but it's packed differently... some of the fragments are densely packed and aligned like ceramic, while others are... well, foamed. At a guess, it's the best way to make use of a severely limited amount of material; the edges are ceramic while the rest is just foamed filler. Should be harder and lighter, but more brittle... thus why it left little shards behind."

"Interesting, but doesn't really answer a lot of the questions we had." Dee nodded tiredly.

"Yeah, I know. Probably need a magic user to really tell how it's kinked..." she commented in a way that sounded more like a question. Mal nodded.

"I managed to get ahold of Katze Brenner, and she should be able to help tomorrow."

"Ah good, that should be interesting." This time she did yawn.

"Get some sleep, Dee."

"Yeah, I know... eesh, you and Min both," she commented with a chuckle as she turned and walked out of the office.

**VRDET HQ**  
**BLANCA MOUNTAIN, COLORADO**  
**8:00 PM LOCAL TIME**

"All right, here we go." Lacroix breathed in and started dealing eleven cards out to each of the five players: Damocles, Dee Greist, Miranda Delgado, Tangaroa, and himself.

Delgado finished a swig of her drink and turned to ask a question of the new ally who was introducing them to this game. "So, Tangaroa, you're with the Doberman Empire?"

"Yeah", he replied in a calm tone. "I'm in Intel."

"Oh." Delgado's face blanched a bit. If this guy was anything like the other Dobe from Intel that she knew... "Do you know a DobeIntel officer named Curtis?"

"Not personally", Tang said, picking up his cards and shifting them upright. "Curtis, huh?" he asked, his voice picking up a hint of emotion. "I might have met him once or twice."

Dee withdrew a card from her hand and laid the rest face down on the table. "I'm pulling from Joe this round, right?"

"Joseph", Lacroix corrected her on the pronunciation, stressing the second syllable rather than the first. "And yes, I think you are."

Dee handed the card across the table to Lacroix, who picked it up and winced

emphatically. He drew out his best card in the same suit and grudgingly handed it over. "That was a good hand, too." Lacroix considered the remainder of his hand. "I'll bid two. I can still make two tricks out of this."

"That's still a good hand." Tangaroa said.

Damocles gave up staring at his twelfth card, the 8"x5" with the rules written on it, and followed with his bid. "I'll take two."

Dee added Lacroix's card to her hand, set aside her copy of the rules from her bionic vision field, and bid. "Three".

Delgado noted that it was her turn. "I should bid, shouldn't I." She took up her cards and sorted through them.

Tangaroa continued his conversation with Delgado. "So this Curtis, do you know him?"

"We meet every so often for coffee," Delgado said succinctly, folding her cards. "Three."

"Three, huh?" Tang gave a last glance at his hand and ruled out the possibility of going nil. "I'll take one, and that wraps it up."

"And I start this off too, don't I?" Lacroix asked.

"Yep," Tangaroa said.

"Well, here we go." Lacroix tossed out a ten of spades.

"Anything between you two?" Damocles asked Delgado suggestively.

Delgado's cheeks flushed pink for a moment. "Oh, no, nothing. We just keep each other up to date on Jihad stuff."

"Is he all right?" Tangaroa asked. "I haven't seen him around here, and I'd expect anyone in the Jihad—"

"Oh, no," Delgado interrupted, "he's all right. He just doesn't want to get involved."

"With Owsen running around, I can't blame him." Dee said.

"Me either," Lacroix agreed, and examined the table. "Let's see..." He turned to Dee. "You take that one."

"Looks like you two are partners again," Delgado said. "I played the eight, and you played the queen," she motioned to Tangaroa, "so we're partners this round."

Dee turned to Damocles. "And that makes you the Ronin, Damo."

"That's a good thing, right?" Damocles asked, looking at his rulesheet again.

"In general," Tangaroa said vaguely, his face showing a hint of mischievous amusement.

As Dee led off the next trick, the television droned on in the background, tuned into a 24-hour news channel. "...and in a shocking new development in the Woodborough murder case, Frank Lancer's second mistress took the stand today..."

Damocles muttered. "They're going on about Woodborough again?"

Lacroix shrugged. "It beats news about our people getting killed."

"Yes, but people are killing people all the time," Damo

explained. "Owsen could be killing people and they won't tell us because they're

only interested in Woodsborough. I want to know if anything has happened to our people.”

“We all do,” Delgado said.

“Miss Lancer was somebody’s people, too,” Tangaroa mused. “She had a family.”

“Yes,” Damo agreed, “but four hours of news coverage a day at the expense of everything else?”

Tang unnecessarily looked back over his shoulder to address the base’s artificial intelligence system. “Hey, Minerva, anything new on the newsfeeds?”

A disconnected voice responded over the intercom. “I’d have told you if there was.”

Delgado grabbed the remote. “Let’s see if there’s anything on the other stations.” The TV flipped over to another 24-hour news station, this one featuring a political talk show.

“...and the *problem* with you and *your* people is that you’re nothing but *partisan liars* whose *only* interest is money and *making themselves rich*, and you engage in these *ad hominem* attacks, attacking other people’s *character* instead of their *arguments*. You are *\*slime\**! You know what I think should be done...”

Before Delgado had lowered the remote, everyone else said in unison: “Turn it back.” They didn’t really need to ask.

“...and Woodsborough continues to be a town in shock 238 days after the horrifying discovery...”

Damo looked down at his cards and grumbled. “I don’t know why they even highlight every little thing about the case when he’s so obviously guilty.”

“There’s a problem, you’ve already convicted him,” Lacroix said. “They’re still having the trial.”

“Yeah, but I can think what I want.”

Delgado threw out a spade and returned to chatting with Tang. “So what kind of work do you do in the Empire?”

Tang grinned in embarrassment. “Well, it’s not the sort of thing we’re supposed to talk about. Here, have a trump.”

“If he tells you, he’d have to kill you,” Lacroix chuckled.

“It’s not as if there are any secrets any more,” Delgado said. “The Jihad’s long gone.”

“I don’t like that trump,” Damocles said, throwing down a joker.

“Bastard,” Tang muttered, then objected. “Wait, you’re Ronin. You’re supposed to go last.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Damo withdrew his card.

“I wouldn’t say the Jihad’s long gone,” Lacroix mused, “we’re right here and we are fighting against.. something which is making Owsen do what he’s doing.”

“I still don’t like that trump,” Damo said, throwing down the joker again.

“Bastard.” Tang smiled.

Dee pulled in her second trick and tossed out a three of hearts. “I’d better play

this now.”

“The reason I’m asking”, Delgado continued to Tang, “is that I worked in Intel myself, for TRES, and maybe there’s something we do differently between TRES and the Dobermans that we can learn from.”

“Perhaps.” Tang said.

“Aris told me she’s glad you’ve been here on the night shift. She might have been in hibernation the past three years, but the 24-hour days were starting to wear her out.”

Tang chuckled. “I’ve been pulling the night watch because I’m still on East Asia time, and we don’t get any sunlight down here to reset my body clock for Colorado.”

Delgado nodded. “That’s the same reason Rens is on the third shift, though it’s kind of odd that that’s night time for Europe.”

“That’s Rens,” Tang said simply.

“You know him?” Lacroix asked.

Tangaroa nodded. A few moments later, noticing that the other players were waiting for a deeper explanation, he started talking. “The Empire sent me to Europe to start my intel career. Since we didn’t have many European assets and TRES did, we had sort of a cooperative exchange cross-training program. Shad was one of the ones who helped train me.”

Lacroix smiled. “I served under Captain Houben for a time. He’s a good officer. A good man. I didn’t know he was into intel.”

“He’s more.. operations than the back-end intel stuff that Delgado and I do, though he can obviously do the back-end stuff too, as we’ve... damn.”

“Sorry.” Lacroix smiled as he took the trick.

Tang sighed and leaned back. “That was the last card of mine that was going to take.”

Lacroix tossed out a jack. “And now I take my last trick.”

Dee slouched low, and Tang tossed out a joker. “No you don’t.”

“Damn.”

Damo looked at the table in mild astonishment. “Hey, I made my bid.” He gathered in the cards and led off the next trick.

Delgado played a card and turned to Tangaroa. “Now, hold on, Tang. Did you just describe yourself as some kind of back-room analyst and paperpusher?”

“Yeah, sort of,” Tang said. “Why?”

“I work in Intel.” Delgado smirked. “We’ve heard about some of the things you’ve done, especially after the war.”

“What did he do after the war?” Lacroix asked.

“Enh..” Tang shrugged. “Blew a few things up.”

“Half of Moscow?” Delgado asked wryly.

“It wasn’t half of Moscow,” Tangaroa explained, “just a few Mafia businesses in one quarter.”

"So what did the Mafia ever do?" Dee asked.

Damo snickered. "What'd the Mafia do?" he asked sarcastically.

"Pissed me off." Tang said.

"They're the Mafia," Damo smiled. "Use your imagination."

"Guess you don't want to talk about it," Lacroix surmised.

Tangaroa nodded. "It's under wraps. National security."

Delgado was surprised. "You went into international relations? Jihaddi aren't supposed to do that."

Tang gave half a smile. "International relations went to me. I sort of had to extricate myself from the situation."

"So that's why we didn't hear from you for four years."

Tang nodded and tried to change the subject. "So, what have you been doing since the war?"

Delgado idly tossed out a trump and replied first. "I do some reporting for the Oakland Tribune."

"Did you break any big stories?" Dee asked.

"No.. actually, I'm thinking of quitting, but I haven't made up my mind yet. When I'm not being sent out on some utterly useless fashion assignment, it's just boring desk work."

"What are you thinking of doing instead?"

Delgado sighed and pulled in the trick. "I haven't made up my mind yet. That's part of the reason I haven't made up my mind yet on quitting. So, have you gotten any new designs working?"

Dee smiled. "I've been working on some power armour, but I haven't finished getting the stress tolerances in the knee joints to acceptable levels. I think I'll have to use titanium bearings instead of steel."

Some of the other players stared at her after she mentioned her hobby project. Not just for a young girl to be working on something that advanced, Jihaddi generally weren't supposed to be taking their skills into the private sector.

"Is that... kosher?" Delgado asked with more than a slight edge to her voice.

"Oh!" Dee chuckled nervously. "Yeah, don't worry. It's a hobby... not that I \*couldn't\* make Jihad-tech stuff, but if I make a setup completely out of mundane technology I can take it out in public and play with it."

"Play with it how?" Delgado asked, expecting to be horrified at the answer.

Dee grinned. "Ah, well, Damo found a 20mm autocannon from a crashed fighter, so I was going to rig it up like a giant rifle and truck it to the Knob Creek machine-gun shoot to make people really jealous. Thing can do 30 rounds per second on full auto, and I should be able to get ahold of some HE shells for it."

There was another uncomfortable pause as the other players seemed to be trying to figure out what to think about that.

"Everyone needs a hobby," Lacroix said, breaking the silence. "What about you, Damo?"

Damocles spoke next. “Dee and I have a machinery shop out in Arizona. Athena Heavy Industries. Maybe you’ve heard of it? We do customizations of weapons and motor vehicles, build our own models-”

“Weapons and *fun* motor vehicles,” Dee interrupted her business partner. “Or vice-versa.”

Damocles shrugged. “Okay, \*she\* does bikes too.”

Dee objected. “I hardly think being behind last year’s winning AMA Superbike team was anything to sneeze at...”

“It’s still not our main business though,” Damo replied. The bickering had the feel of a well-worn joke being brought out for form’s sake, but Lacroix broke in to head things off.

“So what kind of things do you guys turn out?” he asked. Dee and Damo stopped arguing back and forth and Dee gestured slightly for Damocles to tell it this time.

“Mostly custom jobs, reworking pistols and stuff. We made a name doing some competition Colt 1911s but have expanded out to all sorts of other high-end stuff. We’re working on introducing a shotgun of our own design though.”

“That’s actually why we were at the gun show in Vegas when Owsen...” Dee trailed off uncomfortably, before lamely adding “well, you know.” A few heads nodded sympathetically.

“But yeah,” Damo cut in. “We had similar interests so we’ve been out in the middle of the desert playing with toys since VR closed down.”

Dee swallowed and nodded. “Beats working for a living, eh?” she commented with a slightly forced grin. “So what about you, Joseph?”

Lacroix gave a quick grin and answered. “Well, after the war, I went to college, got my teaching credentials, and I’m now an English teacher at Skyview High in Denver.”

“You too, huh?” Tangaroa said. “I teach English myself. Just private one on one tutoring, English as a second language for Japanese children and any other subject they need help on. Actually, I only have one student at the moment, a high school girl. She’s a nice girl, and the family’s nice.”

Damocles couldn’t help but notice a certain twinkle in Tangaroa’s eye. “Tang, you’re not, um..” His face scrunched a bit in disbelief.

Tang blushed, shook his head, and laughed. “No. Her sister. A businesswoman in her mid-twenties, named Natsuko. *She’s* a nice girl.”

“Okay, so you’re not a total pervert.” Damo chuckled as the whole table broke into laughter.

“Yare yare,” Dee muttered in Japanese and rolled her eyes. “<Don’t take him too seriously, he’s just jealous,>” she continued in the same language.

Tang blinked slightly; the girl’s Japanese came as easily and rapidly as if she were a native speaker, though there was still a hint of an accent. “Your Japanese is quite good,” he remarked.

She smiled, more easily than the forced grin a few minutes before. “Thank you.

I grew up in VR and it was quicker than waiting for anime to be translated.” He looked taken aback by the statement that learning a new language was so easy to the point where Dee chuckled. “<Sorry,>” she continued in Japanese. “<Brain like an absolute sponge; sucks up everything it touches.>” Dee tapped her forehead with her natural left hand meaningfully. “<And doesn’t let anything out. Want me to tell you what your last card is?>” She grinned impishly for a moment.

Lacroix coughed politely. “Sorry to interrupt, but it’s not very polite to be carrying on conversations in languages other people don’t speak.”

“Oh, you’re absolutely right, I’m sorry.” She winked at Tang in a not particularly subtle way and flipped her last card onto the table.

“Merci”, Tangaroa smirked at Lacroix, extracting grins from Delgado and Damocles.

Delgado took the last trick. “I get the over and I’m pulling from you this time,” she nodded towards Tang.

“Actually,” Damocles said as he started to rise, “we’d better be getting back to the shop. We have orders to fill.”

Lacroix also excused himself. “I really need to get my grading done; as far as Sky-view’s concerned, I’m not exactly here. If there’s nothing going on that I’m needed for, I’d better be going myself.”

Tang nodded in agreement. “I need to get some sleep before my shift. It’s been fun playing with you all.”

“Great game,” Delgado added as they all shook hands and exchanged parting pleasantries.



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## ***19: Road Rage***

**THE SPIRAL BUILDING  
DENVER, COLORADO  
TUESDAY, APRIL 7, 2004  
10:07 AM LOCAL TIME**

When she showed up for another day's round of tests on the sword fragments, Dee wondered what Mal was thinking, having her working with a mage. And not just any mage - Kazte Brenner was one of the founders of VR -and- the JPV, after all. That kind of reputation was a bit awe-inspiring, and it was with that in mind that Dee walked up to the security desk where Katze was waiting and said, "Uh, good morning Ms. Brenner."

Katze blinked at the slightly awkward formality in Dee's voice, but otherwise replied calmly. "Morning, Dee. I think we're going to the same place, so could you lead?"

"Sure thing."

The two Jihaddi crossed the lobby to the bank of elevators. On the ride down Katze attempted to come up with something that could break the ice between them. She mentally composed and discarded a half-dozen openings by the time they got from the elevator to the doors of the top-secret lab where Dee had been working the day before. Katze shrugged inwardly and just asked, "Something the

matter, Dee?”

Well, okay, that may not have been the best opening.

Dee winced at the sound and looked uncomfortable. “No, ma’am.”

Katze suppressed a sigh and tried again. “Call me Katze, okay? VR closed down a long time ago, and it’s not like I’m your superior officer anymore - not that I think I ever *was* technically.” She continued, “If anything, you know more about this stuff than I do right now.”

“Um, well... old habits die hard?” Dee offered, a bit lamely.

Katze smiled. “C’mon, I can’t possibly be -that- intimidating,” she said. Dee didn’t say anything, only ducking her head a bit. “...Really, I can’t. Can I?”

“Well...”

“You’re seriously intimidated? By *me*?” Katze looked incredulously at the diminutive engineer, unsure whether or not she should be amused or outraged. “I’m not scary like Mal.”

Dee shook her head. “Well, not for the same- forget it, let’s get to work.”

Thankfully for Katze, the next four hours of work loosened Dee up considerably. While they hadn’t started off very well, it seemed that the very act of working together made Dee feel more comfortable with the older woman, reputation or not. Unfortunately, the subject of all their work didn’t seem to warm up in the same way. They had made progress on analyzing the Owsenite, if only in the sense that they knew what -wouldn’t- work. The problem was, they were running out of available options to try, and they weren’t coming up with any good answers. Their mutual frustration was climbing, and when Katze heard Dee’s almost inaudible growling at the shards, she figured it was time for a break. “Lunch?” Katze inquired.

Dee looked up from the microscope she had been using to examine the shards for the thirtieth time and blinked. “Huh, what?” she asked, a bit out of it.

“Lunch,” Katze repeated patiently. “It’s the meal that happens between breakfast and dinner...”

“Oh. Oh! Right! Sure, that makes sense. This isn’t going anywhere.”

“Okay, great. What’s to eat around here?”

“Well, there’s a whole bunch of places on 16th...” Dee broke off, looking thoughtful. “Actually, before we head out, there’s an experiment you could help me with.”

“Oh?”

Dee nodded. “Yeah. I’ve been doing some research on developing ways to cut through magic.”

Katze gave her lab partner a skeptical look. “I’m not entirely sure I like where this is going.”

“Well, cold iron seems to do the trick according to all the stuff I’ve read, but I’m not sure of the exact criteria.” Dee rummaged through her briefcase, pulling out a large Smith & Wesson revolver. “So I made up a few bullets...” Katze began sidling for the door as Dee started loading the revolver. The tech looked up and blinked,

realizing that Katze had gotten the wrong idea. “Oh no, no no I’m not planning on shooting you,” she said hastily, “I just need a spell or something to test on them, and well, we’re kinda short on mages - and Maenads too, for that matter...”

“I get it. Hm. How about I cast a shield spell on a target and you try to shoot it?”

“That’s perfect! We ought to move over to the ballistics lab, though.” the short tech pocketed the case with the Owsenite samples and led them to another lab that resembled a firing range more than anything else. She set up some soda cans at the far end of the range and jogged back.

“All right, that should do it,” Katze said as a blue glow appeared around the cans momentarily. Dee nodded and fed cartridges into the revolver, snapping the cylinder closed and aiming at the first in the row.

“Might want to cover your ears.”

Dee squeezed the trigger and let off the first round. Obliging, it passed straight through the shield and can without slowing down, as did the next shot and can, though the third shot only went through one side and the last three simply knocked the cans over with no holes. Dee sighed. “Figures, it just had to be the cold-worked-ones...”

“Problems?”

“Nah, not really. Just that the ones that worked are the hardest to make.” Dee shrugged philosophically. “Can’t make the job too easy, I guess. C’mon, let’s go get some lunch.”

The two wandered off from the Spiral Building to a Mongolian barbecue a few streets away from Coors Field. Not being well-versed in the joys of Central Asian food, the two played it cautious and ordered nothing too unusual. After a meal of relatively-ordinary stir-fried chicken, rice and tortillas, Dee and Katze left the restaurant for the walk back to Spiral. “Well,” said Katze, “shall we wander back towards Spiral, and see if we’ve overlooked anything in the shard analysis? Or maybe just bang our heads against the lab bench for another couple of hours?”

“Headbanging sounds like a plan,” Dee said, “for all the good it’ll do. Not that Owsenite is your everyday material to begin with. I know somebody in the old Skunk Works went and did a full analysis on it back in the day, but all that data went poof.”

Katze nodded. “Worldwalk?” she asked.

“Mm, yeah. The Blood Jihad got hit pretty hard by it. We lost a lot of stuff...” Dee trailed off, staring into space for a second before adding in a soft voice. “Not to mention my mom.”

Katze blinked. “... Oh,” she said, a bit lamely, unsure as to what else to say.

Dee shrugged and continued, her voice deceptively light and calm. “In a lot of ways, it was worse than if she’d gotten killed. I mean, if that’d happened, then at least we *knew*, you know? But it didn’t, she just... never met us. She was out there

— she's *still* out there, as far as I know — but..." She shook her head. "Dad went looking for her, not long after. I don't know if he found her or not, but that wasn't long before Arsenal left, so I guess not."

"Must have been tough," Katze said.

"Yeah..." Dee paused, then continued speaking in a much more casual tone of voice. "Anyway, that Owsenite data would've been really handy about now. They came up with the data on equipment that's a couple of years older than the stuff we're working on."

Katze nodded. She recognized the change of subject for what it was, and didn't pry. "They probably had a lot more time to analyze it, too."

"There's got to be *something* there." Dee mused. "From what I've heard, Owsenite wouldn't leave splinters in something as wimpy as brick."

"Yeah, that's kind of surprising. Plus what Aris found out, that the thing's got -holes- in it. I wish we could figure out how it was done."

Dee frowned, an idea forming in her mind. "Maybe it was something like a composite layup," she said, "like it could only regrow so quickly, so it's just a solid shell on the outside, and the inside's foamed to fill the volume."

"That sounds like a possibility." Katze agreed. "Part of me is curious how much of -our- Slayer's grown back since we last saw it."

"I'm not sure I *want* to know until this whole thing is over."

Katze raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Well... one of the things we got out of analyzing the Slayer in the old days was Jihaddium. It was kind of a cheaper copy," Dee chuckled. "Cheaper' meaning we could make it at all. But the other side managed to make an equivalent, we called it B'harnium. If the two metals hit each other, they exploded."

Katze blinked. "... Wow." she said.

Dee nodded. "Yeah. I'm pretty sure that I don't want anything as heavily magicked up as the Slayer to explode. That would suck."

"I see your point. But if Owsen's looking for our Slayer, it makes you wonder what he's planning."

Dee paused. "Shit. You don't think there's something to my idea, do you?" she asked, suddenly worried.

Katze shrugged. "I don't know. Owsen's not exactly sane these days."

"Can't argue with that. This whole thing is crazy."

"Tell me about it. It's been almost five years since the end of the war, and now here's Owsen, back from the dead. And it looks as if he's a Lyran pawn. So, why is he showing up *now*?"

Dee flinched at the casual use of the name 'Lyran,' but soldiered on. "Well... I've got a theory, but I don't know if you want to hear it."

"Try me. It's got to be better than Josh's theory." Katze smiled.

"Okay. Well, we know that we managed to at least *hurt* Charn'El. And the Slayer shows signs that it's been forcegrown. I can't help wondering what they've been up

to in the last few years. I'm pretty sure this means that they haven't forgotten us." Dee said. "So what was Josh's theory?"

"Oh, he's convinced that it's all his fault."

That caught Dee off guard. "You're kidding," she said, more statement than question.

Katze shrugged. "Nah, see, he thinks he upset karma by proposing. Five days after, Owsen showed up."

"Hey, that's great! Too bad about the timing, though."

"No worries, we'll get there eventually." Katze paused, then returned to her original train of thought. "As for Charn'El, ponder the idea that he got out of... whatever it was the Maenads put him in on Pacifica."

Dee let out a sound that was half chuckle, half sigh. "Great, something I'd rather ponder my lack of a love life than contemplate."

Katze nodded, not really paying attention to anything but the question at hand. "Uh-huh. But what if he found the sword -and- Owsen in the void, and escaped? It makes sense with everything we know, except why Owsen wants our Slayer."

"Hm. I'm on weak ground here, but. How about this: assume something big happens when the two Slayers meet." Dee frowned thoughtfully, trying to work the problem out.

Katze nodded. "I can believe that."

"Okay, now what *kind* of big things? Explosion? A beacon for an invasion? Re-opens the Babylon Road? Locusts, famine, another decade of 'Friends?'"

"Out of that list, I'd prefer the explosion. At least it'd be over quickly."

"Mm." Dee agreed.

The two Jihaddi walked down the street a little longer in silence, both wrapped up in their own thoughts. As they turned the corner approaching the Spiral Building, Dee finally broke the reverie. "Um?"

"Yes?"

"I was just wondering..." Dee began hesitantly.

"Oh?"

"What do you think of Mal?"

Katze blinked. That was a bit unexpected. "Eh? How do you mean?" she asked, unsure as to where this was going.

"Well, it's just... after all this time, he's still so... well, *Mal!* I can sorta talk to him and stuff moreso, but..."

"Er."

"I mean, that is—"

"Wait, are you trying to say..."

"But it's like—"

"...You're interested? In Mal?"

"I.. um, well... yeah. Kind of have been for a long time."

“Wow. Just... *wow*.”

“I thought it went away and that I’d outgrown it. You know, just a schoolgirl thing... not that I ever really -went- to school much, but you know what I mean... but now he’s around and we can actually *talk* about stuff and I don’t feel like he’s talking down to me... well, not that he ever did that much, but...” Dee trailed off, suddenly realizing exactly *what* she’d been saying, and to who she’d been saying it. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled, face burning. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Katze reassured her. “I’m good at listening, and it sounds like you needed to say it to *somebody*.”

“It’s just.. I don’t know what to do here. I mean, I *like* Mal and we share a lot of interests. But we’re both so busy and I don’t think he notices me... well, like that.”

“To be utterly frank, and I really shouldn’t speculate, but I don’t think Mal notices -anybody- ‘like that.’” Dee nodded dejectedly, as Katze continued. “And who knows? Maybe you’ll find somebody who isn’t a Jihaddi. After all, it’s my oldest friend that ended up proposing to me.”

“Yeah... but that limits it in my case a lot. Besides, I don’t think Minerva’s all that interested, either.”

“Well, what I’m trying to say is that there’s a big world out there, and you’re still young.”

Dee sighed. “I know. Thing is though, aside from Damo, I don’t really hang around with people all that much. Like today, I was going to go sit and figure out how to deal with the data we got today after we split up, and basically do that or work in the lab until something came up.”

“My guess is something’s bound to come up pretty soon now.” Katze shrugged. Dee’s attitude towards the situation was getting a bit repetitive, and Katze’s dormant matchmaker complex was beginning to surface. “What about Damo?” she inquired, trying to keep the question as innocent as possible.

Dee laughed. “That’d be -way- too weird. Don’t get me wrong, he’s a nice guy and we get along great, but it’d be like dating an older brother or something.”

“If there’s an age problem,” Katze noted with a slight frown, “you know there’s a reason we call Mal the Old Man.”

“Despite being short, I *am* legal,” Dee muttered.

“Not doubting you. But if Mal had *grandkids*, they’d probably be your age. Or older.”

“Damn. So there really is something to all those stories about him being older than he looks?”

“I don’t know exactly. He’s pretty close-lipped about his past, but... well, probably.”

“Yeah. I was afraid of that. Oh well, maybe in another twenty years or so.” Dee shook her head and chuckled darkly. “What a life, fate of the world on your head and nobody to date...”

“Speaking of fate of the world stuff, is it just me or are we being followed?”

Dee blinked as she caught a reflection in a window, suddenly tensing as she walked. “Yeah, Katze, I see them too. Pretend we don’t notice them and turn right at the next corner. It could be a coincidence.” She had noticed a wireless security camera on the corner of a building and very quickly brought up the software on her arm’s computer to find the signal and crack its mild (even by mundane standards) encryption. She watched the feed overlaid in part of her visual field as they turned the corner.

“Damn,” Dee muttered a few seconds later, closing the video once she’d seen the group of 3 follow them around.

“Now what?” Katze asked, quite reasonably. Dee quickly flicked her eyes across the street and found an answer.

“First car on our side; go by the passenger door and pretend you don’t know I can steal cars.” She extended a narrow bundle of micromanipulators from the tip of her artificial thumb and shoved it into the lock cylinder before Katze could object. Running the SkeletonKey program she’d written for emergencies like this that automatically controlled the bundle, she was astonished that it didn’t open the lock instantly.

“Uh, Dee? They’re running now... is this wise?”

“Just another second....” It was just a Toyota Solara, albeit a new one, but nothing should have this good of a lock. She watched in horror as SkeletonKey scrolled up to lock types that were only theoretical.

“They’re getting closer,” Katze mentioned, shifting her posture. Closer was an understatement, it was another few seconds before the trio would be upon them. Whose car is this thing, Dee wondered as the program finally found the right key to pretend to be and opened the car doors. Both the ladies jerked open their doors and got in, Dee having the presence of mind to fasten her seat belt while Katze took the far more useful option of hitting the door lock. The men running after them tried the door handle an instant before Dee got the engine started, and had begun to draw a pistol out from under his jacket as Dee mashed the gas.

“Get down!” she yelled to the 6 foot tall former basketball player as the car weaved, trying to make a harder target. There were a pair of pinging noises and then they made it around the corner.

“Where am I supposed to have gotten down to?” asked Katze, quite reasonably. “Also, it seems to have been unnecessary.” Dee glanced to where the bullets had hit the back window, only to flatten themselves harmlessly without making more than a slight smudge.

“Oh... kay. Katze, could you try to figure out whose car we just stole?” Dee was just adjusting her seat when a green conversion van ran a red light and almost hit them. “Asshole!” Dee instinctively screamed, only to have it mutate into “oh shit” as the sliding door flew open and someone raked the Toyota with automatic rifle fire. She turned the wheel to dodge down a side street, her unplanned turn taking out a

newspaper box in the process.

“Every time I go out with Jihaddi lately, I swear,” Katze muttered as she pulled open the glovebox, distracting herself by figuring out the owner. The first thing in it made her pause. “Uh, Dee? There’s a pistol in here.” She pulled it out and held it where Dee could see. The tech blinked at what she recognized as an X-Pistol, which were so far just in prototype stages, and started to get a sudden sinking feeling. What she found around another corner didn’t make things any better, a brown sedan moving to give chase too. Katze frowned as she found the Toyota’s title. “Jonathan Fnord,” she stated flatly.

“We stole Mal’s car,” Dee remarked in shock. She paused, unfortunately in the middle of a turn, though the crunch of side-swiping a parked car brought her back to her senses. “Right. Well, maybe we can finish this before he finds out and put it back.”

Right about then the man in question, Malcalypse the Seeker, was walking out of the pleasant little sandwich shop he had gone to for a late lunch. He crossed to his car and had gone so far as to take out his keys before he realized that his car wasn’t, in fact, actually there. Against all odds, someone had taken his car. Considering the situation for a moment and clamping down on the irritation that the whole thing was causing, he casually reached into his pocket for his cell phone.

Dee and Katze almost blinked in unison as the phone built into the car started ringing. Neither made any move to answer it at first, but after the third ring Katze picked it up. “Hi Mal... uh yeah, about that... it was an emergency and...” at that instant the car sounded like it had been struck by a giant hammer and slewed sideways, Dee working frantically with the wheel and pedals to retain control. The burning smell told her what had happened even before Katze glanced back at the fist-sized hole punched in the driver’s side rear door. “... look, we’re kinda busy, can we talk about this later?” she said into the phone before hanging up. “Uh, Dee, there’s a hole in the car.”

“Yeah, they probably hit us with a grenade launcher. Notice how well the climate control system is dissipating the stink?” she replied casually, mind racing. Probably an old M79, she thought, meaning that they would have to manually reload it and would be getting off a second shot about... now. A monumental crashing sound happened as she jerked the wheel to one side and crashed through part of a glass storefront which fortunately didn’t have anyone in that part of the store. A cloud of glass and underwear flew up behind the car... oh, that was a Victoria’s Secret, part of Dee’s mind thought. Pity, but at least we’re not dead the thought continued as the errant explosive blew a parked car in half.

“This is insane,” Katze commented rather more calmly than one should talk about a car chase of this sort.

“I agree. Going to see about getting us a gate out of here,” Dee replied in mid-



jink, the next grenade carving a brand new pothole for city planning to ignore. She instantly called up the JihadLinker package in her arm and got ahold of Minerva. "Emergency, accidentally stole Mal's car and am in a car chase with people shooting at us, how accurately can you do gates on the fly?" Dee transmitted as one giant run-on sentence at the speed of thought. Min didn't even pause.

"Need a couple seconds to get a fix to a new location."

"Shit, that's too long. Be ready to open one to some coordinates I give though; we'll probably be coming through with a lot of delta-v." Dee closed the link, barely two seconds passed in real time. "Can't just gate where we are... have to predict where we'd have to be too accurately not to get shot."

"So why don't we just run then if we can't get a gate." Dee shook her head.

"Can't go too fast in city streets, not many pedestrians now, but also going straight would make us a good target." A series of jinks and turns kept the next grenade from plowing into the Toyota as Dee flogged it for all it was worth. "Just need to get creative... at least they're not coordinating that well... shit," she broke off just as the green van pulled across the side-street in front of them and again opened fire. The bullets spraying across the windshield seemed to be working better, small cracks appearing here and there.

"Hang on," Dee yelled, resisting the urge to duck down or veer away from the van, instead pressing harder on the gas pedal. Katze and the gunner figured out what was about to happen at the same time and their reaction was much the same, both covering their face with their arms and tensing in anticipation. The Toyota slammed into the van with a sickening crunch, the whole event taking place far too fast for even the adrenaline-hyped perceptions of the people involved to see it actually happen. "Urgh," Dee muttered, taking note of the ruined van wrapped around the car which was miraculously still running. She shook her head to clear it as the airbags deflated and, unusually packed themselves back away.

"Can we not do that again?" Katze pleaded as Dee noted the brown sedan with the bigger stick come around the corner. Dee growled an expletive under her breath and slammed the gearshift into reverse.

"I make no promises," she muttered as the car lurched backwards in a cloud of tire smoke, irritatingly taking the van with it. In her adrenaline fueled state, Dee saw the breach of the grenade launcher click closed and come bearing down at them. She snapped the wheel to one side with the accelerator still to the floor, the mass of the van snapping both cars around just in time to interpose itself in the way of the explosive shell. The blast was even nice enough to dislodge the van. Dee took in the surroundings as quick as she could and slapped the gearshift into drive, making for the gate to a parking garage. "Okay, I think I've got it now," the tech muttered as she kicked the car around the concrete spiral ramps heading upwards.

"Got what? Isn't the top a dead end?" There was silence, except for screeching tires for a second. "Well, isn't it?"

"Not... exactly." She opened a connection to Minerva and very quickly gave her

coordinates for a gate portal as they came to the top, open level of the parking structure, the brown sedan hot on their tail but far too busy driving to try for a shot.

"You're not..." Katze noticed the edge of the roof coming up, over a back alley away from the main streets.

"Yep," and the car crashed through the chain-link fencing on the edge, Dee tapping the brakes to orient the car properly. Behind them the people in the brown sedan continued on, not realizing what was happening until an instant too late, plowing through the hole that the Toyota had made. The results were far different, the Toyota dropping straight down the alley while the sedan flew across the gap to slam into the side of a neighboring building. There were screams as the car fell towards the pavement, and another crash that Dee's consciousness decided to edit out.

Back in the Mt. Blanca hangar bay, Mal stood and watched the area where Minerva was opening the gate to. He was rather curious to hear what explanation the two would have to offer, and also somewhat interested to see what shape his car was still in, though he didn't place too much importance on that by comparison. It was just a car after all.

Events proved that that was a fortunate attitude for him to have. The gate opened and there was an incredible crunch as his car fell out and hit the concrete floor at probably 80 miles per hour. The front end crumpled and air bags had gone off, but the fact that the car impacted with the body vertically was worthy of comment. It resembled less a car and more a piece of abstract art, some strange monolith that had planted itself in the bay. Even as he strode over to check, there was a thumping and the passenger door opened and fell off, clattering to the floor.

"I still say that could have gone better," Katze said to the interior of the car as she jumped down, looking disheveled but unhurt.

"Any crash you can walk away from," came Dee's reply as she climbed out of the car and then noticed Mal standing nearby watching them sternly. "Uh oh. Uh... I suppose you want an explanation."

"That would be helpful, yes," was Mal's reply. Dee nodded, then winced as behind them the car fell over onto its roof, with a crash and tinkle of all its remaining windows shattering.

"... right."

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## 20: Getting To The Point

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VRDET HQ  
BLANCA MOUNTAIN, COLORADO  
3:00 PM LOCAL TIME

He awoke slowly, and immediately regretted it. Everything hurt. His entire body was one congruous ache. Breathing was a chore, and each lungful of air might as well have been liquid fire. He cracked an eye, and bright, pale light stabbed into his retinas.

“Nngh?” Felton hazarded.

“Ah, good, you’ve returned to the living,” said a familiar voice, in a tone of well-practiced patience honed by a career dealing with people ill-equipped for keeping up with his thought processes. Felton shielded his eyes from the overhead lamp and squinted toward his feet. His vision swam for a moment, but eventually he managed to focus dully on the figure at the end of his bed, where Malaclypse sat calmly, hands folded over his crossed knee. “You’re lucky to be, even by your standards.”

Felton tried in vain to swallow, but his mouth felt like he’d been sucking on cotton balls. “W’time s’it?” he managed to choke out.

“Tuesday.”

“... Oh.” He tried to sit up, but a firm and gentle hand on his chest held him down. He rolled his eyes to look into Keili’s softly smiling face. “How are you feel-

ing?” she asked.

“Like the worst bloody hangover of my life, only I didn’t get to enjoy getting there first.” He tried to glare at the light, but only succeeded in making his eyes sting. “Why’s it so bloody bright in here?”

Mal slid off his chair and moved to the dimmer switch on the wall. When he could see comfortably again, Felton picked at the bandage around his left shoulder. The gash beneath was still angry and red and oozing. He could move the arm in its sling a little, but it took a lot of effort and discomfort. “The autodocs managed to suture you up fairly well,” Mal said, moving his chair to the side of the bed and sitting back down. “You’re not quite back up to speed yet, but you managed to do a several weeks’ worth of healing in only a couple of days. You should be lurching around the facility in no time.”

Kirk tried to wiggle his feet, but a searing pain around his ankles made him quit the attempt. “Great,” he said, rubbing two days’ worth of sleep out of his eyes. “Okay. Somehow I doubt you’re just here to wish me well. What’s up?”

“I think you know.”

“Yeah... Owsen?”

Mal shrugged. “He’s fallen off the radar. Either you dealt him a pretty serious blow or he just can’t find anymore Maenads to kill.” That comment made Felton grimace slightly.

“Seems he’s learned a few new tricks,” he said. “I wouldn’t count on him being down for long.”

“You got a good look at the sword?” Mal asked.

“Closer look than I would have liked,” Felton mused, rubbing at his shoulder with a wince. “Looked just like the Barney-Slayer, but black.”

Mal nodded. “We suspect that it doesn’t just look like it. That it’s actually the regenerated missing half.”

Felton started to look a little alarmed. “I think I can believe that. It smelled like Owsenite. Hell, it *bit* like Owsenite. But it also smelled... no, *reeked* of Lyran magic.”

“That we’ve also suspected, but were hoping wasn’t the case.” Mal produced an enlargement of one of Dee’s photographs and put it in Felton’s hands. “Can you read this inscription?”

The Maenad studied the photograph. “Well, tell you the truth, I’ve hardly mastered the language, but...” He looked at it thoughtfully in silence. “I recognize the root word. I think it means ‘irony’ or somesuch. Doesn’t make a whole lot of sense, but...” he hesitated.

Mal cocked an eyebrow. “What is it?”

Felton handed the photo back to him and then pointed at the line of scrawl in the blade’s furrow. “You see that glyph at the shoulder of the blade? As far as I’ve been able to tell, it’s not a standard character of the Lyran alphabet. But it’s been on many of the texts we pulled out of Pacifica.”

Mal twirled his finger in an impatient “get on with it” gesture.

Felton grimaced. “It’s a personal mark. A signature. It belongs to Charn’El.”

Now it was Mal’s turn to look alarmed. “This could be more serious than we expected,” he said, rising to leave. “Get some rest. I have a feeling we’re going to need everyone in top condition in the coming days.” He hesitated for a moment, and then stated the question that was bugging him, but wasn’t important enough to pose until now. “Weren’t your eyes green?”

Keili took Kirk by the chin and turned his head to look. “It’s happened again,” she said. His eyes, in fact normally green, had become streaked with dark red.

“It’ll pass,” Felton said, dismissively. “Happened once before, after we moved the ‘Slayer to the JPV campus. But there’s something else, Mal. Owsen said something about a ‘Scourge’ coming. To purge this world of its filth.”

Mal scowled. “The connotations of that are unsettling. Especially if Charn’El has managed to find his way back to this plane.”

Felton nodded. “Aye. I’d really like to know what Owsen is up to right now...”

### EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND 11:00 PM LOCAL TIME

The man quietly occupying the corner table of a nondescript Edinburgh pub was drawing a lot of curious glances. Not because of his clothing, though even in Scotland the kilt as daily wear was a bit out of place. Nor was it really the scraps of armor he wore, but their battered, slightly charred and apparently well-used state certainly did nothing to deter it. Rather, it had a lot to do with the broadsword laid casually across the table next to his pint of Guinness. It had a certain sinister feel about it, but above all it looked quite a sharp, serviceable weapon. No one had mustered up the nerve to ask him to remove it.

Tilden Owsen was flustered. Things were moving along so nicely until his encounter with Nemesis. It was bad enough that the pup had proven so difficult to track in the first place, but he had had the means to the sword in his grasp and had foolishly allowed it to slip away. He had lost the scent again, and God knew how long it would take him to pick it up.

Worse yet, there was still no trace of the other three, which led him to believe that they were no longer a part of this world. To Owsen this might have been good enough, but he couldn’t be certain his master would be in agreement. In all, his mission had reached an impasse, and it made for rather sour spirits. So he was doing what came naturally to an Irishman in a foul mood: he was attempting to get drunk, to varying degrees of success.

He was focused on his drink when the dull hum of background conversation suddenly ceased, as though the atmosphere had been sucked right out of the house. Owsen looked up curiously.

**ATTEND.**

The command resonated through his psyche, booming impossibly loud in his ears for words spoken without sound. He bolted to his feet, knocking over his pint, and dropped to one knee with his head bowed. "I am here, Great One."

**THE HUNT PROGRESSES?**

"Y... yes, Great One. I have located the youngest of the cubs..."

**DO NOT PRESUME TO CONCEAL TRUTH FROM ME, OWSEN.**

"The eldest and her mate elude me yet, Great One," Owsen said hurriedly, face twitching. "I battled the one called Nemesis, but he has escaped your wrath. He claims to know the location of the sword, my lord, but I fear the trail has grown cold."

**YOU ARE MY HERALD, OWSEN. FAILURE WILL NOT BE ACCEPTED.**

"Yes, Great One. I will not fail you."

There was a brief, puzzled silence. **WHAT HAVE YOU FOUND?**

"Found, Great One?" Owsen asked. It took him a moment to understand. "Oh... a mere trinket, my lord." He retrieved the medallion from his pocket.

**SHOW ME.**

Owsen frowned. Show? Shrugging, he held the medallion up, allowing it to dangle in front of his eyes. He then felt it — a cold, sharp presence, like being stabbed in the brain with an icecicle. The feeling was not unlike trying to share the view through a knothole in a fence, only the fence this time was his body. It was a touch disconcerting.

**WHERE DID YOU FIND THIS?**

"Around the neck of Nemesis, my lord. What is its significance?" Owsen asked. He heard a chilly, broken hissing sound, like freon escaping from a punctured hose. He realized that his master was chuckling.

**SEE.**

His mind exploded. Dark and disturbing images flooded into his consciousness, memories he didn't have that forced their way in. Memories of Lyran biomancy in dark places, of experimentation to change human beings into... something else... Of helpless women, held fast by fleshy tendrils and unconscious, implanted with, no, infested with... Of vague shadows, at once so human and yet not... Of burning villages, stalked by monsters wearing small amulets not unlike the one in his hand... Of the mages' victory turned defeat as the monster-men ultimately self-destruct. The waking-dreams gradually faded, but the memories lingered.

"I understand, Great One," Owsen said, squeezing his eyes shut until the invasive memories faded into a dull throb in his skull. "But what use is device for tracking if it is no longer around his neck?"

**DO YOU QUESTION MY INTELLIGENCE, OWSEN?**

Owsen bowed his head deeply, a tremor of sudden fear shuddering his body. "No, Great One. Forgive your servant's tongue, for it has been affected by drink."

**INDEED.** There was a thoughtful pause. **LEARN.**

Another storm of memories, all magical rites and symbology. It had seemed hopeless, but now he understood. He knew what he had to do.

And then he was alone. Except for the rest of the pub's patrons, who had found themselves very interested in the lunatic kneeling on the floor in the midst of some sort of psychotic episode. Owsen stood up, brushed off his knees, and took notice of the stares. "What? Have you not seen a man communing with his god before?" he said, and lifted his sword from the table.

Suddenly nobody was interested in him anymore.

He nodded in approval, and left the pub, sliding the black sword into its scabbard at his hip. He grinned up to the afternoon sun, which somehow seemed brighter. It would all be over soon, he was certain of it, and this made him happy. The last Maenad of the Holy Albino left on this wicked earth would be dead, and in the process he'd have the means of getting back what was once his.

And then the Scourge would begin.

It was going to be a good day, after all.

**BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA  
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 8, 2004**

Katze ran her finger along a row of books, looking for the one that was in English. She had figured it wouldn't be hard to find, she stuck it specifically in with the few books Josh and her had in foreign languages so that she could find it on quick notice, but it wasn't coming up. She could have sworn she'd stuck it in between the Russian-language copy of the Brothers Karamazov and the history of Marraketh Rene had given her. But there wasn't any book there, which both puzzled and worried Katze.

She stood there, staring at the bookshelf, when a voice over her shoulder said, "Well, look who's actually at home." Katze turned, only to find Josh standing there, still in his work clothes, and she wondered why she hadn't heard him coming in downstairs.

"I was looking for something," she offered, and instantly regretted it. It came out sounding somewhat lame. She hadn't really offered Josh an explanation of her whereabouts over the last week. Not that it was necessary, of course, but if they were going to build a relationship on trust, it was something she ought to do.

"A book, I would assume," Josh said, with a hint of a smile.

Katze frowned. She didn't understand why Josh seemed to be playing with her, unless he was actually angry with her and wasn't admitting it. "I'm sorry," she said. "The whole Owsen mess is picking up speed, and I'm not sure how long it's going to last."

Josh nodded. "I figured as much," he said. "It's what I get, I guess, for falling in love with a do-gooder." His eyes sparkled at the last line. "But it would have been

nice if you'd told me beforehand. As it was, I had to find ways to amuse myself."

"You would have had to find ways to amuse yourself whether I had told you or not," Katze said. "But with that said, I had a book here that I need to find, and I could have sworn I put it right here."

"Well, the project I started working on was sorting and rearranging the bookshelves. I did find a book over here, but I thought you had just misfiled it. It was in English in the middle of the foreign language books."

"Yeah. I did that on purpose so I could find it. What did you do with it?"

Josh frowned in thought. "I threw it in the box of books I took back to Moe's last night."

Katze took a deep breath and tried to control her temper. Josh didn't quite realize how important that book was, and it wasn't his fault he had boxed it up and taken it back to the used bookstore. "Then I guess we're just going to have to go to Moe's and see if we can find it, aren't we?" she said.

"Why are you mad at me?" Josh asked. So much for attempting to keep her temper, Katze decided. Josh continued. "I only put books we had more than one copy of in that box. We talked about doing this when we moved. You know that."

"That book was important, Josh! It was the only clue I had..." What Josh had said sunk into Katze's head, and she stopped her tirade. She stood silent for a moment and then said, quietly, "More than one?"

"Yeah. I have two copies of *Colour of Magic*, because one is a first British edition signed by Pterry himself. And then one for reading, because I don't want to destroy the one by repeated rereadings. I figured we didn't need a third copy. When did you get interested in the Discworld novels anyway? I thought fantasy reminded you too much of home." Josh frowned. "If I had known you were so interested in it, I'd have lent you my books, you didn't have to go get a new copy."

Katze stared at him dumbly. "Discworld? Fantasy? Pterry? Err?"

"You didn't read it, did you," Josh said. It was definitely a statement and not a question, but Katze nodded anyway. "So if you haven't read it, why did you have it?"

"You're not going to believe the story," Katze said.

"Lesse. My fiancée is the liberator of my homeworld, killing my father in the process of doing that work, and in her spare time, when she's not busy pretending she's as normal as everybody else despite the fact that she is very much not, works as part of a team that fights things the rest of us should not know about. And I believe all that." Josh looked at Katze. "What are you going to tell me that could top the utter unbelievability that is your story, Kats?"

"Touche," Katze said. "Okay, then. A friend of mine, at the closedown, relocated himself and a good chunk of the property of his JAO to somewhere else, and the only clue I have as to where he went was the copy of that book. He said to read it and that's where he is."

Josh's mouth fell open, and it took a few moments before Katze reached up and



tapped him on the chin. He closed his mouth, and then said, “Wow. I didn’t expect that.”

“I \*told\* you it was a bit of an unbelievable story,” Katze said. “Now, the point of this whole thing is, what can you tell me about this Discworld? Because, if that’s where this book is set, then that’s probably where my friend is. And it’s rather important we check on him, because he’s in possession of something important.”

Josh nodded sagely. “How much detail do you want? I know a lot of it.”

“Just enough to give me some idea where to go. I’m not even sure Mal can find this place, let alone get me there.”

“Hmmm, I’m going to guess your friend is a mage, going to Discworld wouldn’t make much sense otherwise.”

“Right on, oh wise one.” Katze smiled after saying it, and Josh couldn’t resist smiling back before his face settled back in a serious expression.

“Okay. Discworld is a flat disc, hence the name, that is carried by four elephants on the back of a turtle. They’ve all got names, but we’ll not worry about that now. On this disc, there’s a city called Ankh-Morpork, and that’s where Unseen University is. That’s the wizard’s college. He’s probably somewhere near there if I don’t miss my guess.” He walked over to a bookshelf and pulled a small paperback novel out. “Here, this is my reading copy. Don’t lose it.”

Josh flung the book at Katze, who caught it. He then came back to her, smiling. “I hope that helps,” he said.

In response, she kissed him, and said, “I don’t think I’ll be back tonight. I have a trip to make.” And she disappeared before he could say anything in return.

Josh stood there for a second, and then slapped his head. “I forgot to tell her that the wizards at Unseen are going to boggle over a girl on campus.” He turned around and grabbed a book off the bookshelf and smiled to himself. *\_Equal Rites\_* seemed like good reading material for the night.

**VRDET HQ**  
**BLANCA MOUNTAIN, COLORADO**  
**THURSDAY, APRIL 9, 2004**

Katze appeared in the middle of the lab. Malaclypse didn’t even look up, instead continuing to ready the ‘Gate. He did, however, point towards a garment bag hanging on some random piece of machinery.

She opened up the garment bag. Inside were petticoats and a frilly dress. She looked at them incredulously and turned towards Mal, who was wrapped up in getting the ‘Gate ready. “You can’t be serious,” she said.

Mal continued to work, smirking slightly. “Well, from what I can tell, based on a quick reading, is that you’re looking at Victorian. From that, the only other option I can see is dressing as a man.” He turned to another console and typed some commands. He paused for a moment.

“You sure you want to do this?”

Pulling on the dress, Katze said, "With Owsen running around like this, I need to make sure that the 'Slayer... the -other- 'Slayer is still fine. When I know that it's safe, I'll feel much better. I'm sure you will too." She smoothed out the dress. "So, what do you think?"

Mal looked up. "No, you're right. I—"

"What," she said.

Mal adjusted his glasses. "Well, you probably aren't going to want to wear those jeans under the skirt."

## THE DISCWORLD

Katze stepped onto the grass. She set a metal suitcase on the ground and unlocked it. She pulled a canvas sack out of the case and set it on the ground open. Looking up briefly, she noticed a cow staring dumbly at her. It chewed on some cud, blinked, and bent back down to eat some fresh grass. Katze removed some small taped bundles from the case and placed them into the sack. She opened the last one in the case and placed the contents in her—

Wait. She didn't have any pockets. She looked all over the dress, but couldn't find anywhere to put the small silver coins. Taking a quick check of the area, when she was satisfied no-one was around, Katze put the coins in her bra. She pulled out a book and consulted a small map in the front cover. She looked around and started walking towards a road in the distance.

It is a cliché about cities that they never sleep. Even in the depths of the night, something stirs and cities take on a life and a personality of their own. Whether this is a function of the collective unconscious, or just inanimate objects being endowed with the spirit of the idea behind them is unknown, but cities live.

Ankh-Morpork, Katze decided, not only suffered from multiple personality disorder, but also a case of attention deficit disorder, antisocial tendencies, halitosis, and some creeping skin infection one really didn't want to think too hard about. Add to this the sheer general feeling of being one step too close to the edge to back away, and Katze was generally rather sorry she had decided to come looking for Pupp in the first place.

She didn't have the first clue as to where to find Pupp other than what Josh had told her. One would think it wouldn't be that hard to find a university, but among Ankh-Morpork's charming habits was the tendency to put things in the least bloody obvious place, and after wandering through the streets, Katze found herself completely lost. She sighed and continued walking, idly wishing she'd actually bothered to read the book Pupp had given her before this whole mess came to this.

It couldn't be helped, she thought. She was here now, and bloody-minded enough to find Pupp and do the errand she had been sent on. In the meantime, she was trying to find a soul who could possibly give her directions, but nobody really seemed

to be all that welcoming, let alone friendly and helpful and all those other adverbs, which just served to frustrate our lost adventurer even more.

As it was growing dark, Katze figured she would try her luck at one of the taverns by the river — if you could call that a river. It looked something much more akin to an industrial waste accident happening in slow motion. Even Cleveland got the hint when its river caught on fire, Katze thought, and then realized she'd actually compared something to Cleveland in a manner in which Cleveland came out favorably. This realization did not help Katze's opinion of the place, but as she was still trying to do her duty, she picked a tavern at random and pushed open the door.

There are certain places too dodgy to be called disreputable, and the Mended Drum in Ankh-Morpork was one of these fine establishments. Of course, our heroine, being ignorant of what passed as culture on the Disc, didn't realize that the Mended Drum was probably one of the best places to practice stuff like your beating up somebody with a table leg or axe flinging from fifty paces or other related skills as opposed to what people normally go to taverns for — this being the wine, whiskey, and song.

So it probably should not have come as a surprise that the Mended Drum was full on engaged in the middle of one of the greatest bar fights in its history (which happened every other night and twice on Thursdays) when Katze walked in. "Excuse me..." she started to say, but was rudely interrupted by the sounds of a dwarven battle axe whistling through the air very close to her left ear and thudding into the door she just walked into.

Before Katze's conscious mind could catch up to the fact that yes, there was a rather large and heavy axe wobbling gently next to her head, her subconscious mind reacted in self-defense. Long buried instincts reared up and, sensing danger, lashed out.

Even for the Mended Drum, the bang was quite impressive. Much later, after the dust had cleared, people from as far away as Pseudopolis would claim to have seen the flash, and unscrupulous traders of all sorts would market bits of charcoal they found lying around as "genuine debris from the Great Explosion."

### UNSEEN UNIVERSITY AN HOUR OR TWO OF QUIETLY SNEAKING AWAY AND ASKING DIRECTIONS LATER

Katze walked through the open gates to the courtyard. Awestruck, she paused and stared at the abstract tangle of towers, parapets, balconies and mobius loops of Unseen University. "Wow. Pupp sure knows how to pick 'em."

She continued through the courtyard, not noticing the shocked stares and muted exclamations following close behind.

As she approached the door she was grabbed around the shoulders.

"Aye wouldn't go that way, may gel!"

The large woman aimed her towards the side of the main building. As they were

walking, she talked about this, and that, and how the Dean was doing that, and how they were doing that with this, and oh yeah, the Bursar. See, he was fighting with the ArchChancellor and they—

Right. Anyway, Katze was shown to a non-descript side entrance from which she was guided into the kitchen. Some kitchens are prominent in their distinct lack of use. You know, the squeaky clean pots, perfect floor, empty sink, and the acute lack of smells. Not this one. The University kitchen was full of smells, some good, some bad, some unintelligible. The only way to tell that the black dripping mass hanging from the ceiling was pots would be to use a metal detector.

A broom was pushed into her hands and she was directed to a hallway. She tried to protest but trying to get a word in while the woman (who Katze found out was Mrs. Whitlow) talked constantly about all the goings-on in the University was like trying to nail a noodle through a two-by-four.

“Now you just go ahead and start sweeping this hallway, gel! If you see hanything that might disturb you, just close your eyes and hwait a few moments.” Mrs. Whitlow turned and strode back down the hall.

Katze looked at the broom, then at the rapidly moving figure of Mrs. Whitlow. “Wait, but—”

The older woman fluttered her hand and continued walking. “You will be fine may gel! Don’t worry, aye know you’ll do me proud!” She faded into the distance.

The hallway was empty. Katze shrugged and started sweeping. At least no-one was going to question what she was doing there if she was cleaning. She leaned the broom against a wall and lifted the canvas sack off her shoulder.

Katze reached inside the sack and pulled out a JihadLinker. She punched in Pupp’s address and hit ‘trace.’ I hope he’s left it on, she thought.

Underneath a large stuffed alligator, left behind by the room’s previous occupant who as the result of an unfortunate magic misunderstanding, the Unseen University’s newest faculty member carefully positioned a medicine dropper over a bubbling cauldron. The slightest wrong move could be highly inconvenient. He wiped a stray sweat droplet from his forehead.

Carefully... caaaaarefully... almost... aaaand...

“PUPP!!”

...ohshit.

**WOOMPF**

Lifting the blanket off of Pupp’s head, Katze cautiously smiled, “So.. bet you weren’t expecting to see me, were ya?” She handed him a mug full of what she was hoping to be water, which he promptly poured over his head, dousing his still-smoldering hair.

“Katze? Wha— Kat! What’re you doing here?” Pupp grabbed her and hugged Katze tightly. He let go and held her at arms’ length. “This has to be the first time i’ve ever seen ya in a dress... not too shabby!” He paused for a moment. “Wait.

What ARE you doing here," he said.

"Well... it's a long story."

Katze explained the situation, putting extra emphasis on the parts involving the Owsen's rampage and subsequent multiple killings of Maenads.

"Wait. Owsen? Big guy, kilt, really awful accent?"

Katze nodded, "that's the one. I don't know if you remember him or not, but he disappeared in a nicely vague puff of smoke when all the mucky-mucks tossed Charn-el out of this dimension on Pacifica."

Pupp was recruited into the Jihad in the brief period immediately after Operation:Phoenix and just before Pacifica. He remembered hearing through the grapevine about the events on that island, but never got many details, even after having become a Trium Adjunct. The only solid thing he knew about the operation was that it was where the Barney-Slayer was shattered, bringing about the events leading to his and JPV's holding on to the remaining half of the sword. He reminded himself to slide by the vault and check on it, as he hadn't really been worried about it since he'd arrived on the Disc.

He showed Katze around the office, and tried to answer her questions about why he chose a medieval culture to call home.

"You see, THIS is why I chose this particular reality to hunker down in," Pupp explained. He very casually flicked his wrist. A small, bewildered rabbit appeared in his outstretched hand.

"On Earth, I'd merely create an illusion that there was a rabbit. The ambient magical energy in our universe is very faint." He stroked the rabbit between the ears, calming the animal, who now started looking around the room looking for food.

With another flick of the wrist, the rabbit was gone, leaving nothing but a small puff of purple smoke.

"This world is absolutely *saturated* with magical energies, so rather than create just the illusion that a rabbit is in my hand, I actually can create a living creature where before there was nothing." He rolled his eyes, correcting himself, "Well, not exactly nothing. It's actually pretty complex involving base elements from the surrounding area and chemistry and such, but because of the heavy magic saturation, it's no effort at all."

Katze had noticed from the first moment she stepped onto the Discworld that she was utterly enveloped by magic. Stepping out of the 'gate, it felt kind of like walking into a heavy fog which you can't see, can't smell, and which has the effect of making a mage feel like they're taking a constant methamphetamine shower. "I noticed."

She let him go on for a few minutes, but ultimately, the reason she was on the Disc was to check on the 'Slayer. She interrupted Pupp in the middle of a demonstration of how he was able to pull a hat out of a rabbit, a pretty bad pun once she stopped and thought of it.

"Pupp. I need to make sure the 'Slayer is fine. Could you take me to it? She

noticed his face drop when she stopped him. "I'm sure it's okay," she said. I mean, you have been checking on it, right?"

"Uh.. yeah. It's just fine." He looked off into the distance. "Checked on it.. oh, last week or so."

"Great. Let's go. I gotta get back to Earth, and I want to know that it's safe," Katze said.

Pupp nodded and headed for the doorway. "It's at JPV HQ. We can take a coach." He stopped at the door. "You sure you don't want to relax a bit first?"

Katze was puzzled. "Uh, no. I need to see it now." She had a moment of suspicion, and decided it wouldn't be too soon before she saw the 'Slayer. They walked out of the office and headed for the JPV campus.

The coach pulled up at the main building of the JPV campus. Pupp tipped the driver with a single Ankh-Morpork dollar. Katze was struck with how over-run the buildings were. What looked like years of plantgrowth had moved in on the Praxeum's space. It looked like a ghost town.

"Pupp, where is everybody?" She noticed a raccoon peeking out of the window of what was her office when she was helping him get the fledgling JAO off the ground. "I know you went to the University, but didn't anyone stick around?"

He nodded, "yeah, some of them stuck around for a few months, but those of them who didn't come with me to the 'U' went out on their own. Last I heard some went to other countries, and some have just camped out in small villages and towns." He sighed.

He pulled some vines out of the way of the entrance to the main building. "It's still down here in the vault. There's no electricity, of course, so..." He snapped his fingers, and a ball of light appeared in front of them. the light revealed the main entrance to be just as overgrown as the outside.

Katze grabbed Pupp's arm. "Tell me you've actually checked on the 'Slayer. This looks like no-one's been here for years!" She couldn't believe that he would leave the Jihad's single weapon supposedly able to kill the Purple Bastard unguarded. Her temper flared. "Pupp. You *know* how much B'harnii and the Lyrans want the Barney-Slayer! HOW COULD YOU LEAVE IT LIKE THIS!?" She disappeared.

Puppeteer leaned up against the wall of the entrance. "But.. you don't..." He stepped towards the stairs. "Kat, wait!"

Katze appeared in the vault. She stomped over to the platform where it rested. She couldn't believe it. The glass was completely covered with dust and dirt. It was obvious that no-one had been in the room since Pupp had brought the JPV to Discworld. She heard Pupp opening the locks.

Katze brushed off the dirt.

The door opened and Pupp practically fell into the room, breathing heavily. "Kat, look... I mean, I know I haven't, you know... kept *watch* on it, but the 'Slayer's been

safe! Look, I'm sorry, I..." He noticed Katze staring at the BarneySlayer, mouth agape. "What?"

Pupp peered into the case. "The fuck? You've gotta be kidding me."

Katze opened up the case, reaching in to remove the sword. Pupp just stared, not believing what he was seeing. The sword was whole, like nothing had ever happened to it! Katze pushed it into his hands. "Here. From this moment on, this sword stays in your possession at all times." She rubbed her forehead. "The Lyrans grew Owsen's shard into a full replica of the original sword. Now we have our own. You need to protect it with your life, you understand?"

He took the sword from her grasp. All Pupp could do was to nod silently. As Katze turned and left the room, over her shoulder she said, "please don't let me down."

The ride back was filled with deafening silence. As they approached the South gate of Ankh-Morpork, Pupp tried to apologize, but Katze cut him off. "Look, you don't have to apologize. I'm not mad." She looked into his eyes. "But i'm very disappointed. I never would have imagined that I couldn't trust you in this. And what's worse is that I don't have any choice but to trust you again. I have to go back." She tapped the Barney-Slayer, which was sitting next to Pupp on the seat.

"I already asked you once, but just to make sure, please do not let it leave your sight. Don't disappoint me again." She disappeared, leaving Puppeteer alone with the Barney-Slayer.

"Fuck. Now what?"

### KINGMAN, ARIZONA FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 2004

Dee blazed across the pavement on the back of a bike, lost in thought. The bike was for a customer, a brand new Yamaha, and ostensibly she was taking it out to flog the hell out of it before she completely disassembled it. She always reserved the right to do that. Customers knew that she was a capable rider, and it was far easier to get a feel for how to improve things once you'd ridden them to the limit and experienced their shortcomings yourself. Obviously it was also for the fun of getting to ride a lot of top-end sportbikes, as all her customers knew, but noone could argue with some of the results she could achieve.

That was only part of why she was out here though. The dry streambed was one of what she thought of as a personal course, twisting and winding through scrubland. It was quite good when she had found it, but she'd gradually and painstakingly laid a layer of real concrete over the concrete-like surface the mud had baked into, turning it into a budget test-track. She often came out here to clear her head; over the last couple days she'd been out here as much as she could. Which wasn't to say she wasn't getting useful data about the bike, but it was far from the only thing on

her mind.

“Okay, we ran,” she muttered to herself, clicking the shifter down two gears, then leaning into a corner and getting on the throttle again. The bike screamed. “They had guns and it was in public. How the hell did they know where we were?” It was that last part that had been really bugging her. They hadn’t been followed, she knew that, and for them to have been found after randomly wandering the city was too much of a coincidence.

Several more corners flashed past, brush and occasional trees lining the sides forming into a blur. 135 miles per hour she knew, the bike’s instruments piped directly into her sensorium via her right arm. Not too bad, but she scrubbed some speed off for the long sweeping left-hand corner, leaning all the way into things. And then in a flash she saw the truck, parked across the width of the lane and concealed by the brush until she was right on top of it. Dee struggled to change directions and slow down, but had just enough time to straighten up before the front of the bike slammed into the bed of the pickup, sending her flying.

Well fuck, she had plenty of time to think as she sailed through the air. The world had slowed down to a snail’s pace and more than anything she felt an intense wave of irritation. Her mind instantly connected the truck to her attackers a few days earlier and to, of course, the Owsenite shards she still carried in her jacket in anticipation of getting back to work on analysis Monday. They must have some way of tracing them. Then she noted the ground about to run into her and wondered exactly how much this was going to suck.

The first bounce sent her flying an additional 20 feet, her forearms scraping into the ground from where they had instinctively come up to protect her head. While she was wearing state of the art - Jihad state of the art - riding gear, a type of synthetic fabric that hardened to the stiffness of steel on impact and resisted abrasion, the impact still hurt. A lot. The next bounce was off the bank of the stream and the one after that into a few small trees which she probably destroyed; Dee wasn’t too keen on paying attention by then, though. In fact, it seemed a fair place to rest a little while.

It was less than a minute later that she heard rustling through the bushes. Dee raised her head enough to see the figure approaching, and recognized it as one of the three men who had chased herself and Katze in Denver. “Fuck,” she muttered. The man spotted her and called out to his companions in some language she’d never heard before, then grinned slightly as she raised her right arm towards him, interpreting it as a pleading gesture from a battered foe.

There was a loud explosion, and he looked downright surprised as the shotgun blast took him full in the chest. Dee started hyperventilating, smoke rising from the hole the concealed one-shot gun in her arm had blown in the palm of her glove. Then she very quickly regained her senses, tore off her once shiny chromed helmet and scambled towards the brush and concealment, staying low so any others wouldn’t see her.



They came running, crashing through the brush and making it dead simple for her to tell where they were. Amateurs, part of her mind said. You are too though, another replied, to which the first told it to shut up. Smiling grimly, Dee reached inside her jacket and pulled the Sig P210 she always carried out of its shoulder holster. She clicked the Swiss pistol's safety off, started the targeting software specifically for it, and took a couple deep breaths to calm herself. Here goes, she thought to herself as she quickly pushed herself to her feet. There were two of them, both by the body of their comrade. Both were scanning the area alertly, on guard for whatever had fired. One was facing her and shouted, bringing his pistol to bear. 103 feet away, the targeting software calculated from watching through her eyes. In his excitement, his first shot went wide, passing at least a foot to the side of Dee's head. Her return shots didn't go wide. The incredibly powerful computer in her bionic arm used a variety of algorithms to calculate exactly where the gun needed to be pointed and fine-tuned her aim, an electrically driven finger stroked the trigger twice, and the man went down with a pair of hollowpoint bullets destroying his heart. The second one had barely started to spin to face her at the warning; her next two shots took him in the temple and he fell as well. Dee lowered her pistol and opened up a JihadLinker connection to Mal.

"Hi, just so you know, I just got attacked by the same people as in Denver. I don't need medical assistance, but I have three corpses, a wrecked bike, and a truck that need disposal." She sounded far too calm to herself, even given that it was transcribed directly from her thoughts.

"Right," Mal replied. "KillJoy just showed up; I'll gate him through to help clean up."

"Thanks." She closed the connection and then, all of a sudden her nerves caught up to what had just happened and she threw up in the bushes.

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## ***21: Ghost Of Christmas Past***

BLANCA BASE  
SATURDAY, APRIL 11, 2004  
2:13 AM

He had to admit, as he strolled down the darkened corridor at god-knows-how-early in the morning, that he was rather impressed with what these kids had going for them. TRES HQ had a pretty substantial underground facility, but it was nothing compared to this compound-under-the-mountain. Still, in the end, it wasn't going to be about who had the best toys, was it?

The man in black tossed his head from side to side, chuckling at the irony of that thought, because, really, there was one toy that really mattered, wasn't there? Say true, because if that wasn't so, he certainly wouldn't be here right now, in this inevitable tomb that they all so cleverly dug for themselves.

And the security! Well, it was certainly impressive. He was sure he saw all manner of automated defences on his way in, all sorts of nifty little high-tech gadgets that stared blankly at him with their all-seeing eyes that somehow did not see him. And all that rock and debris in the access tunnel? Well, that was certainly bothersome, but the master had shown him a rather clever way in.

He smiled and waved cheerfully at the camera watching him as he walked casually through another one of those interesting laser grids that were no doubt meant

to trip an alarm or something worse when someone crossed them. Very clever.

Well. We shouldn't let ourselves get distracted now, should we? Now, let's see... ah, of course. Hospital. And rightly so, he imagined that the little pup was probably still a bit broken, and it served him right, didn't it? A little suffering for not dying on schedule as he should have. The wild-eyed spectre couldn't help but smile at this.

He almost didn't notice when the door a few paces down the hall slid open, and out strode this giant of a man. He quickly spun around a corner, drawing his sword with his back to the wall. This could get quite a bit messy, couldn't it? Good, very good. He grinned, flexing his fingers around the grip, tensing, ready to strike...

KillJoy strode on by without a single glance, disappearing down another corridor.

Oh. Well, just as well. He was here for a purpose, after all. Now, where was he? Ah, yes. Sheathing his sword, he skipped off briskly into the hospital wing.

Not far away, in one of the many recovery rooms, former Grand Admiral Kirk Felton slept, and dreamt. This in itself was not unusual, but it was the first time in several days that he had what one might call a 'conscious' sleep. In it, a chilled wind caressed his skin, and he felt the reassuring solidness of the haft of a wood-axe in his hand. It whistled through the air, thumping into the log stood on the block, splitting it neatly in two.

He left the axe embedded in the block and turned. Sure enough, below the short but steep ridge on which he stood squatted a small cottage erected almost haphazardly from stone, white smoke curling from the rough chimney poking through its thatch room.

He was home.

He rolled his head back, closing his eyes to the cloudless blue sky. He inhaled a lungful of the crisp air, heightened Feral senses detecting on it the faint scent of blooming heather. It was familiar, all of it, and in spite of that he couldn't suppress the faint smile that touched his lips. It was the day when everything changed.

He half-ran, half-stumbled down the incline to the threshold of the house, pausing with his fingers splayed on the weathered wood of the door. He looked at it thoughtfully, knowing what he might find inside, but shook his head with a small sigh. No, things had indeed changed, and even in dreams it was better to allow some ghosts to remain buried, no matter how much they were once loved.

His tiny little homestead was only a brisk twenty minute walk from the edge of town, a walk that would be relished on a day like this. It was a walk which passed quickly, such as they always do in these sort of dreams, and as he crossed into the muddy lanes of the little community, the wind once more picked up, caressing his skin, only this time carrying on it the faintest sound, whispers on the breeze. Curious, he thought, and then the pain seized him.

Keili was awakened by her husband's stirring next to her, not entirely surprising given how tiny the bed on which she lay next to him was. She rolled over muzzily, slipping an arm around his waist and kissing him lightly on the back of the neck. She cracked a sleepy eye, and what she saw started her to instant lucidity, lunging for the dagger she kept sheathed near the bed. She deftly drew, but before she could stab into the grinning spectre's neck, it pressed a finger to its lips and gave her a soft shush. As darkness overtook her, her eyes rolled back in their sockets and she flopped limply into her pillow, the slim stiletto slipping from her fingers and clattering onto the floor.

Tilden Alexander Owsen watched her fall unconscious, and turned his attention back to Felton, and leaning close enough to the Maenad's ear to kiss it he whispered into his dreams. Felton convulsed and stiffened as the final syllables fell from the lips of the fallen Feral. Faint traces of violet light wound themselves across the surface of his skin, forming intricate patterns like luminous tribal tattoos, eldritch in design and purpose. His eyes fluttered open, unseeing, glowing red.

Owsen smiled with satisfaction, briefly, but then his face grew deadly serious. "Now, me boy... where is what's mine?"

Red. The color of passion. Of life. But also one of violence, of hate. Also a color of death.

It filled his mind, it filled his vision, it filled his soul, even in this dream-place. And a horrible liquid warmth, tasting of tin and copper, filled his mouth, coated his throat. It was a taste that he had not experienced, had not allowed himself to experience in a long time. He'd killed since, yes, and feasted, oh certainly, but never this, never did he allow what little shreds of humanity he could hold onto in such a state to slip this far from his grasp.

This was human blood.

Memory gave way to nightmare. Fingers of orange fire scabbled for the skies as the fresh corpse, still warm in his hands thumped wetly to the ground. He felt like a puppet, strings pulling unresponsive limbs. Trapped in his own body, experiencing everything but controlling nothing. He bellowed at the sky in animal rage... or was it simply terror? He couldn't be certain.

The village in Felton's mind was now ablaze. This isn't right, he thought to himself as he snagged one of his kinsmen in taloned claws and tore off his head with ease. This didn't happen, this was not as he remembered it. This wasn't memory, anymore. Not his own. And as he raged, struggled against his traitorous dream-body, somehow, while he knew it wasn't right, it **FELT** right. Good. Full of purpose. And that was what horrified him most of all.

People fled from his monstrous form, brown alligator-skin slicked with blood, and he pursued with glee (horror!), slashing them to ribbons with great swipes of his talons, scorching them to ash with the merest effort of thought. He was bred for this, he felt somehow, as he pounced upon a woman fleeing a burning house. he

turned her to face him with teeth poised to tear out her throat and glimpsed her face.

The face of his wife. Keili.

*No!*

And as his fangs closed around her soft throat, the world swam away from him, blurring, ripped away from his thoughts and memory. A wave of nausea ran through his dream-body, seizing his guts like a clenching fist, and for a fleeting moment, as a fog overcame him, he felt once more attached to himself. And he heard that voice again, that presence, probing at him, at his mind. Searching for something.

Clarity returned. And that sense of riding back-seat in his own body. And now his fingers were clenched around a Lyran's throat, fingers that ended in talons gleaming like steel in the afternoon sunlight. This was memory again, real memory this time, and not long ago. He ripped the mask away from the mage's face, revealing the terrified visage beneath. With detached curiosity, he noted a sensation of prodding, as though his brain were a book and eager fingers were paging through his memories. And then sense of satisfaction flowed over him, satisfaction not his own. He knew, as the Claws flashed and flayed the Lyran's chest open, that Nemesis, at this point of the kill, wasn't capable of that sort of satisfaction; his was much more animal. Feral.

Closer, was the impression he was feeling. Closer to what?

The world sucked away again, recollection of seconds ago already fleeting. It grew dark. Acrid odors filled his nostrils, the smells of fresh paint and new carpets, and yet something else; it had a faint copper scent, a greasy texture to the air that wasn't tactile and yet felt nonetheless. Magic, he reckoned. His ever-betraying puppet-body turned, leaning his weight against a vault door which seemed chillingly familiar. What he glimpsed inside as the door swung close with a thumb alarmed him greatly even in his detached state.

The shards of the Barney-Slayer.

A sense of alien delight filled his mind, delight that was also not his. He began to understand now, with growing terror as he turned to face Puppeteer in his full Arch-Chancellor regalia. Delight became urgency, and he lashed out against his metaphysical bonds as he experienced that paging sensation and his memory swam...

Control. He had to have it. *Concentrate. Steer the memory if you can. Resist!* Pennsylvania. Where in Pennsylvania? More urgency. *No! By God, if he wants it, you sure as hell aren't going to hand him a roadmap! You want to know where your damned sword is? Well, here you go, me bucko! See it well!*

The JPV campus. Closing ceremonies. *He wants to know where it is. It's overwhelming, the need, the desire. So strong! Isn't he going to be surprised? Joke's on you, me boy!*

The campus vanishes. The sword with it.

*It's gone, you sick fuck! GONE!*

*RAGE.*

And that moment, that one fleeting moment where emotion subverts control, that's all he needed.

Felton awakened.

No, that's not precisely correct. He did awaken, but it was Nemesis that looked Owsen in the face as the magic scrawlwork faded from his skin. "You," he hissed.

"Me!" Owsen said with a spiteful cheer that masked his anger far too well. Nemesis lunged from the bed, his healing body screaming in agony as he did so, Claws sliding from his fingertips as his arms closed to catch Owsen in a deadly bear-hug. Instead he got himself a face full of a glass-faced cabinet. He sprawled in the broken glass, bleeding freely from fresh lacerations on his head.

He rolled over, slashing up his hands and elbows, trying to focus on Owsen through the stars that swam in his vision and the blood that was running into his eyes. How did he move so damned fast? He tried to shake the cobwebs from his head, and already whatever recollection he had of the dream just a few minutes ago was slipping away. He tried to stand, but his tendons still refused to support his weight. "W-what...?" he started. His head throbbed something fierce.

"What was I doing? Oh, just learning something new." There was a soft moan behind Owsen as Keili began to awaken. "I'd love to stay and kill you, but I have someplace I need to be and I have a feeling it's going to get rather crowded here soon."

Owsen tapped his forehead in mock-salute and with an unnecessary flourish of his greatcoat, zipped off into the hall.

Nemesis managed piece his thoughts together enough to form a coherent order as Charn'El's Herald fled. "Minerva! Intruder alert!"

"...I'm not detecting anyone out of the ordinary," came a response from a loud-speaker.

"Just bloody do it!"

Of course, Mal was in an extraordinarily foul mood when he stepped out of the elevator. Naturally, it was a scant fifteen minutes ago when he'd finally been able to relax enough to doze off for the first time in God knew how long, and so by the rules of whatever cosmic joke was being played on him something was bound to go wrong. And the klaxons were beginning to give him a migraine.

"Shut the damned noise off," he grumbled, rounding the corner into Felton's room. The sirens went mute. He shouldered his way through the small crowd that had gathered there, rubbing a palm over his tired face. "All right. What's going on?"

"Owsen," Keili said.

Mal froze in mid-yawn. "Owsen? You're sure?"

"Crazy eyes, stringy hair, beard, bad breath, kilt? Yeah, I'm pretty fookin' sure it

were him,” Felton said, dabbing at the cuts on his brow. They seemed to be fading already, so there was at least some good news.

A vague sort of panic was starting to settle in and the Jihaddi were growing restless. The thought of Owsen running loose in the mountain was not a pleasant one. “How the hell did he get in?” asked Lacroix.

“Teleport?” suggested Katze.

“No,” said Tangaroa. “It would have tripped the alarms. Shad and I would have seen something in the situation room. And the proximity sensors registered nothing either.”

“Look, guys,” said Felton. “He was pokin’ in me brain. I don’t think I have tae spell out the urgency of the situation fer ye.”

Mal pinched the bridge of his nose. “All right. The only way in or out of the mountain is by teleport or by Gate. Which means he’s got to still be inside somewhere. Min?”

Minvera stared thoughtfully at the wall for a moment, head tilted to one side. “I’m still detecting nothing.”

“Shit,” Mal said. It wasn’t a particularly eloquent statement, but it summed things up quite well. “Okay, so he’s either found a way to mask himself from our defense network or he’s found another way in and out. We’re going to have to confirm it either way, which means we’re going to have to do it the old-fashioned way...”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Dee groaned. There was a lot of base to cover on foot and so few of them to do it with.

“No, I’m not. KillJoy, Dee, Damo, you take this level and sublevel one. Min, Katze, you’re with me on level two and three. Tang, Aris, Rens, you take four and five. Lacroix, Keili, Delgado, you take the rest of the sublevels. I doubt he’d go deeper into the mountain, but it’s best to check it out anyway. Oh... and avoid sublevel two. If he’s gone in there our problems are probably over.”

“The old man is insane, thinking he can keep us up all hours...” Katze mumbled.

“If I’m miserable, *everybody’s* miserable.”

“Owsen probably isn’t too goddamn miserable right about now,” Lacroix said, turning to leave.

“So let’s correct that.” Mal clapped his hands together. “All right. Arm yourselves and move!”

The Gate room was clear, as were the labs. He wasn’t entirely surprised. Owsen probably wouldn’t have figured out how to work the Gate anyway. Mal grimaced at the daunting task ahead; having to search the Library.

“Main access tunnel is secure,” KillJoy’s voice rumbled over the comm-link. Not surprising.

“Gardens clear,” Dee reported.

“Garage is clear,” said Lacroix.

Mal sighed. “All right, ladies. Back upstairs. Get ready for a nice jog.”

“Hold up, I’ve got something,” said Minerva, slowing to a trot behind Mal and

Katze.

“Owsen?”

“No... multiple contacts... they’ve breached the main access road.”

Mal swore. The timing was impeccable. He clicked on his vox. “Tangaroa, Lacroix. Change of plans. You two meet me in the situation room. The rest of you keep looking.” He clicked off his comm and looked at Minerva and Katze. “You two as well. And be careful.” He ran for the elevator.

Owsen smiled as he opened his eyes. Well, that certainly was very educational, wasn’t it? And how they scurried around looking for him! Of course, their first mistake was assuming he was there at all and not actually a handful of miles away, but if they knew, it wouldn’t have been such a clever trick, would it?

He stood and dusted off the seat of his pants, snatching up the Dark Slayer and sliding it back into its sheath. Well. The little diversion he’d arranged should keep them occupied for a little while.

As for himself, well... he had a date with destiny.



## **22: Over The River And Through The Woods**

TEN MILES NORTHWEST OF BLANCA MOUNTAIN  
4:00 AM LOCAL TIME

The middle of the night usually isn't a terrific time to be traipsing through the forest. The middle of the night, when winter was just starting to realize that it was supposed to be spring, was an even worse time to do so. The dead of night, in sub-freezing temperatures, while tracking an unknown number of armed spongin who seem far too connected to a renegade Jihaddi who goes through Maenads like tissue paper? That, now - that was in a category all of its own.

"You gotta hand it to the man," Tangaroa mused, "he really knows how to shake up an evening."

"Mmm," Lacroix half-responded, picking his way around a denser spot of brush. "That's one way of putting it, anyway. This is getting ridiculous."

The night had been frantic, to say the least. Not two hours earlier, Owsen had somehow managed to infiltrate Blanca, assault Felton, and get out mostly undetected. After the first bits of panic over the breach calmed down, most of the Jihaddi on-base started scouring VRDET HQ from top to bottom. Just in case things weren't confused enough, the proximity alarms by the base entrance started going off a few minutes later when an unknown number of armed, uniformed people tripped some sensors. When it came to figuring out who would shadow them to

see what was up, Lacroix and Tangaroa ended up picking the short straws. More to the point, the short straws were picked for them when Mal ordered them out after the unknowns.

"You know, we were kinda rushed out the door to track these guys," Lacroix said, as much to himself as anything. "What should we do if these guys turn out to be Mundanes? Civvies, say, or maybe US Army?"

"I'd track them anyway," Tang replied. "The timing was way too convenient for it to be a coincidence. From what I saw of the prox sensors, they definitely aren't US military, though. Wrong uniforms. The weapons were different too; definitely not hunting rifles, but they didn't look like American weapons either."

"I suppose," Lacroix finally added after a couple of minutes. "I just wish Owsen could have picked some other day to send us off into the wilderness. I was hoping for Mass and a nice, quiet afternoon today, but noooo.."

"Oh yeah," Tang said. "Uh, happy Easter?"

"Mm," Lacroix mmd. "I think this is the first one I'll have ever managed to miss, unless we find those guys soon."

"I'll add it to the list of grievances," Tang said, a sympathetic tone underlying the wisecrack. "Oh, it's four."

"Huh? Oh, it is," Lacroix said sheepishly. Reaching for the once-again-familiar weight of his Linker on his belt, he called back to Blanca to report in. "Sitrep normal," Lacroix said formally.

There was a snort on the other side of the line - Damocles, this time. "Nice to know \*someone's\* is, at least. One of the outlying sensors picked up movement, by the way - a couple of guys northwest of your position, moving in the same direction. We're pretty sure they're the guys you two are after. Keep moving."

"Right. How's Admiral Felton holding up?"

"About as well as you'd expect," came the reply. "Owsen didn't seem to physically harm him, but he seems more shaken up than he's willing to let on." Lacroix heard an irritated, accented "I'm \*fine!\*", sounding like it was coming from the room next to the one Damo was in. "Of course, Admiral! Uh, yeah. The situation appears stable here, though. We haven't found anything. Let us know if you two turn something up."

"Right, Sir," Lacroix said, closing the connection after the usual formalities.

"How's Felton?" Tang asked, having caught up to Lacroix while he was on the Linker.

"Loud," Lacroix replied, which drew a reassured laugh from the Doberman. "We're headed in the right direction; the outliers caught our friends headed northwest."

"Then lead on," Tang said, grandly gesturing ahead into the darkness.

"Oh no," Lacroix said. "You take point for awhile. It's your turn to go tripping over stuff you can hardly see, so I'll know what to avoid."

"Pfft," Tang said, but he went ahead anyway. Lacroix envied Tang his ability to

move so silently.

Time passed, more or less in silence, as the two continued through the woods. Lacroix found himself falling into the mindset of the patrol as he got more used to it. Through the occasional bursts of smalltalk between him and Tang, fewer and fewer things nearby went unseen or unheard, and even his own movements began to get closer to the ghostlike silence some of the other Jihaddi always seemed to take for granted. Lacroix noticed that it was becoming easier to see after awhile, and was almost startled to realize the sun was coming up.

“Think we’re gaining on them?” he asked shortly afterwards, moving past Tang to take point.

“We gotta be by now,” Tang replied. “We can’t tell obviously, since we passed the outer prox sensors, but they’d have to be almost as nuts as we are to still be moving after this long. Sooner or later they’re going to have to settle someplace.”

“Yea - huh,” Lacroix said suddenly with a jolt of recollection. “Where are we...?” he said to himself, taking out his Linker and checking the map of the area. “Duh,” he muttered, putting the Linker away after a moment.

“What’s up?” Tang called from a few paces behind him.

“The maps of the area are pretty detailed,” Lacroix said. “VR managed to chart just about everything larger than an outhouse that’s built by humans in the area, and I just remembered something. We’re headed almost in a straight-line route towards a small building, probably some kind of cottage, that was put up a few miles away about the same time I was posted to Blanca. What do you wanna bet our friends are heading that way?”

“That works as well as anything else,” Tang allowed. “How far out is it?”

“Few more miles, I think. We can probably get there by two or so if we keep up the pace, but if that’s where they’re going we should start keeping more of an eye out a bit before that.”

“We should probably call home, let ‘em know what’s up.”

“You’re right, at that,” Lacroix said, doing so.

“That sounds like our best lead,” Mal said over the Linker when Tang and Lacroix filled him in. “Check it out. We’re still busy here, so you two are on your own.”

“Right. Any instructions in case it’s them?”

“Again, you’re on your own. If they’re hostile and you don’t think you can take them, then observe and get clear, and we’ll gate you back home. If you think you can, though, then go ahead. I’ve got a lot of questions that need answering, and I’d like to have someone or something that \*will\* answer them, instead of just shooting back, for a change.”

“Right,” Lacroix said again. “We’ll let you know once we start approaching the site. Lacroix out.” He closed the connection and put the Linker away, and the two Jihaddi continued tramping further into the forest.

## 3:25 PM

Lacroix peered up over the small ridge, looking down through the trees into the hollow a couple hundred meters away. There it was, alright. The cottage looked rough but comfortable, a log-built affair that was somewhat larger than most of the cabins you'd see out in the woods these days. It also had the look of something that had seen several seasons come and go, rather than being at all recent. Was this some civvie's building that had gotten co-opted, or did the spongins actually have a presence this close to Blanca during the war? He hoped it was the former, especially when he saw the pair of antennae sticking out of the roof, the two covered jeeps parked near the building, and the guards.

He checked his watch. Tangaroa was probably in position on the other side of the clearing by now, but it couldn't hurt to be sure before going on. It would suck to have spent three days tracking the spongin only to screw it up or have to call it off. The plan was to plan things out with their Linkers, but Lacroix felt uneasy about the antennae - were they for listening or sending? - on the cottage's roof, and so he decided to be both cautious and minimalist about the whole affair.

Lacroix took a few deep breaths to steady his nerves and quietly pulled out the linker. He decided to give Tang a few more minutes, taking a mental tally of the number of spongin in and around the building. There was a good deal of movement - they were obviously unpacking something - so it wasn't easy at a glance to figure out how many were there. A few were obvious guards, staying at certain spots and looking around with sentries' eyes, and most of them were armed. After a short time, he thought he had a good count, pulled up the 'Linker, and started typing.

"7-10 5-8A G Y/N" he typed quickly, sending in burst mode.

"Y" came the reply a few seconds later. "U/I1?"

Lacroix thought a moment. Tang obviously wanted someone to do the diversion thing; against those odds both Jihaddi going at once would probably be less than bright. Going in sequence would be less than bright anyway, but the Jihad wasn't about playing it safe as much as it was playing it in the least suicidal manner.

"U1," Lacroix sent back. Waiting a few more seconds for Tang to get ready, wherever he was on the other side of the clearing, he pulled out his XRifle and got it ready for action. Some activity in the clearing down below; someone had noticed something being sent and was consulting with the guards. Some days, being right about a guess really sucked.

"Shit," Lacroix said to himself, quickly typing "G!" before putting the Linker back on his belt and preparing his rifle. They might have been quick off the mark, but with luck they were still just spongin.

A few seconds later, he noticed another commotion in the clearing, and the hint of rustling in the trees on the other side. The guards looked around to place the sound, did so, and two of them started walking to the north to look. Lacroix brought his rifle up a bit more, staying behind cover, waiting to see what Tangaroa

had in mind.

When the two spongin got close enough to the tree line, all hell suddenly broke loose. The amount of ambient light in the area of the tree line picked up, and suddenly the spongin were pelted with small bits of debris - acorns, small branches, and the like - blown off the trees. The rain of debris wasn't major or harmful, but it was proof that something more than a breeze was kicking up. The spongin shouted something to their buddies in the cottage, split up, and started pushing their way into the woods with their weapons up. The rain of debris abated at the same time, and Lacroix thought he saw movement heading deeper into the woods.

The spongin saw it too, and the pops of rifle fire began to sound across the clearing as two more spongin began to race up to support their friends. Lacroix winced and shuddered a bit despite himself at hearing that sound again, feeling the memories gnaw around the edge of his conscious. He gritted his teeth and forced it down; there was no time for that anymore. He waited a few more seconds to be sure the spongin were interested in Tangaroa, started hearing the deeper boom of Tang's own pistols in return, and moved.

Bringing his rifle up to his chest, Lacroix vaulted the edge of the ridge and started moving down the slope as fast as he could. There was a good amount of cover, and he made his way from bush to tree to boulder, almost halfway down the slope, before being noticed.

One of the spongin still watching the cottage noticed him, shouted something he couldn't quite make out, and started firing from the shoulder. Lacroix hit the ground before the first shot was fired and rolled, watching rounds clip the leaves above his head uncomfortably close to where he was. Rolling a bit more, he pulled his rifle up, popped up from behind the boulder he found, and fired a couple of shots. The whining hiss of the XRifle brought back a number of memories as well. The shots missed, but they made the spongin he was shooting at get his own head down.

Lacroix took an instant to listen to things. Shouting in the foreground; still can't recognize it. Tang fires off two rounds in the distance; good, he's still out there. Lacroix charged the grenade launcher on his rifle, popped up for an instant, and fired before diving for cover behind another bush. The arc was low, the round fast; almost before the *chunk* of the grenade's firing left the air, the crump of the explosion took its place. Pumping a second grenade into the launcher's chamber, he rose quickly to look around. The shot was maybe a bit too accurate, but that worked too.

Snapping off a few more shots from the shoulder at the spongin who piled out of the cottage to join the action, he ran forward to a fresh piece of cover. The spongin were panicked somewhat by the ferocity of this attack coming from one side, and their shots were wide off the mark. One of Lacroix's bursts went stray, hitting one of the jeeps, lighting it off in a large fireball. The confusion bought him time to rush closer, during which he fired another grenade wildly, kicking up a fountain of dirt, snow and rocks. Another pillar of flame appeared briefly, off in the woods, followed by some more pistol shots; Lacroix felt thankful that it wasn't later in the year when

the woods were dry. Gunshots kept firing on Tang's side of things; he thought he heard fewer of the spongin rifles than before. Two long bursts tore up the trees nearby; those had to use most of someone's magazine.

Almost to the treeline, four guys ahead, one down, four in the woods. That was probably all of them. Trying to get some space between himself and the spongin working to the treeline, he charged a smoke grenade, fired it into the ground, and used the cover to run off to one side. Diving behind a boulder, he waited a few moments while the spongin charged "him" in the smoke cloud. Pulling up again, twenty feet to their right, he fired off a long burst, hitting three of them, setting some small fires in the brush. The fourth hit the ground, pulled the pin on a grenade, and threw it at Lacroix.

Less than ten yards away, even a spongin couldn't be too far off. The blast of the grenade was mostly absorbed by the ground and cover, but Lacroix was still tossed a couple of yards, his rifle a few more. "Shit," he said; he didn't feel injured, but his rifle being out of reach pissed him right off.

Rolling across the ground as fast as he could, hearing the spongin rushing up behind him, he reached his weapon. By the time he was turning around, the last spongin was rushing around the rock, with an honest-to-god *bayonet* on his weapon, either out of ammo or wanting to finish it up close. Snarling something at Lacroix, he brandished his rifle like a spear and picked up the pace.

Rolling a bit more to try and get fractions of a second, Lacroix grabbed his rifle and came to his knees as the spongin was on him, pulling the rifle back for a thrust. Out of reflex, he swing his own XRifle, deflecting the thrust of his foe's bayonet, and planted the butt of the rifle squarely in the spongin's stomach. Bringing his weapon up and around as the spongin dropped his own rifle, Lacroix brought the butt up again, this time into the spongin's face. The guy went down hard, not going anywhere for awhile. Lacroix brought his rifle back to firing position and looked quickly around him. Nobody in sight who was a threat.

Aside from the rustle of the trees and the crackling of the burning jeep, the forest was silent.

"Tang?" he essayed, shouting towards the woods up north as he walked cautiously towards the cottage.

"I'm here," came the shout back across the woods. "Four down," he added, stepping cautiously into the clearing from the other end.

"Same here," Lacroix replied, "and one more who'll be getting up later." He gestured with his rifle at the unconscious spongin and realized he should restrain the guy.

"You're hit," Tang said as Lacroix bent to tie up the napping spongin. "Right arm." He kept an eye around the clearing and the building, reloading his pistols as he did.

"Rea -? Shit," Lacroix said, more to himself than anything as he checked. A round had clipped his arm sometime during the firefight, just enough to make a

mess without being bad enough for him to notice right away. “Shit,” he said again, more in an “I was using that shirt” tone than a “there’s a gouge missing from my arm” sense.

“Prolly looks worse than it is,” Tang said, obviously not finding it bad enough to worry too much. Lacroix nodded, finished tying up the spongin, and gestured at the cottage. “We should check inside in case anyone’s still there.”

“I agree,” Tang said. “This time *you* go first.”

Lacroix carefully walked into the cottage, his X-Rifle leading the way. He carried himself in a way that showed he was starting to feel his injury, but seemed to be handling himself alright. Tangaroa followed, his pistol ready. The cottage entryway branched off into several other rooms.

Lacroix started into the room on the right, and turned back to Tangaroa. Tangaroa waved him forward, and turned to the room on the left.

It was a kitchen. Seeing nothing interesting there, he walked through it into an adjoining room, where a computer system was connected with wires leading up to the roof, probably to the rooftop antenna array. Tang was curious to examine it, but felt it was something that Shad or Mal should have a look at first.

Tang went back to the kitchen and looked around. It looked like most other kitchens a decent-sized cottage would have, except that it was far neater than most kitchens, and infinitely neater than any kitchen ten men used should be. It seemed to fit with the discipline of the spongin, anyway, although Tang also found it oddly disturbing.

Looking into the cupboards and fridge, he found nothing unusual. The fridge just had normal food, the cupboards normal groceries and dishes. Closing each, Tang picked up a notebook sitting on the counter and opened it, expecting the notes in poorly-written English which were common on most spongin facilities. Instead, he found page after page of an elegantly-written, vertical script he was not familiar with. This would be going back to Blanca.

He heard voices from the other side of the cabin then, and one of them wasn’t Joseph’s. Tang drew his gun again, and hurried through the cabin.

“Tang?” Lacroix called out, but not urgently. Tangaroa calmed and lowered his pistol as he entered the room.

“What’s up, ‘Sep?” Walking in, Tang saw what was up glare at him.

“I’ve got a bit of a problem here.” Lacroix waved towards the new captive. The spongin had taken a burst from Lacroix’s X-Rifle, and his right arm was a charred ruin. He wasn’t putting up a fight.

“Looks like he’s got the problem, if you asked me,” Tang quipped.

The bit of a problem reacted angrily - and unintelligibly. “Y’khadiji, toduki-khat-anlakh fai dhalyr’el telyx,” he jabbered in what would have been a threatening tone, had all his limbs been intact.

Tangaroa raised an eyebrow. "I see."

"Can you make out what he's saying?" Lacroix asked hopefully.

Tangaroa couldn't, but by now had a fair guess at the language. "Unless I miss my guess, your friend is speaking Lyran."

"Entralakh *Lbi'ireli* tischeibal otasaiel fthei!" the spongin spat furiously as soon as Tangaroa said the word 'Lyran.' He rose up from the chair he was sitting in, a picture of perfect anger. Despite the rifle, Lacroix actually started back a step before remembering what he was holding. Lacroix shook his rifle at the spongin to make it clear who had the gun and where it was pointed. The spongin almost audibly bristled,

Tangaroa was also taken aback by the angry response. Apparently he'd touched a nerve. He didn't mind touching it again. "Yep, definately *Lyran*," he said, stressing the word. The spongin ground his teeth, but didn't seem suicidal enough to attack.

"So what should we do with him?" Lacroix asked. "And the other guy out back, of course," he added.

"Well," Tangaroa said, "this guy we're definately taking in. Cover him for me so I can restrain him, and then we'll take a good, hard look at this place before heading back. We should call Blanca right away and let them know what we've found here, too."

Lacroix spoke up as Tangaroa searched the captive. "Anything interesting in the rest of the building, by the way?"

"Oh, you could say that."

After getting the flaming ruin that used to be the jeep out front under control, Tang and Lacroix did what they could for the wounded spongin, dragged the unconscious one indoors, and started looking through the cottage in more detail. The building looked like a bigger find than anyone had expected, with several more notebooks filled with what appeared to be Lyran handwriting, to say nothing of the computers and gear. Things had calmed down enough back at Blanca that Shadur could talk Tang through checking through the computers, and they confirmed that the spongin were able to intercept Jihaddi communications near Blanca.

The computer software, at least, was in English; the earliest recorded dates on some of the intercept files were in 1998, which was a sobering hint that B'harne's forces weren't all noisy and incompetent. The fact that the cabin had sent some kind of brief transmission during the firefight itself wasn't just sobering, it was alarming.

"We don't have time to figure out what they sent just yet," Tang said, and the two continued looking around.

One of the other jackpots was in a set of locked drawers in one of the cabin's three bedrooms. On top of the normal mix of outdoorsy stuff and military gear and a few other books of Lyran writing, Tang found a pile of manila folders, flipped through them, and started wearing an "oh, shit" expression.



“Tang?” Lacroix prompted, seeing the look on the Doberman’s face. Tangaroa handed the folders to Lacroix, who opened the first one.

Inside was what looked like a detailed dossier on Mal - Jihad connections, aliases, public history, and some guesswork at things the enemy didn’t know during the war that were entirely too close to the mark. The other folders contained similar things: a history of Felton’s company; grainy photos of Dee and Katze, taken during the car chase the previous week; a folder with some information on Damocles which apparently fell together after someone had examined Dee’s business connections. After a few minutes, Lacroix closed the folders and handed them back to Tang, who simply nodded at the pollaxed look on his face.

“At least we’re not in these yet,” Lacroix said heavily, thinking about how recent - and how accurate - much of the information in the dossiers was.

“Yet, anyway,” Tang said, with the cynicism of an intel operative. “They did transmit *something* before we got in here, and we caught those security cameras while going through the place.”

“You so lighten my mind,” Lacroix muttered. Tang gave an ironic bow. “One thing’s for certain, anyway,” he continued: “I don’t think they’re just gunning for the Maenads anymore.” Tang could only nod.

“We got room for guests?” Tang asked cheerfully, prodding the two captives through the portal.

Killjoy, hearing the commotion, walked into the room and noticed the prisoners. “Good job,” he said.

“This guy’s the hero”, Tang pointed his thumb at Lacroix. “He captured both these guys and he saved my neck out there.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Lacroix protested. “We were split up, and you fought your own way out.”

“Yeah, but if it hadn’t been for you, it would have been ten on one instead of four on one. Someone get Mal on the horn so we can tell him the good news.”

“Mal’s already on and waiting to hear more from you two.”

“Great. Let’s keep the prisoners separated, in separate rooms, so they don’t bolster each other’s morale.”

As Killjoy started to march the prisoners off to their cells, Tangaroa continued. “First off, if we have anybody who speaks Lyran or whatever it is they’re talking, put them in there and see if we can get something out of them early. And don’t feed them just yet.”

“Mal?” KJ asked from the hallway.

“The spongies,” Tang shouted back, then continued to the present group. “Or whatever they are. I don’t think they’re spongies, to tell the truth. I’m not sure what they are, but I’ll find out for sure. Does this base have an MP3 library that can be piped into the intercom in their rooms, or does someone at least have a CD player and and some Good Music?”

"Of course." Mal said. "It's a Jihad base."

"Good." Tangaroa pulled a handful of \$20 bills from his pocket and flipped through them, double-checking his finances. "We'll start by saturating them. I'd also like to run their prints, run their DNA, and see if we can find out who they are, when they disappeared from society if they ever did. Find out who owned that ski lodge. By all appearances, there's more to this than it appears."

"Our primary concern is still Owsen", Malaclypse reminded Tang, "and he's out there moving right now. I don't think you're going to learn enough from digging into the prisoners' past in time to stop him."

"Yes, well, we sort of know where Owsen's going and why, but the prisoners are more of a question mark. I'll get what I can from the prisoners. Maybe Owsen has a weakness they know about or we can get him back somehow, or maybe they've laid a trap for us that we can find out about." Tangaroa stuffed the money back in his pocket. "Aris, I'd like Portal into town to make a quick run for some equipment and things. I'll call in for retrieval in an hour or so."

"You're awfully eager to use the portal again," Mal said dryly.

Tang smiled. "I'm glad to find a teleporter that doesn't have a fifty-fifty chance of killing me when I use it. It's a wonderful piece of equipment you have here."

Mal didn't smile. "Tang, we didn't totally decommission the base, so all the equipment you need should be right there. Besides, Splitting up now while Owsen is out there is a bad idea, and I don't want to see a repeat of what happened the last time you went running around in a city."

Tang stood in stoic thought for a moment. "Understood."

Mal continued his lecture. "Besides, according to your own 'Linker report, you're not convinced they're Spongin, -and- we can't communicate with them, so it's a waste of time to even try."

"That's merely a strong assumption at the moment. I want to be 100 percent sure."

Mal rubbed his chin. "Give it a try, but don't fuck it up."

"It's scavenger hunt time. Do we have lunch here?"

### A FEW HOURS (AND LUNCH) LATER...

Tangaroa waved the B'harnii doll at the captive. "Do you know who this is?" He was squeezing the doll's skull so tightly that its facial features were stretched to an amusing level of distortion, but it was recognizable enough for a Spongin. The prisoner, however, did not respond. Tangaroa noticed his grip and relaxed it. Still nothing. Usually a Spongin would have asked to hold the doll by now, but this one just kept sneering at him. This guy had been doing a lot of sneering.

"Fine." Tangaroa said. He dropped the doll and kicked it around the floor a bit, looking over to see the prisoner's reaction, waiting for the inevitable "don't hurt Barney!" whine. Nothing. Tang set it on fire. Still nothing. The smoke made him cough, so he turned the fire out. Yes, setting fires in an underground base is a dumb idea.

Tangaroa shoved the doll in a drawer so he wouldn't have to look at it anymore and made a note of the prisoner's reactions or rather the lack thereof. He then reached into a large paper bag and pulled out two smaller paper bags from a local burger joint, setting them on the table where the prisoner could see them. He reached into one bag and drew a wrapped burger. Making sure the captive was watching, he slowly unwrapped and took a big bite into the bacon double cheeseburger.

"Mmmmm!" He savored the greasy flavour far more publicly than he normally would. He reached into the bag with his free hand, pulled out a few fries, and popped them in his mouth. "Mmm, these are good. Y'hungry?" He held up the second bag. "There's one for each of us."

A short while later, Lacroix walked into the room and gestured at the empty table. "Hey, where's my lunch?"

Tangaroa looked up at Lacroix quizzically, having delivered Joseph's lunch to him earlier.

"Kidding", Lacroix smiled.

Tangaroa surrendered a slight grin, then narrowed his eyes and got to business. "How's our one-handed friend?"

"He's not talking. Well, not in anything I understand."

"Same here. At least he's eating. Any luck on your end?"

"Yeah. They'll eat UnHellthy Snacks, but it doesn't have any effect."

"I'll call Mal and give him an update."

"We haven't gotten anything out of them yet."

"Yes, and he'll want to know that."

They walked out into the hallway, and Tang turned on his JihadLinker. "Hey Mal, this is Tang. Nothing significant since the last report. They're still acting stuck up and won't talk English. Unhealthy snacks and good music haven't had any effect, though I've been enjoying 'em. Also, they don't seem to care about our favourite purple bastard, so these guys are definitely not your old fashioned Spongies."

"First off, I don't care what you're enjoying. Second, I told you from the start not to waste time treating them like Spongin. Since it should be obvious by now, even to you, that what you're doing isn't working, I'm putting Mr. Lacroix in charge of the interrogations."

"Thanks," Tangaroa said without a hint of sarcasm. "I'll keep you up to date." He shut off the linker and turned to Lacroix. "Well, you're in charge now."

"Okay..." Lacroix started. He had never run an interrogation before and, outside of the police dramas he'd seen on television, he didn't have any idea how to conduct one. "So what do we do now?"

"Keep trying to get something out of them," Tangaroa said unhelpfully. "It's up to you if we kick their ass or not."

"No." Lacroix said, surprised that Tang would make such a suggestion and surprised again when Tang seemed to relax a little at his denial. "How do you usually

handle interrogations?” he asked.

Tang chuckled. “We usually despongify them and they’ll say everything once they’re free of B’harnii’s grasp. I always had other people handle anything different, and I never really took part in that directly. We didn’t have very many of those to begin with.”

“So we’re both working off a blank slate.”

“Not entirely blank. Want me to work on the other prisoner?”

“Sure.”

“So let’s see Captain Hook.”

Lacroix’s eyes went wide. He lived through way too much carnage — seen it happen to his friends — to find any amusement in Tang’s levity. In his shock and in the interest of tact, he did not complain.

Tangaroa leaned towards the one-armed prisoner. “So, do you speak English?” Not getting nor expecting an answer, he bemusedly continued. “Sprechen Sie Deutsche? Nihongo o hanashimasu ka? Chosonmal hal su issueyo? Govorish po Russki? Se habla Espanol? Parlez vous Francais?”

“No, and definitely no on that last one,” Lacroix said, having already attempted to interrogate the prisoner on his own. “At least, he’s not going to tell us if he does.”

Tang took another glance at the printout in his hand, then turned to the prisoner and smiled again. He essayed a bunch of Lyran-sounding noises, picked from the ones he remembered from the firefight.

“Nakhad Lhi’ireli entralakhjas, Yi’khadij,” the prisoner snarled.

“Could you repeat that?” Tangaroa asked, scribbling wildly on the paper.

“Ekh, ail-rekhidja,” the prisoner said in a disgusted tone.

“And that was an ‘ekh ail-rekhidja,” Lacroix quipped.

Tangaroa flipped over a few papers while looking for the translations, then stopped and raised an eyebrow. “This could take us a while,” he said, pulling some sheafs from the bottom of his stack of papers and giving them to Lacroix. “Here, maybe you could help me out with this. Hey, Minerva, could we have some help here?”

“Tang,” the AI replied, sounding just the slightest bit tired, “I have already told you that I don’t have any language files for spoken Lyran. I have a few bare notes that Admiral Felton transcribed into the JihadNet archives before the shutdown, and those are all for -written- Lyran. So for the last time, I can’t help you.”

“Could you at least save and repeat what the prisoners say, or give us transliterations?”

“I can do that, but I don’t know how much help it’ll be...”

Katze walked into the small observation room, only to find Tangaroa and Lacroix slumped against the wall, looking very tired and frustrated. One of their charges sat alone in the interrogation room, looking defiantly at her. Katze knew he couldn’t

see any of them as they were behind one-way glass, but the glare was unsettling. She looked away from his gaze and asked the two, "How's it going?"

Lacroix looked up, blinking, as if he'd been in the process of drifting off to sleep. Tangaroa didn't even bother looking up and muttered something under his breath that Katze didn't quite catch. She frowned and spoke, "I'll take it that it's not going well. What's the problem?"

Tangaroa pulled himself to his feet. Lacroix stretched out his arms, and then joined Tangaroa in a standing position. The three of them stood there looking at one another, and Katze, despite the fact that she was usually careful to keep herself shielded from other people's thoughts and feelings, could feel just how tired they were. She had managed to grab a nap that afternoon when they were busy, but their fatigue was starting to make her feel tired too.

Finally, Tangaroa spoke up. "We can't speak Lyran, and they either can't or won't speak English."

Katze nodded. "That's a problem." She stood there for a moment, thinking about options, and not finding one coming to mind. "And there's nobody around here who knows Lyran and can converse with this guy." It's too bad there's nobody around here who can learn a language fast, Katze thought to herself, and then suddenly smiled. Of *course* there was somebody around who could. "I might have a solution. I don't know for sure if it'll work, but I don't think we have any other options."

Lacroix looked puzzled, which amused Katze to no end. Tangaroa said, "What do you have in mind? We've tried everything we can think of, including having Minerva play translator, and nothing's worked."

"Allow me to demonstrate," Katze said, and then faced Lacroix. "Lacroix, if I recall correctly, French is your native language, right? Could you please start speaking in French and not stopping until I tell you to?"

The startled look on Lacroix's face amused Katze. "What do you want me to say?" he finally asked.

"I don't care. Talk about your childhood or your university days. I don't really care what you're saying, I just want you to say it in French."

Lacroix looked baffled, but started to speak in French. Katze closed her eyes, paying attention to the cadence and rhythm of his voice more than the words, and dropped her mental shields, allowing the full strength of what Lacroix was saying and thinking wash over her.

After about five minutes had passed, Katze opened her eyes and interrupted Lacroix midsentence. She delivered her line with a perfect Quebecois accent. "Merci, Lacroix, ca suffit. Vous pouvez arrêter maintenant."

Tangaroa spoke up. "I don't get it. You know French. How is that going to help with our language problem?"

"I didn't know French when I walked down here," Katze said, switching back into English. "And I've never been to Quebec."

"It was perfect. You didn't even have an accent. How'd you do that?" Lacroix asked.

"It's the way you speak the language," Katze said. Then she waited for the two of them to realize just what she did.

Lacroix got it a second before Tangaroa did, and whispered under his breath, "Calisse!"

"So you're going to suck the language out of his head," Tangaroa said, gesturing towards the prisoner in the other room. "Then you're going to speak to him in it."

"Well, that's a rather inelegant way of putting it," Katze said. "But it's accurate enough. I don't know if it will work, though; I've never tried to do it with a language that isn't from Earth or Marraketh. But it's better than anything else we've got, right?"

Lacroix and Tangaroa both nodded their assent. Katze said, "Okay, then. What we're going to need to do is keep him speaking. Again, I don't really care what he says; I'm more concerned about catching the cadence of the voice as a focus. When we go in there, I don't want you guys to refer to me in any fashion, just let me sit in a corner and concentrate. When I think I'm ready to go, I'll just start speaking. It could take a while, so don't panic at first if I'm utterly silent."

Lacroix smiled. Tangaroa turned towards the door and said, "Let's do it."

Time. It was the one thing Katze didn't have enough of. Given days, getting this language would have been easy. But she didn't have days — she wasn't even sure she had hours. Every minute counted, and Katze was counting every single one somewhere in the back of her mind.

It had been difficult to get pegged on the subject she was trying to draw the language from. Tangaroa had to throw out a lot more words than she had really been expecting to get him to say anything, and whatever extension of herself she used to do this was finding itself distracted onto his thought pattern as opposed to the prisoner.

Granted, the prisoner didn't even know she was here. Lacroix had brought in two folding chairs and set one up behind the prisoner. Then he sat down on the other chair in plain view of the prisoner. Their captive had shown no interest in the other chair at all, something Katze had been thankful for.

Tangaroa started by saying random combinations of sounds that made Katze wonder if he was just tossing out phenomes hoping they would make words. She had ported in a moment later. The prisoner was still glaring at Lacroix and Tangaroa and had not noticed the third presence in the room. It was the last thing that had really gone right in this whole farce.

She looked up from her concentration to see Lacroix, a worried expression on his face, checking his watch. She glanced at her own. Half an hour, and nothing to show for it. Lacroix looked up and gestured at his head. Katze shook her head in response to that and went back to trying to concentrate.

Tangaroa had to be blocked out somehow. It wasn't his fault; he was doing as she had asked. But she couldn't afford to keep getting distracted onto his mind. There was one more thing she could do, but it carried a risk that Katze wasn't sure Mal would want her to take if he were able to hear the options. She could focus all her attention and concentration on the prisoner, but it left her vulnerable to an outside attack. It wasn't easy to pull back.

More importantly, though, was the fact that if she failed, the whole thing would backfire, and the strong beliefs the prisoner held would become her own. The thought made Katze shudder involuntarily. She would rather be dead than a Lyran thrall, but if she made the decision to throw all her concentration at the subject, she wouldn't have a chance to make that decision.

But if she didn't do it, then they'd be no closer to being able to get this captive to tell them where Owsen was, and Owsen was looking for the Slayer. Katze knew it wasn't in this world, but she recalled that it took a rather large magical spell to get it and everything else to leave this world, and if Owsen happened to stumble across that spot...well, there might still be a signature from that spell there which would lead him directly to Pupp and the Slayer.

That couldn't be allowed. Owsen must not find where the Slayer had gone. That decided, Katze took as deep of a breath as she could without the prisoner hearing her, squeezed her eyes tightly closed, and shoved her entire focus on the captive in the middle of the room. At first, it didn't seem to be working, but the sounds and the tactile sense of air flowing in the room diminished and then disappeared. It was just Katze and this oddly mellifluous melody that, after a second or two of confusion, she recognized as the language the prisoner spoke.

Katze saw. Images didn't need language to be understood, and the captive seemed to be both aware she was in there and feeding her images that showed his powerful status. Behind it all, the pattern of the language fluttered and twirled. It would be alright if she gave in. There were worse things to be than a servitor to the greatest race in the universe. The Lyrans really weren't all that bad when one got to know them. All one had to do was give in — give up that old unhappy life and let us in.

Katze pulled her sense of self into as tight of a ball as she could and dug her fingers into it as if she was a rock-climber digging for the only traction between her and a painful fall. The captive apparently knew that Katze was not bending to his will, and the language became, instead of a soft and soothing melody, an angry storm that was determined to knock her from her precarious perch.

She was trapped. If she tried to pull back, it would give the other a split second in which to take over. If she stayed here, that storm would eventually penetrate the tight boundaries of self. Either way, she was about to become a thrall of the damned Lyrans and there was nothing she could do about it — except wait and try to hold on.

Lacroix looked at his watch. It was now forty minutes since this had started, and Katze still showed no signs of having grasped the language. She was sitting there

with her eyes squeezed shut, and looking as if she was concentrating deeply on something. Maybe she'd have it soon.

He turned his attention back to the prisoner in the center of the room. Despite the fact the captive had lost an arm in the fighting, he still glared defiantly at the both of them, as if he could take them both if he just had a moment. Lacroix found himself somewhat admiring a fighting spirit like the prisoner had.

Tangaroa had taken to repeating back anything the prisoner said, trying to get him to say more things. Lacroix, being the subject of Katze's little demonstration, didn't think it took as wide a vocabulary as Tang seemed to be trying for, but Katze hadn't given any indication that she knew the language yet.

He looked back at Katze, only to find her crouched in the chair, her hands over her head, grasping for something he couldn't see. He couldn't quite make out the expression on her face, but her eyes were still screwed shut. Lacroix wasn't quite sure what was going on, but he was getting the feeling that Katze was in some trouble and might need help.

Tangaroa had stopped. He apparently saw the same odd gestures Katze was making, because he bent down and whispered in Lacroix's ear, "What's going on? Why hasn't she gotten it?"

Lacroix whispered back, "I don't know, but I think she's in trouble. Keep our friend busy while I call for help."

Tangaroa nodded, and went back into his standing position, loudly speaking a string of syllables as he went. He must have said something appropriately nasty, because the captive spit a bunch of syllables back at Tangaroa. Lacroix ducked out the door, pulled out his Linker, and said, "Min? Is somebody around that might be able to help Katze?"

There was a moment of silence, and Lacroix wasn't sure his question had been heard, when Min's voice came on the line. "Grand Admiral Felton is on his way down."

Lacroix gulped. "Tell him to come on into the room when he gets here," Having done that, he pocketed his Linker and went back into the interrogation room. The captive glared at him again, but he wasn't really concerned with that. Katze had somehow managed to get herself in an even tighter ball despite the folding chair, and her hands were now clenched into fists and jammed in next to her forehead.

He had no idea what was going on, but he was worried. Hopefully, the Grand Admiral would arrive soon.

He had been able to walk again with the aid of a cane for only a few hours now when Minerva's call had come down, and most of those few hours had been spent pacing his recovery room nonstop, fueled by a heady mixture of anxiety, anger and guilt. Now he was hobbling through the base's labyrinthian corridors, his cane tapping out an unsteady rhythm as he made his way to the brig.

Felton had been on edge since he awoke to find Owsen's intangible form looming over him. He knew what the former patriarch of TRES Corps was looking for,



but it was killing him not knowing just how much he had let slip, and even though he knew the Barney-Slayer was no longer on this plane he couldn't be sure it was safe anymore knowing that the High Mage of Lyran had snaked himself back into existence. He had grown even more antsy when he heard that Ensign Lacroix and that Doberman fellow, Tangaroa, had brought back a pair of captives. He had been good about not getting in the way — these were, after all, quite capable individuals he was working with, so there was no reason for him to go poking his nose into their work.

That's what he told himself, at least, until the page had come through. Now he was beating a hasty path down there, as fast as his sore legs could manage. Though thankful for the excuse to get personally involved, he wondered what could be going on that they needed him for, and moreover, what he would do when he got there.

Beat the answers out of them, if necessary, thought the base part of him.

"No," he answered aloud. "That's no' the way."

Yes it is, Nemesis thought. It's always the way. If you can't break their minds, break their bodies.

"Shaddup," Felton hissed.

It'll be our fault, you know, if Owsen gets his hands on the Barney-Slayer. Maybe we don't know where Schneider took it, but if he finds the JPV site...

"Yes, I know, dammit," he growled, coming up to the door into the brig. "Ye dinna think I ken that I might hae screwed the fookin lot o us o'er jus tae buy time fer me own neck? I goddamn ken, a'right?"

Felton paused in front of the one-way glass, looking into the room. His reaction was triggered by a combination of things: His anger with his own self; the sight of Brenner, curled into a ball and obviously suffering; the helpless expressions on the faces of Lacroix and Tangaroa; and most of all, the smug, disinterested look the prisoner was wearing. In spite of his tender ankles, he raised his steel-toed boot, and kicked the door in.

The maelstrom screamed around the borders of her consciousness, howling for blood and a way in. Katze wasn't even concentrating on language anymore, because every bit of her strength was going to hold her sense of self in as tight a ball as she could manage. But she wasn't going to be able to hold out for much longer. At some point she would have to let go. She was trying to hold off for as long as she could, but it had come down to a matter of moments.

A hand slipped. Katze braced for a fall, trying desperately to hang onto anything that might undo what was about to happen, but her thoughts only fell on Josh. She felt like such a miserable failure, because she knew she had promised him that she would stay with him unless it was absolutely necessary to save others, and here she was, about to enter the service of the enemy, and even though it was totally involuntary, she still felt guilty. Good and faithful Josh, and she was going to leave. If she hadn't made the dumb decision to give her entire attention span to the captive,

this wouldn't be happening.

The other hand slipped. Katze scrambled for purchase anywhere, but the boundaries were starting to blur, and she waited for the darkness to overtake her sense of self.

But the darkness never came. Instead, a bright light did, and when it cleared, Katze was surprised to find that she was still herself. Or at least she thought she was still herself. Is that what minions thought, that they were still themselves? She tested herself, running her mind over the phrase 'damned Lyrans', and found that it still was a perfectly accurate description of what she felt about those too smug bastards.

The second thing was that she could hear another voice mumbling, and it was in English. Katze remembered that she had been trying to acquire the captive's language, and instead she had broken through to a part of his brain that thought in English? This seemed impossible from everything she'd learned about language acquisition, but she wasn't about to question it now. Instead, she just marveled at the long string of insults the prisoner was thinking up about Tangaroa.

And the prisoner didn't even seem to know she was there. That seemed rather odd, too, considering the sheer malevolence of what she had just been up against. Could the language be that malevolent? Languages were a tool. They couldn't be malevolent. The whole thing clashed with everything Katze had learned.

But before she could really ponder the oddness of everything she was picking up and attempt to fit it in, she found she was having troubles breathing. Or the captive was, and Katze was feeling it. She pulled back, having no trouble doing that, and blinked a bit as she found herself back in the room with Tangaroa and Lacroix... and Felton, who was strangling the captive, demanding the captive tell him where Owsen went.

She stood up, formulated the thought of what she wanted to express, and yelled it at DS. Only instead of the English words 'Knock it off' that she was expecting, the sounds she made were at the same time foreign and familiar.

After a second, it dawned on her that the spongie had never thought in English at all, it's just that her understanding of his language was such that it seemed like he was thinking in English. Or something was protecting her from the malevolency that had nearly drug her under. Even now, as Katze thought about it, she could feel that malevolency lurking in the back of her head, associated with this language, but it was a mostly harmless monster — she knew its tricks now. It was definitely better than the maelstrom she had lived through.

She looked around the room. Lacroix and Tangaroa were both wearing stunned looks, Lacroix more than Tangaroa. The prisoner, having been released from Felton's grasp, looked somewhat worried, and Felton himself wore the strangest expression she had ever seen on another's face.

But she was even more surprised when Felton spit out something in Vulgar right back at her.

At first, it hadn't even occurred to him that he had spoken anything out of the ordinary. He snapped at the girl, of course, but he was desperate for answers and growing more angry by the minute, and the angrier he got the easier it was for Nemesis to become the dominant will.

And so he had yelled back at her. "Hold your tongue, woman!" was what he had intended. It took a moment for the red-haze of angered impulse to clear for him to realize what had emerged was "Ail-rekhad, alish!" It took him another moment to realize that it was Katze to whom he responded in kind. He stared at her with his red eyes, not sure what to say next.

Katze's face screwed up in concentration as she tried to grind the mental gears necessary for speaking English. "I didn't know you spoke Lyran," she finally managed.

"Do I?" Felton asked, still slightly dazed from the experience. Katze nodded. "And... you do too?" he asked.

"Sorta... it's complicated," she replied, coming around to face the prisoner. He was rubbing at the welts around his neck from where Felton's fingers had dug in, wearing an expression of bewilderment that was fading back into distain. "I'll explain later," she said, thoughtfully watching the captive as he glared at the Feral, shifting her mental processes with a bit more ease now. <What is your name?> she asked him. Doesn't hurt to start with the basics.

<May your bowels rupture!> the prisoner spat.

"How friendly," Felton said, patting his pockets down in search of a cigar. He produced one, which he lit with a flicker of fire from his index finger and gave it a few experimental puffs. "Fook his name. Ask him where his boss has gone tae."

Katze sighed. <Look. This will probably a lot more comfortable for you and a lot less painful for us all if you ease up on the superiority complex.>

The prisoner sneered at Katze with unmitigated contempt. <Your questions are pointless. Your insignificant lives cannot be saved.>

<Saved from what? From Owsen?>

The prisoner glared at her with seething hatred and then looked away, unresponsive.

Felton leaned down, his face only inches away from that of the prisoner. He smiled, not in a friendly way, but with the sort of twitchy cheshire grin meant to mask barely restrained rage. It didn't help that his teeth seemed to have developed extra points. <You'd best answer the lady's questions,> he said in the Vulgar tongue, words carried on a cloud of bluish cigar smoke that caused the captive to gag.

<I do not fear you,> hissed the prisoner, shrinking back irritably from the smoke.

"No? You should." A dull red glow burned behind Felton's pupils. His skin turned ashen and somewhat leathery. There was a soft metallic sound, like the blade of a knife cutting through silk as his Claws slid out. He brought up one long steely

talons to prod the prisoner gently under the chin. "I'm a Cub of the White Death."

The color rapidly drained away from the prisoner's face. Felton smiled. This was the response he was looking for. <Now... where has your master gone?>

The thrall found it difficult to think, sitting face-to-face with the boogymen younger Lyrans are taught to fear and elder Lyrans taught to loathe. His answer was, at least in theory, completely truthful. <My master sits upon His throne on the Homeworld.>

Felton's smile melted. He stood, and his hand flashed in an arc that Katze was sure would remove the prisoner's head; instead, it swept shallow furrows across his cheek and nose, barely deep enough to draw blood. There was a sense that the next one would be less generous. <Wrong answer,> Felton rumbled.

"Sir..." Katze began to protest in English, but the look in Felton's eyes caused the words to catch momentarily in her throat. She glanced past him at Lacroix, whose hand had instinctively moved for his gun; his hand wrapped its grip, thumb resting on the hammer, but he hadn't yet drawn. He seemed to be fighting an inner struggle, and Katze had a feeling that whatever Felton did next would be something everyone was going to regret. Tangaroa just stood impassively, arms folded. He seemed to have a more pragmatic outlook on the Maenad's interrogation methods.

"Lacroix, Tangaroa, maybe you guys should take a break. You've been at this for a while," Katze said. Lacroix opened his mouth to protest, looking at Felton, but she just nodded. Tangaroa just shrugged and shuffled out, Lacroix finally resigning and following him in silence.

After they had left, Katze looked levelly at Felton. "Sir, we're after information, not happy revenge fantasies. We aren't going to learn anything if he's dead."

"We've got a spare," Felton said, smiling bitterly. "Fine," he said, stepping back and sheathing his Claws. He thrust his hands into his pockets and watched, cigar rolling anxiously between his teeth.

Katze closed her eyes and did her mental acrobatics. She turned back to the prisoner. <Where is Owsen?> she asked in the prisoner's alien tongue.

He didn't answer. He just sat, eyes locked on Felton, petrified with terror at having felt the Maenad's talons graze his flesh. There had been no pain, just the sensation of the cold metal slicing effortlessly through his skin. His righteous anger had been siphoned away by that touch. The small part of his mind still capable of cogitation wondered if this was how his masters felt when slain by the Claws; no pain, just a freezing sensation of having been drained of life.

Katze looked over her shoulder at Felton. "I don't think we're going to get anywhere as long as you're standing there," she said.

"I can make him talk," he responded, bristling at the unspoken suggestion. His hands came out of his pockets.

"No, I think we've got his attention now. Let me give it another try? Alone?"

Felton bit through the end of his cigar, jaw muscles tensing in fury. He looked as though he were ready to tear everyone in the room apart, but with some effort

the rage subsided. He spat out the stub of tobacco in his mouth and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Fine. But I'll no be goin' far." He turned for the door, throwing a spiteful glance over his shoulder, and then left the room.

<Okay,> Katze said, once the door had closed behind him. <He's gone now. Let's talk.>

The captive sat silence for several moments after the Feral left the room, and eventually the color started to come back to his face. The gradually warming sting of the cuts on his face served to bring his mind back to coherency. He blinked a couple of times, focusing on Katze, and then the look of contempt returned.

Katze just smiled gently. <You're working with Owsen?> she asked.

<Yes,> the prisoner answered, looking at the mirrored window as if trying to gauge whether the Maenad was just outside.

Katze allowed herself to enjoy the small victory. Now she was getting somewhere. <Good. And you know where he has gone?>

The prisoner looked at her. There were the fires of hate once again in his eyes, and more... there seemed to be amusement. <What good will it do you to know?> he hissed. <You cannot stop what is to come.>

She recoiled slightly at the glare. <What do you mean? What is to come?>

He just smiled spitefully and looked back at the mirror, as if challenging the Maenad to come back in.

<Is Owsen going to Penn-syl-vania?> she asked, tongue stumbling a bit over the mix of English and Vulgar.

No response.

She watched him for a few moments, but he never deigned to make eye contact again. She sighed and stood. "Alright. I've tried to be nice. I even sent the Maenad away, and you've rewarded me with nothing. I'll just go and let him know that he can do what he will."

As if to punctuate that note, there was a loud crashing from the room next door, and the shattering of glass. Both of them had the sense that Felton had gone to see the other prisoner. The captive looked at Katze with wide-eyed panic. <Okay! I'll talk!>

Katze came out into the hall a few minutes later. Felton was leaning against the wall, cane next to him, puffing quietly on another cigar. Mirrored glass was scattered around his feet and a mangled stool lay in the doorway. "Oh no... you didn't," she said, hurrying to look in the other interrogation room. The one-way glass was busted out, but the prisoner looked unharmed, if terrified.

"Nah, he's okay," Felton said, smiling with satisfaction. "He actually caved as soon as he saw me. That was for *your* benefit." He nodded at the window.

"Owsen is moving on Pennsylvania," Katze said, turning quickly back to Felton. "He knows the sword was moved to the JPV campus, and he knows it was moved off-world."

“Aye,” Felton said, nodding. “But he doesn’t know where it was moved to, and he doesn’t know exactly where the campus was. But if he finds the campus, I don’t think he’ll be ignorant for long.”

“Alright,” Katze said. “It sounds like the info is good. It’s time to brief the others.”

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## **23: Collision Course**

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Katze stared over the length of desk. There had been many times she'd been here before, usually being lectured by Mal over one screwup or another. She never expected when the closedown happened that she'd ever find herself standing there again, and though this time she was relaying information, that feeling of *deja vu* was still awfully powerful.

Felton stood next to her, finishing up a short briefing on what they'd discovered by interrogating the prisoners. Mal was, of course, sitting behind the desk, listening intently to what Felton was saying, and processing all of it. Nothing got past Mal. Probably, by the time this was all over, Mal would know exactly what to do. It was an oddly comforting feeling, Katze thought.

Felton finished. Mal frowned. "Alright, Owsen knows the sword isn't here. So why is he searching in Pennsylvania for it?"

There was a moment of silence before Katze realized that Felton was looking at her like this was her question to field. She took a deep breath and started. "Early in 1999, a couple enterprising young mages at the Praxx came up with the idea of forensic magic. The short of it, they noticed that magic use left signatures that one could use to figure out what happened somewhere and who might have done it, and spell parameters." She stopped for a moment, to let what she'd just said sink in, and judging by the sour expression on Mal's face, he came to the immediate conclusion.

She let it settle a second longer and moved on. “The little bit we figured out is that this signature lasts in proportion to three variables. The biggest one is length of time since the spell has been cast, but the area affected and the power invoked both play a very important part in how long a signature lasts and how effective it is. Is there still one there? I honestly couldn’t tell you. But the big rule at the Praxx when it came to researching is to assume that the Lyrans could do it already — and it seems wise to me to do the same with Owsen.”

Mal nodded. “Right.” He fell silent, as if pondering all the options. Felton waited quietly, and Katze tried her best not to fidget. Mal rose from his chair. “Min, would you mind everybody together in the situation room? I think I know what to do.”

“Even Tang and Lacroix?” Min asked. “Both of them are sleeping.”

Katze looked at Felton, remembering the moment in the interrogation room where she’d sent them both away. Mal looked as if he was about to tell Min to wake them when Felton said, “Let ‘em sleep, we can brief ‘em later. They’ve been going for a long time and need the rest.”

The entire gang, minus Tang and Lacroix, gathered in the conference room. There was some grumbling about how Mal was calling yet another meeting, but that was silenced when the subject of their grousing walked through the door looking like the proverbial cat who’d eaten the canary. He took his place at the front room, looked around the table as if running through his mental checklist, and then spoke.

“Thanks to some good work, we finally know where Owsen is, what he’s looking for, and most importantly, *how* he’s looking for it. This gives us an advantage. It might even bring this whole sordid mess to an end.” He let that news sink in around the table, and then turned his gaze on Dee. “Dee, I need the fragments of the Dark Slayer back from you. All of them.”

The diminutive techie blushed, and then reached into her jacket pocket. She took out the small box the shards had been kept in and looked at it mournfully before sliding it across the table to Mal. Mal left the box in front of him, barely even looking at it. Dee frowned, and everybody else stayed very quiet, wondering what devious plan Mal had come up with this time.

Mal looked around once more, and then began. “We know that Owsen is looking for the Slayer. We also know that Owsen knows the Slayer is off-plane. Thus, he is looking for the last place it was on this world, which is the former JPV campus in Pennsylvania. Thus, we are going to meet him at the JPV campus and lure him into an ambush.” He paused, waiting for the rest of the Jihaddi to catch up with this news.

Delgado, having much experience in figuring out where the implications in a briefing were going, asked a question. “No offense, sir, but how do we know Owsen hasn’t found the site and has already gone through? Do we have some way of track-



ing him that we didn't have before?"

"He doesn't know where the JPV went to when they left," Minerva noted. "In order to find that out, he'll have to trace the spell from where it was cast. And before you ask, we know he hasn't done *that* yet. If he opened a planar gate, I'd see it. So far he hasn't, which means he's still here, and still looking."

Mal nodded. "Precisely," he said. "We're finally a step ahead of him. We know where he's headed, even if he doesn't. And we have the tools," here he tapped the box of mutated Owsenite fragments, "to use his monomania against him." He turned to Aris and Katze. "Step one, what do you two know about aura enhancing spells?"

Aris and Katze exchanged quizzical looks. "Well, a little bit," Aris answered cautiously. "I'm pretty sure we could come up with something."

"Excellent. Then that's what you're going to do to these. We're going to incorporate the fragments into a quickly-forged copy of the original Barney-Slayer, then enchant it until it glows."

"A decoy." Damocles said.

"Spot on. If it looks like the Slayer and has a similar enough aura, we can divert Owsen from trying to follow the JPV and bring him to wherever we want to. Which brings us to Step Two."

The holographic projector in the center of the meeting table flared to life, displaying a neatly-rendered model of what looked like an abandoned town. "This is Dry Well, Nevada," Mal narrated as the model spun around on the table. "It was originally created back in the early 1950s by the Army to test nuclear bomb damage on the Typical Small American Town. Not that the Typical Small American Town was ever in any danger of being nuked, but whatever. The place was built, blown up, and then rebuilt several times before aboveground testing was banned in the '60s. Ever since then, the place has been completely abandoned. It's literally out in the middle of nowhere, and nobody will object if we start firing off weapons out there."

"Kirk, you're field lead for this part. Take KJ, Damo and Shad with you, set up some sniper positions centered on the middle of town. Delgado, you're going to be our designated spotter for this, pick a spot as you will. Once you guys are on your way, we'll proceed to Step Three."

Mal turned to Dee, who was still looking mournfully at the box of Slayer fragments. "Dee, once the decoy's in the hands of the mages, you and Min are going to head out to the JPV site and lay down some early-warning sensors. Nothing fancy; just enough to warn us. Once you're done, join the party in Dry Well. Min, you're coming back here to run the Gate."

"Once Owsen is on final approach, Katze and I will take the decoy out to the JPV site and get his attention. Once he's aimed at *us* instead of the JPV, we'll kick him through a Gate portal so he ends up right in the center of your crossfire. Owsen's a notoriously tough critter, but even he can't stand up to heavy weapons crossfire when he's not expecting it." Mal paused. "Oh, and when Tang and Lacroix wake up, somebody needs to brief them and get them out to Nevada."

“Okay, there’s the plan. Any objections?” Mal looked at the group. A ragtag gang of weirdos they might be, but they were still consummate professionals when it came down to it. Nobody said a word otherwise. “Okay then. We’re on a short schedule. Let’s get to work.”

**SOMEWHERE IN EASTERN PENNSYLVANIA**  
**SUNDAY, APRIL 11, 2004**  
**7:35 PM LOCAL TIME**

The sun dropped, painting a large swath of the countryside with pinks and reds. In the fading twilight, the sound of hooves striking pavement brought the man walking along the side of the road to a halt, looking up to see what danger may strike.

An Amish family, on their way to something, or maybe on their way home, was approaching in their buggy. The man stood by the side of the road, watching as the buggy passed, and nodded imperceptively to the driver of the buggy, who was probably the father of the family. The driver, perhaps aware of the honor that had been bestowed on him, gave the slightest of nods back. The buggy passed, and the clop-clop-clop of hooves striking pavement died into the heavy dusk air, leaving the man on the side of the road to continue wandering, lost deep in his thoughts.

Lord Owsen was not happy. The information that he had gathered from the cub the night before was woefully incomplete. Nemesis knew where the sword had been, but not where it was *now*.

Sifting through the information he’d grabbed from the cub - who was also apparently one of his master’s failed experiments, oh the irony - revealed that the sword, HIS sword had left this world for another long ago. Where that was, Nemesis had no clue. Remembering the cub’s bewilderment, Owsen’s anger grew stronger and stronger. His sword, the one great treasure of his life, his entire *raison d’être*, was in the hands of some meddling, interfering -weak- human on another plane of existence altogether.

Somebody still on Earth knew where the sword was, though. That much he had managed to grab from Nemesis’ brain, that and the information that he hadn’t accidentally killed the one who knew in a fit of pique. Owsen made a low growling sound as he replayed the encounter in his mind. That was twice now that the last of the white death’s cubs had defied him, cheated him out of both his sport and his rightful possessions...

At least, he thought suddenly, the Scourge will take him even if you cannot. The thought cheered him a little, but not much.

So now he was here in Pennsylvania, a place Owsen had had very little experience with in his life... before. This was the last place the sword had been on Earth, and Owsen was sure, absolutely positive, that if he could find exact spot he could track the sword. After all, was it not his? He and the Barney-Slayer had a bond that transcended all other things; when he got close, it would call to him, and he would go to

it like a moth to a flame. And when he had it back, he could complete his revenge on the White Death, summon the Scourge, and end this for all time.

But Nemesis - may all the Ascended curse his misbegotten hide! - hadn't known *where* in Pennsylvania the damned place was. All he knew was that it had resided near one of the large cities in the southern end of the state, but not *which* one.

Owsen had started his search near Philidelphia, only to come up utterly empty. Now he was stuck, marching along these back roads, moving back and forth over all this monotonous farmland looking for something that didn't exist anymore, all because one weak-willed cub had managed to trick him, betray him, distract him from getting the last piece of the puzzle...

The building wave of anger finally reached the high point. He bellowed into the evening sky, whirling his black blade out its scabbard and jabbing it in the direction of the setting sun. "BASTARDS!" Owsen screamed, waving the sword around, "TRAITORS! YOU CAN'T HIDE FROM ME FOREVER! I'LL FIND YOU AND DESTROY YOU FOR WHAT YOU'VE DONE! SEE IF I DON'T!!"

Glowing with power, Owsen leapt upon the nearest large object, which happened to be a perfectly ordinary elm tree sitting by the roadside. Striking the tree again and again, Owsen raged incoherently against his enemies and everybody else on this thrice-damned planet who DARED stand against him and hide his prized possession from his sight, the poor pitiful monkeys who would all be obliterated when the Scourge came down on top of their unsuspecting heads and no doubt they all had it coming, the useless ignorant scumbags they were, and the pitiful Jihaddi who tried to stop him and they'd all pay oh yes they would pay with blood and fire and ice and steel they wouldn't die in the Scourge they'd SCREAM FOR A THOUSAND FUCKING YEARS *BEGGING FOR MY MERCY...*

Owsen collapsed to his knees, panting, as the red fog lifted from his sight. The elm tree he'd chosen to work out his frustrations on was now nothing more than a smoking stump, splinters of wood scattered around it gently smouldering as if the tree had been struck by lightning. Slowly, he levered himself back to a standing position and shook himself. Sighing, he slid his shadowy blade back into its scabbard, then smiled.

"You know," he remarked casually to the blasted tree, "I really needed that. Thanks." Owsen's lips quirked into a small smile, and he continued on down the road, heading west, following the faint siren call of the Barney-Slayer.

## THE DISCWORLD

The room was dark, the only light being what bits of fire in the fireplace were reflected off the metallic things in the room. In a chair pulled close to the fire, a mage sat, staring into the fire, a sword propped against his chair. The metal of the blade and his face both reflected the chaotic mumblings of the fire as the mage wrestled with one of the hardest questions he had ever faced — whether to return to the

world he had abandoned five years ago or not.

Puppeteer had been happy on the Disc. For the first time he could really use the powers he had been born with instead of struggling and hiding. But when Katze had shown up, he found that he had missed the world he had come from. Plus, what Katze had said...

He pulled the sword into his lap and examined it again. He could barely believe the blade was whole again — it had been broken for almost as long as he had been a Jihaddi. It took a bit of mental rearranging to account for it being in one piece again. But that wasn't the question he was pondering.

Maybe there came a time to return home again. It wasn't as if Katze had said not to come back to Earth, had she? She'd just said to keep the sword close. And while none of his colleagues seemed too surprised at the sword that had come out of nowhere, he was getting tired of the constant assumption he was doing some research on it instead of just being a glorified babysitter.

Yes. He could go home, hike to a phone, and help the Jihaddi figure out their Owsen mystery. And he could bring the sword so they would have it when they needed it. They could probably use all the help they could get, right?

Pupp stood. It was decided, he thought. He would go help with this mess Katze had mentioned and then he could decide what to do from there. And a missing wizard at Unseen wasn't exactly front page news, so he wasn't worried about his colleagues' reactions.

**VRDET HQ**  
**BLANCA MOUNTAIN, COLORADO**  
**SUNDAY, APRIL 11, 2004**  
**9:02 PM LOCAL TIME**

“Sooooooo...”

Katze turned to Aris, setting the claymore down on the workbench. “So?”

They were standing in one of Blanca's smaller R&D workrooms, with nothing besides the claymore and a few shards of the Dark Slayer. The claymore itself was a jihaddium copy of the original Slayer. Rather, it looked a great deal like it. But Katze could feel the difference, and she wasn't attuned to it the way Owsen was. Might be. “So I was wondering, do you do any sort of setup for your magic? Because all my non-extemporaneous spellcasting is of the chalk-and-candles variety.”

Katze blinked. “Oh. No. I don't need any setup.”

“Okay. Do you think if I put stuff up it'd interfere with what you do?”

“It shouldn't.”

“Great.” Aris pulled a sharpie out of her bag and started doodling runes on the table around the fake Slayer. “So, you've seen the original a lot more recently than I have. D'you think you can handle the resonance stuff while I bind these babies—” she picked up the silk bag full of shards, “into the handle?”

“Sure, if you don't mind shielding everything from outside.”

“Gotcha.”

Aris finished her scribbling, then pulled the two largest splinters from the bag and lay them on the crosspiece. “Okay. Bind, resonate, block. I’m ready when you are.”

Katze nodded and held her hands over the blade. “Let’s go.”

She felt a swell of power as Aris closed her eyes and started chanting in a purring, raspy language. The splinters of Dark Slayer blurred and sank into the metal, leaving a purple tinge on the surface. The color spread outward like blood in water, fading as it eluted down the blade and across the hilt. A minute passed and the color was washed into every corner, diluted by the original silver until only an afterimage of the indigo remained.

“All right,” Aris said, and Katze felt the dragon pulling her energy back, creating a wall around the room. “That should take care of half the resonance.”

Katze nodded, lowering her fingertips to the blade. *Please, she asked the metal, Can you feel like we need you to? Can you make this impression on the universe?*

The answer came back hard and fast.

**THE BLADE WAS BROKEN THE SLAYER WAS BROKEN THE  
HERALD IS COME AND THE BLADE IS NO MORE**

Katze gritted her teeth. *Please, she urged again, tightening her focus.*

**THE BLADE SINGS THE HERALD SINGS THE WIND SINGS  
THE BLOOD SINGS THERE IS NO MORE THERE IS NO BLOOD  
THERE IS NO WIND THERE IS NO HERALD THERE IS NO  
BLADE**

*But we have a blade!*

**THE BLADE BREAKS THE SONG BREAKS THE LINE BREAKS  
THE UNIVERSE BREAKS**

*I’m not going to take this from a hunk of metal.*

**THERE IS NOTHING HERE**

*But there is! Katze pleaded. There is something here!*

The presence wavered. Katze pressed. And suddenly, the resistance crumbled.

Katze opened her eyes and pulled her hands back. Aris was staring down at the softly glowing sword.

“Is it supposed to do that?” she asked.

Katze reached for the hilt and picked it up. The glow faded until it was barely noticeable. “I think it’s just residual. It sure feels like the Slayer, though.”

“Cool. Nice job.”

Katze looked at Aris out of the corner of her eye. The dragon didn’t seem to be aware of the negotiation she’d just had with the sword. “Thanks. Let’s go show off our pretty to Mal.”

JUST OUTSIDE MEADERTOWN, PENNSYLVANIA  
MONDAY, APRIL 12, 2004  
5:02 AM

The goddamn dogs were barking again.

Zeke Bauer sighed and pulled himself out of bed to see what phantom they were barking at this time. A farmer's life meant early mornings, but Zeke had hoped that he might be able to sleep until dawn this morning. But that was not to be. Damned dogs.

His wife stirred a bit. Zeke looked over, but saw that she wasn't awake yet. Too bad, he could have used some coffee. Sure, he could buy one of those automatic coffee makers, but Zeke preferred the way his wife made it.

He pulled his overalls on over his night shirt, and looked out the window in the first light before dawn. The fields his window overlooked were being prepared for planting, and he saw nothing out there that would have attracted the attention of his dogs. Maybe somebody had made a wrong turn up his driveway. It wouldn't be the first time city folks had mistaken his driveway for a 'quaint country road', as the last couple had told him.

But just in case there was a fox raiding the hen house, or other predators afoot, he grabbed some shells for his shotgun from the drawer next to his bed, and headed downstairs to where the shotgun was kept, hanging over the kitchen door. He loaded the gun, and then stepped outside to see what was occupying the dogs. The black Labrador, Missy, stopped barking the moment he stepped outside, but she was still watching something off in the direction of the wheat field. The other dog, a mixup mutt he'd found some years ago and named Joker, was tugging frantically at the end of the rope and still barking.

"Okay, okay, calm down, we'll deal with it," he said to Joker as he untied the knot holding the dog from taking off. Joker, the second he was free, bolted towards the wheat field. Zeke, curious as to what had gotten into that damned mixup mutt this time, followed him. Missy tailed behind him, having learned from a few duck hunting trips not to bolt before her master released her.

The wheat field sat in a small hollow visible from just around the corner from the kitchen porch. Joker, barking loudly the whole way, had covered most of the ground from his tether to the field already. And sure enough, there was somebody out in the middle of his wheat field, swinging something through his wheat. The light wasn't good enough for Zeke to make out exactly what he was swinging, but whatever it was, it was sharper than the scythe that Zeke would have used to cut the wheat. He'd already sliced himself a good trail most of the way through the wheat from the far end of the field.

Missy quivered next to him. "Stay, girl," he muttered to her, understanding that she wanted to go and join Joker in scaring off this stranger. But he couldn't afford to lose her. The crazy mixup dog hadn't cost him anything, but he'd paid good money

for a good hunting dog. Joker plowed his way into the wheat field and disappeared from view.

The weird guy in the wheat field just kept slicing through the wheat as if it were warm bread straight from the oven. Zeke stood there, not quite knowing what to do until he remembered the shotgun he was carrying. Just as he was about to raise and fire it, he heard snarling and barking coming from the wheat field. He couldn't quite see Joker, but he was sure the man was hurting his dog. "Get out of my wheat!" he yelled.

The man stopped in his progression through the field, and then disappeared out of sight. Joker was still snarling and barking up a storm, so he was still out there somewhere, and he hadn't been hurt yet. Zeke raised the shotgun and fired a shot in the air as a warning. "Get out!" he yelled again. "Or I'll be shooting to kill on the next shot!"

The shot finished echoing, and Zeke was struck by how quiet the morning was, other than Joker's frenzied barking and snarling. The man still hadn't reappeared, and Zeke decided to go down into his wheat field to figure out what the hell had happened and then deliver on his threat. "Heel," he commanded Missy. He stood there for a second, reloading his gun, and then set out for the field, Missy a shadow at his heels.

Zeke knew his way well through his fields, and it seemed like no time at all when he burst through the wheat into the man's scythed path. In front of him kneeled the strange man — and strange he was, who the hell would wear a kilt and armor in modern Pennsylvania? Especially with a trenchcoat? — looking at Joker, and going, "It's okay, doggie, I'm not going to hurt you. You're a pretty doggie." Joker, for his own part, was having nothing of this stranger, and was snarling and barking just out of the stranger's reach.

Next to the stranger on the ground was a sword, black as night. It might as well be the devil's sword, as Zeke wasn't sure Satan himself could find a sharper blade. That was what the man had been swinging to blaze this trail through the wheat. This whole thing was entirely too strange and Zeke found himself wishing that he was still in bed asleep, because that would make more sense than this being reality. Despite that, he raised the shotgun to make good on his threat. But just as he was about to fire at the man's head, Missy bounded forward to the man and licked him on the cheek. Zeke wasn't about to shoot at a man with his prized hunting dog in the way, so all he could do was stand there with his shotgun aimed, watching as the man laughed and stroked Missy.

Joker edged forward, his fear of the stranger in conflict with the attention Missy was getting. The stranger looked back over at Zeke's mixup mutt, and then back at Missy, and said, "See, I'm friendly. I just want to pet you, cute doggie. Just like this one. See, this doggie likes me."

Zeke was angry now. The stranger was making friends with his hunting dog, after destroying a good chunk of his wheat. He said, coldly, "I warned you to get out of

my field, you son of a bitch.”

The man spun as he stood up, picking that accursed blade off the ground and wielding it like he knew exactly how to kill Zeke with it. Zeke backed up a step in fear as he'd never been so close to a minion of Satan's before, and instinct took over. He squeezed the shotgun trigger, hoping that he'd aimed well enough to score a hit.

The sound was a deafening roar. When his ears stopped ringing, he was astonished to find that the stranger was still standing there, with a chest wound that would have killed a man. “Oh. That wasn't nice. That wasn't nice at all,” said the stranger, sounding as if he had been insulted and not wounded grievously. “You really ought to be more careful with that.” And before Zeke could move at all, the stranger swung that sword through the air and sliced Zeke's shotgun in half, right next to where his trigger finger had been. Zeke stared at his two hands, his left clutching the long barrel and his right holding the butt end.

He looked back up at the man, and blinked again. Whereas a moment ago he would have sworn on a stack of Bibles that the stranger had a well-placed shotgun wound right where his heart should have been, it now appeared to be mostly healed. Zeke wondered what deal this stranger had made with the Devil to have such powers, and prayed to God that this man wouldn't find that he would be much easier to split in half than his shotgun.

Missy whimpered and pawed at the stranger. The stranger looked down and grinned widely before scratching Missy on the head. “You're a good doggie, yes you are, and you just want attention, yes, you're a cute doggie...” He looked up at Zeke, sheathed the sword, and gave him a huge smile. “I was going to kill you,” he said. “But since you have two adorable doggies, I think I'll let you live a little while longer. Tata!” He waved, then walked past Zeke down the trail he had cut into the wheat. Missy looked about to bound after him, but then looked up at Zeke and sat instead.

Zeke blinked, and then slowly made his way through the wheat and back up to the house. Missy and Joker both tailed after him, and he didn't yell when they slipped through the door into the kitchen in front of him. Normally, the dogs weren't allowed in the house, but today would be an exception. He sat the two pieces of the shotgun down on the table, pulled out a chair, and just stared at the clean cut that separated the two of them.

“Ezekiel Bauer, what are these dogs doing in the house?” a voice called out from the other room. His wife, still in her bathrobe and her hair up in curlers, burst into the kitchen, followed by the dogs. She stopped short when she saw his shotgun on the table in two pieces.

“The dogs saved my life,” Zeke said, not totally sure he believed what had happened. “He could have done that to me and not to my shotgun.”

“Done what?” his wife asked. Zeke explained the crazy events of the morning to her, and she stared at the cut, as smooth as if a skilled metalworker had done it. The



two of them sat there in silence.

Finally, Zeke said, "Who would believe it?"

## THE DISCWORLD

Pupp stood and dusted his hands off. The sword he was babysitting stayed propped against one of the walls in his laboratory, but the floor and a good chunk of the walls were covered in the arcane magical symbols he would need to be able to get himself home.

### SOMEWHERE IN PENNSYLVANIA

4:00 PM LOCAL TIME

The'Akhai hated this planet. Hated the smell, hated the decor, hated the creatures (ah, but what they could become when they were forced! He did like that), hated everything about the place. There had been none happier than he when they'd all been recalled home. He had hoped to stay there for a long time, but alas, it was not to be.

Word had come from on high that the Herald was reaching his goal of finding the second sword. That there might be resistance. That it would be prudent if he, The'Akhai, were to personally accompany the Herald to the sword, to make sure the relic was recovered for the greater glory of His Omnipotence. And to make sure the Herald didn't outlive his usefulness, of course.

So here he stood. On this planet. In the smells. He didn't want to think about what he must be standing in. Uncontrolled organic matter. Disgusting.

The Herald was coming this way. The noise was enough of an indication, but the subtle glow that wafted along the limp ley streams of this planet was a more definite telltale. The'Akhai stood still, unnoticed by the local fauna, until the Herald was only a few feet away, cursing loudly in his own language.

"Herald. Attend."

Owsen whirled, eyes narrowing. The sword came up in a swift arc until its point hovered inches from The'Akhai's mask. The Lyran eyed the point, debated moving, and decided it wasn't worth the effort.

"What the bloody fuck are you doing here?"

The'Akhai expended enough energy to raise his left hand gracefully in threat. "More politeness is expected toward your benefactor. I am here to help with your search."

Owsen crumpled, the tip of the sword dropping. "I don't need any help," he whined. "I'll find it myself. And RIP IT FROM THEM!"

The Lyran ignored the spittle flying from Owsen's mouth and made another gesture. "I brought assistance. For our amusement."

The Herald took his time looking over the Saetherans and the human minions. Finally, he nodded. "I get to kill Nemesis," he growled. "With my own hands, I

get to kill him. I'm the Herald, and it's my duty, and he RAN from me. From me. His friend. His brother. HE RAN AWAY. And I'm going to kill him. And get it back."

Thel'Akhai considered for a moment. Then he lowered his hand and nodded consent.

**DRY WELL, NEVADA  
1:00 PM LOCAL TIME**

The worst part was always the waiting. Once the fighting itself began, things would go smoothly. They always had. But that blank time before the battle would always be every soldier's private hell - especially if that soldier was more or less alone.

Joseph Lacroix willed himself not to fidget, having already done everything he needed to do to prepare. After that, he willed himself to stop shaking from pre-battle nerves. Mal had sent everyone to different points around Dry Well with vague enough instructions: they were to wait until Owsen appeared, and bring him down when he got into a position to get nailed by a crossfire. It was simple enough; everyone had scattered about, checked their weapons, set up a little extra cover in whatever spot they chose to fire from, and they were ready. Inside of five minutes, the town was silent again, everyone down behind cover. Waiting.

Lacroix checked the charge on his XRifle for the seventh or eighth time, saw that it was exactly the same as it had been the previous six or seven times, and glanced about him at the materiel he had on-hand. XRifle; some extra magazines for it; Linker; just in case, several grenades, a pistol, and in his belt, a combat knife. He chuckled despite himself at the latter; what was he thinking, even accepting the possibility of taking a knife to a Maenad?

Movement in the street; Lacroix looked up to see Mal pacing up the street, checking everyone's firing positions. He waved out the window, recieved a curt nod in return, and settled back into his firing position.

After today ("if we survive this," a part of Lacroix's mind thought; another part thought "shut up!" just a little louder), it wasn't going to be over. He knew that much. It wasn't "just" a case of a Maenad going postal anymore; the Lyrans were involved, at the highest levels. That meant that the war was back on, even if the Jihaddi hadn't officially declared the fact and started reconvening yet. Lacroix started to think about how to get out of his job at Skyview for the semester, and briefly amused himself trying to think of how outlandish an excuse he could pull off.

"Everyone in position?" Mal's voice came over the Linkers. Everyone was, in fact, in position, and said as much before settling back to waiting.

Lacroix took a couple of deep breaths to steady his nerves, checked his gear, and started scanning the street again, alone with his own thoughts. This was the first time in years that he found himself under cover, a rifle in his hand, waiting for a

powerful enemy to come to do battle. It was different this time - the enemy was only one man - but last time he'd had thousands of his own friends alongside him.

For the briefest of instants, his view of Dry Well changed. He was no longer on the ground floor of an abandoned, dusty duplex, gazing into a deserted, desert village from a long-broken window in complete silence; he was instead leaning on the firing step of a snow-filled trench, a cliff face behind him, the uncountable enemy marching towards him with their battle hymns competing with the howling wind in a contest of volume. The image was gone almost before he noticed it, but notice it he did.

Taking another deep breath, Lacroix tried to stop the shakes again.

Dee distractedly drummed her fingers against the stock of her rifle. It was one of her personal Jihad-tech weapons, what had started life as a TRES railgun action but had been reconfigured to be enough lighter and smaller that she could actually carry it. Barely. Probably overkill against people, even a Maenad, but that beat the alternative. Damocles was waiting with a scoped M-14, a more traditional choice, and between them was a belt fed machine gun set up around sandbags... because neither actually expected things to go smoothly. For similar reasons, the interior of the building had been sown with booby traps; they were on the roof of one of the taller buildings and should have had a decent view around.

In most aspects, this wasn't the first time Rens had been in such a position. Crouched next to a window on the shadow side of a building, overlooking an open area, with a sniper rifle on its tripod next to you, looking on and waiting for your target to stray into your sights so you could shoot him — while it would hopefully never become a comfortable feeling, it was at least familiar, like an ill-fitting garment that you've had to wear so often you've gotten used to how it chafes.

Of course, all the other times, the target in question hadn't been one of the most respected Jihaddi, much less his one time supreme commanding officer, and he didn't much like the prospect of-

*Stop that.*

Rens mentally glared at his partner. *I know. He's gone over the edge, killed who knows how many good people, would have managed to do the same to us if Mal hadn't managed to port us away... It's just that..*

Shad's mental "tone" was as derisive as he'd ever heard the dragon get during their internal dialogues. *It's just that you're STILL thinking that somehow there's a way to save what's left of him from what he's become, and underneath all your cynicism you're too much of an idealist to want to, as you call it, "give up on him".*

*Dammit, he's one of our own, or at least he was! If there's any way to get him back, we owe-*

Shad's "voice" went cold, flat. *There isn't.*

*Dammit, you don't know that!* Rens raged.

*Yes, I do - and so do you. From the debriefing, Nemesis tried his hardest to snap Owsen out of it, and nearly got gutted in the process. And you're insulting most of the rest of the Maenads if you believe that none of THEM cared enough for, as you call it, "one of their own" to try, and look where it got them. Who died and appointed you God? Who anointed you with the destiny to succeed where they failed?*

*I... No. You're right. I just wish you weren't.*

*... So do I.*

And behind a window in an empty building in Dry Well, two beings sharing one body crouched and prepared to shoot someone they at one time had called "friend".

**FORMER SITE OF THE JIHAD PRAXEUM VENEFICUS  
PENNSYLVANIA  
6:00 PM LOCAL TIME**

Katze stepped through the gate behind Mal and blinked in the sunlight. A part of her wondered offhand where the campus she was so familiar with had gone before her memories caught up with sense impressions. But there was more to be done than boggling over how little had changed at the site since she was last there.

Two things were paramount over everything else — find the spell remnants and clean it up if possible and at the same time keep Owsen believing that the sword Mal carried was the real one. Given what had transpired at the enchanting, Katze didn't trust the false blade enough to let up on it, but it would definitely make the first task harder. The two tasks together seemed much like trying to juggle chainsaws while doing fine watchwork, she thought, but what had to be done was going to be done.

Between those two tasks, she had to hope that Mal could hold Owsen off while she tried to work. And it had to be done as fast as possible on top of it. She set a small part of her concentration to keeping an eye on the enchantments on the sword, and then set to work on the spell remnants.

It was really the worst possible news. Yes, the spell still had a remnant, which she had feared, but it was just garbled enough that she couldn't tell offhand if there was still useable information there. Yet there was something dynamic happening in the middle of it. Katze frowned. That was unusual.

She dismissed her concentration and blinked at Mal. He seemed to be concerned about something else, and she hated to give him yet more bad news. "It's hard to say what's still there," she said.

He nodded. "And Owsen brought company."

Katze turned slightly, and looked over her shoulder. "Well, fuck," she said, wondering just how she could stop a Lyran. Probably couldn't, but they had to try. "I'll do what I can."

She concentrated again and noted that dynamic bit had changed from the last moment. If she didn't know any better, she'd almost say that somebody was incom-

ing. But the only person who would do that would be...but Pupp wouldn't. She'd told him not to. But it was definitely an incoming transport spell.

She frowned and traced the new lines of the incoming spell. They all congregated right about...there. Where the outgoing lines roughly converged. That couldn't be a coincidence. Which meant...

Katze sighed, released everything she was concentrating on, and bolted for the convergence point. He would — and he was. And all she could hope for was to beat Owsen to him.

### **Incoming wormhole!**

Mal blinked. "*What?!*" he demanded out loud.

**There's an incoming planar gate forming near your position!** Min's voice sounded through his lace. **I don't know who it is, tracing now.**

Mal turned to look at Katze, but she was already gone.

Owsen and Thel'Akhai felt the prickling sensation of the portal opening at the same time. They turned, Owsen gleeful while the Lyran maintained his bland composure, and saw the shimmering bubble of the portal coalesce into a human shape.

Thel'Akhai held his position while Owsen took off, running at full speed towards the figure now standing only bare yards away.

Puppeter felt the last bits of the transfer spell drain away and sighed wistfully for the world he'd left behind. He hated to leave, but if the gang needed the Slayer, then he had no other choice, did he?

Pupp hefted the Barney-Slayer and looked around. He was going to have to get in touch with everybody, and the nearest phonebooth was a good walk away from the old campus. Oblivious to the charging man in black directly behind him, Pupp squared his shoulders and prepared for a hike.

Owsen charged, dark Slayer held high. The call of the light drowned out all other sounds. The robed fool in front of him had the object of his desires, and now nothingnothingNOTHING would get between him and his prize anymore...

Mal snarled the vilest curse he could think of and drew his X-Pistol. His line of sight was terrible, and any attack was sure to draw attention, but there was nothing to be done about it. Gritting his teeth, he lined up on Owsen and let off a burst.

Pupp took one step towards the old access road when his world suddenly went topsy-turvy and he hit the ground rather hard. Stunned, it took him a second to realize that he'd been tackled and thrown to the ground - rather hard, in fact

- by a girl. Some small part of Pupp's brain noted that this was the first time in a while that he'd been tackled by a girl - Unseen University tended to discourage such behavior on the part of students and faculty - while the rest of it went blank with shock at the identity of his tackler.

"Katzel!?" he blurted.

"You *idiot!*" that worthy individual hissed, her face a mask of wrath. Before Pupp could come up with any rebuttal, she grabbed him, grabbed the sword, and they vanished.

Owsen skidded to a halt as his quarry vanished in front of him. He snarled in frustration, the song of his sword singing in his ears louder than he had ever heard it. He must have it had to have it wasn't going to let anything get in his way of hunting it down — when a bolt of plasma scarred the ground before his feet, setting the grass on fire. He turned, smiling.

Mal charged, waving the faux Barney-Slayer over his head while firing blindly towards Owsen and his group. Skidding to a halt on the grass, he drew his arm back and flung the sword at Owsen, sending three feet of sharp steel in a glittering arc right at the former Maenad's head. Owsen, for his part, seemed unconcerned, swatting the spinning blade out of the air with a casual sweep of his Slayer. The sword shattered on contact with the dark blade, spraying fragments all over the soft Pennsylvania soil.

"Nice try," Owsen noted absently, then grinned. "Now, let's talk about the retrieval of my property." He stalked forward, purple flames bursting to life on his skin. Mal held his ground, readying his guns as if preparing to make a fight. Owsen could see the determination in his opponent's eyes. Then, he did - to Owsen's experience - a most remarkable thing.

He ran.

A disk of blue light opened up behind Mal, who lunged backwards and through it before Owsen could react. Owsen charged, but the portal snapped shut seconds before he reached it. He skidded to a halt, snarling at the empty air. Owsen could feel the sword now, feel its presence on this plane like he never had been able to before, so finding them was going to be no great difficulty.

Owsen grinned. More fools they, to think that they could escape the Scourge. He concentrated, focusing the power he'd been given towards a goal. He may not have been able to open holes in space, but he could move quickly. With a roar of purple fire, Owsen lifted off the ground and streaked westward, homing in on the faint call of the Barney-Slayer.

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## 24: *Line In The Sand*

DRY WELL, NEVADA  
MONDAY, APRIL 12, 2004  
3:07 PM LOCAL TIME

The portal opened in the center of town, just like Mal said it would. The waiting Jihaddi tensed, weapons ready, waiting for Owsen to appear and then open up. A nice and simple takedown. The portal rippled, the target was coming through—

**HOLD FIRE! HOLD FIRE!**

—and instead of Owsen, Mal tumbled out of the light, which cut off as he rolled in the dust. Mal popped up, checked to make sure that yes, he was not getting shot into tiny fragments, and then looked out at the sniper-laden main street. “Change of plans, folks,” he said, his neural lace carrying through to the Jihadlinkers. “Digest version: Pupp’s here, he’s got the sword and Owsen knows it. Ah.” Mal broke off as an abashed Puppeteer appeared in the street, accompanied by a furious Katze carrying the Barney-Slayer. “Okay, Owsen’ll be tracking the sword now, so he’s on his way. We can put this to our advantage. Pupp, get some ranged attacks ready and move to assist Aris,” he pointed towards the building where the dragon was stationed, “Katze, hand over the shiny.” Katze hesitated fractionally, then shrugged and gave the sword to Mal. “Great. Now, find a nice quiet spot and get your bow ready. Here’s the plan: I’ll use the sword to keep Owsen in one spot, and when I say

ready, you guys blast him.

“Places, people! Owsen can’t be that far behind. Let’s -move!-”

Owsen flew through the sky, a purple-tinged comet of pure rage. No longer caring if anybody saw him or felt the power he wielded, he flew on, willing the purple fire surrounding him to move still faster. The ground blurred as he passed the sound barrier and continued to increase his velocity. The image of the Barney-Slayer burned in his mind, the presence of the mystical blade guiding him, the urge to combine the swords and summon the Scourge blinding him to everything else.

Owsen could feel the sword’s presence directly ahead of him, down in the desert. He shifted his course, not bothering to reduce his speed...

Above the long-abandoned test town of Dry Well, a purple comet appeared. It arced through the sky, accelerating, until it hit the ground right in the center of Main Street with a flash and a terrible roar. The shockwave of the comet’s landing caused the buildings surrounding the epicenter to crumble, filling the air with dust. A figure stepped out of the cloud of dust and debris, purple fire arcing off his limbs, a mad glow in his eyes.

“WHERE IS IT?” Owsen bellowed, “WHERE IS WHAT’S MINE? GIVE IT TO ME!”

There was no response from the silent buildings. Owsen snarled, and cast a bolt of purple energy into an abandoned ice-cream parlor, rendering it into a pile of desiccated splinters. “WHERE?!” Owsen yelled again.

This time, there was an answer. Mal stepped out of a building half a block away. He was idly swinging the silvery blade of the Slayer at his side as he marched out to the center of town and faced Owsen.

“Looking for this?” asked Mal.

Owsen stared at his opponent. “You... I know you, but you’re not a Maenad..” His eyes widened slightly in recognition, then narrowed. “Of course. The scientist. One of DeadLock’s friends. What was your org? ‘Evil Geniuses Something Something.’” Owsen grinned his happy grin. “Consider me impressed that you’d face me like this. Doesn’t matter, I suppose. You’re just as *dead* no matter what you were. Now give me my sword, and I’ll make this as painless as possible.”

Mal grinned a happy grin of his own, and flicked his wrist. The Barney-Slayer glowed blue and vanished out of his hand. “Sorry,” said Mal, “but it doesn’t belong to you anymore.”

Owsen shook his head. “Oh, you shouldn’t have done that,” he said sadly. “You really shouldn’t have. Now I’m going to have to rip you apart, piece by piece, until you bring it back. That’s the *hard* way. Why couldn’t you have done this the *easy* way?” Owsen swung his dark blade in a mocking engage salute, then charged at Mal.

Mal stood his ground, and just as Owsen prepared to run him through, he stepped smoothly aside, ducking the blade. Calling his quarterstaff out of hyperpark, he shifted into a defensive stance as Owsen whirled and lashed out.



The'l'Akhai glanced up sharply from his scrying trance. The Herald had arrived at his destination. Once he had stopped moving, The'l'Akhai was able to determine the location to send himself and his... reinforcements.

The masked wizard gathered the not-inconsiderable energies afforded to a Lyran of the seventh circle and cast the teleport spell, translating himself and his charges to the Herald's location.

The Lyran reinforcements appeared with a shimmering effect on the outskirts of the immediate combat zone. In the center, the Herald and one of the accursed yi'khadiji were engaged in battle. The'l'Akhai could *feel* the other yi'khadiji scattered about the area, waiting for the right moment. A negligible gesture imparted the information to his servitors and Saetherian soldiers, and without a word they scattered, hunting for their targets.

The'l'Akhai's orders were to eliminate the yi'khadiji, recover the swords and then reopen the road to Lyra. If the Herald was too badly damaged in the fight, or proved reluctant to part with the blades, then that was simply too bad.

Kirk Felton crouched on one of the rooftops watching Mal and Owsen clash, sniper rifle ready and waiting for the signal. The Maenad noted that it didn't seem terribly sporting to fill a brother's head full of high-velocity depleted uranium. But fuck it, sometimes you've got to do what you've got to do. As he pondered this, Owsen slipped an attempt by Mal to sweep him off his legs, and shot forward with a vicious lunge. For the briefest of seconds, Owsen was off-balance and completely vulnerable.

Felton saw his chance, and his finger tightened on the trigger...

...when the wind shifted and brought him new data. Felton inhaled sharply as he recognized the scent.

There was a Lyran here.

It was too much to bear. He had no choice but to give in to the overwhelming force of instinct, the fire in his veins that threatened to rip him apart. The rifle slipped from his fingers as he slumped backward, writhing violently as the throes of the holy warp-spasm contorted his body. The sound of his Feral howl echoed across the faux rooftops.

Perfect.

It wasn't a word Rens liked to use in this context, but the conditions were as close to such as he'd ever had when making a shot. Owsen was standing with his back towards him as Malaclypse taunted him with the Slayer. No time left for niceties. Maenads were tough almost beyond comprehension; any hit that didn't kill him instantly would be brushed off, and people - his friends - would wind up dead.

He took a deep breath and concentrated, lining up the crosshairs on his scope with the back of Owsen's head, held his breath, finger tightening on the trigger...

*DODGE*

The imperative from his partner went through Rens' mind like a thunderbolt and he threw himself away from his position, rolling across the floor and getting to his feet just as a sword slashed down into the floor where he'd just lain, neatly bisecting the rifle.

There wasn't any time to think, however, as a second sword came sweeping toward his neck in a flat horizontal arc and well-honed reflexes took over. He ducked under the slash, trapped the arm holding the sword and threw its owner to the ground before taking a step back and studying his opponents. It was dark in the room, and while that hadn't posed a problem to him in years the dim glow coming from his opponents' eyes suggested it wouldn't pose a problem for them either, which was an unwelcome surprise.

Rens took another step to move out of the center of his two assailants, noting from the corner of his eyes that the one he'd thrown had managed to roll with the throw and keep a grip on his sword without hurting himself.

*Obviously Tang wasn't exaggerating when he described those guys he and Lacroix tangoed with. Equally obviously, they've got more of them. And we didn't even think about it. Stupid, stupid, STUPID.*

His standing opponent remained where he was with his sword in ready position between them, obviously waiting for his partner to get back to his feet before engaging an opponent with reflexes this good.

*And stupid they most certainly aren't. Don't even THINK about trying them on bare-handed, Rens.*

*No room to transform either. Time to burn a trump.*

Even as he responded to his mental partner, Rens flexed his left hand in a very specific pattern, which was picked up the microcircuitry in his glove that sent a mild tingle to the nervous receptors in his palm to indicate it had received the command and was ready for retrieval. Rens studied the shifting sensations while the hyper-space storage/retrieval system cycled through the list of items he'd prepared for just such an emergency. Pistols would be useless - at best he'd be able to shoot one of them while the other ran him through.

*therefore—*

He dove to the side just in time to barely dodge the sword strike that came slashing from above, kicked the wielder against the inside of the leg for good measure, rolled away from the other's followup, and then his left hand closed around the sheath of his katana as the retrieval system pulled it out of hyperpark.

There wasn't time to draw - yet - so he caught the first enemy full on the solar plexus with the pommel, eliciting a "whoof!" and a backwards stagger but nothing more - definitely armored - then reversed and rammed the butt of his sheath into the second one's groin. That worthy squeaked and went down on a knee, and yet became now as Rens took a long step forward to get inside his first opponent's guard, ducking under the incoming slash and unsheathing his own sword in a reverse draw

that dragged the cutting edge along a diagonal path across his enemy's torso, cutting through his armor and shallowly through his flesh, from right hip to left shoulder, before laying the back along his forearm and reversing the arc in a horizontal cut at neck height, slashing through both jugulars in a single stroke and finishing off with a kick to cause the body to fall away from him instead of on top of him, then half-turned and stabbed behind him in an underhand low arc, burying his katana in his other opponent's stomach until the hilt-guard ran flush with his sternum.

Time returned to normal as Shad looked over his shoulder, meeting his erstwhile opponent's gaze as that worthy started realizing what had happened and that he was dying, and feeling the weight on his blade increase as the dying man's legs failed to support him any longer. He pulled his blade back out, reversed and decapitated his foe with a single strike, letting the body topple to the floor as he shook the blood of his katana and resheathed it.

*Only two? I think I'm insulted.*

*They'd have had us if you hadn't warned me at the last instant. Don't get overconfident.*

*... True. We'd better ca-*

Shad's internal monologue was interrupted by the twin noises a collapsing building and the shrieking roar of a Saethrian. Of three of them, he mentally corrected himself as he heard Killjoy's answering growl.

*Shit.*

Fortunately, the roof was only one stairway higher.

Killjoy stood next to the second-story window across the street from Felton, his bazooka held in the ready position. He'd picked up the rather ungainly weapon from the cache Mal had dumped here earlier, and held onto it despite suggestions from the others to get a different weapon. The expert system that ran KJ's mind had a fondness for the overkill, so it kept the bazooka.

As the battle in the street raged, KJ waited patiently for the right moment to tag Owsen with an anti-tank weapon. Suddenly, KJ's brain sensed... something happening elsewhere. Something big, and something *bad*.

KJ slung the bazooka over his shoulder, crossed to the opposite side of the building, and silently exited through another window.

In another building across the way from where Mal and Owsen were fighting, Aris Merquoni and Puppeteer were waiting, weapons drawn. Well, Aris had her trademark gunblade drawn; Puppeteer wasn't one for weapons per se. His magical abilities made him a fairly formidable opponent in a scrape, but other than that he liked to consider himself just this guy, y'know.

Still, the erstwhile mage was wondering what his role in this thing really *was*. So far he'd done nothing more than screw up (Pupp was expecting to get a serious chewing out from Katze, to say nothing of the others, when this was all over.) and

his role in Mal's plan seemed dubious, at best. Ranged magical attack wasn't really his thing, and if Owsen had magical backup...

Wait.

Something pricked at the back of Pupp's mind. Magical backup. If they were right behind Owsen, then that meant bad things were afoot. And if he could stop them... well, then maybe he'd get to save the day yet. Pupp got up from his position near the window and began moving towards the rear exit, hoping Aris wouldn't notice.

Naturally, Aris turned at just the right moment to see Pupp sidling towards the door. "Pupp?" she whispered.

"I have to go," he replied. "Something's wrong."

"Bwah?"

"Something's not right here, I need to figure it out. Be right back."

Pupp reached the door and stepped through. Aris glanced back at the battle on the street, then ran for the door herself, cursing mercurial magicians all the way. Barreling out the door, she saw Pupp carefully making his way down the side of the building.

"Pupp!" Aris yelled, "Get back here, dammit!" She dashed over to the truant mage and grabbed the sleeve of his robe. "We've-"

Aris didn't get to finish explaining what "we've" was. At just that second, a group of five heavily-armed men rounded the corner. The group of Jihaddi and Lyran servants stared blankly at each other for a few seconds, then with a yell of something incomprehensible the five servitors brought their weapons to bear on Aris and Pupp.

Aris yelped and threw a fireball at the group, hitting a servitor near the center of the group square and causing him to burst into flames. As the servitors reacted to this new development, Aris grabbed Pupp and hauled him back behind the corner.

"Nice job on the one guy," Pupp noted.

Aris scowled. "I was aiming for the guy in front, dammit."

Something shifted in the wind, or perhaps it was a shift in the ether that Tangaroa felt. He tensed and raised a finger, ready to cast a seeker spell to watch his back, before hesitating. That could give away his position and the plan to Owsen, assuming that Owsen couldn't already sense him and the others. Given that what was left of Owsen's mind seemed to be focused for now on the sole task of retrieving the Barney-Slayer, it would be best to avoid the possibility of revealing the snipers' existence through casting magic, so Tangaroa performed reconnaissance the old-fashioned way. He turned around and looked out the back window.

He almost wished he hadn't.

Tangaroa dropped his rifle, text-relayed an SOS over his JihadLinker, and cast as many seekers as he could. Then he jumped out the back and cast a flame sword in one hand to prepare for the fight, leaving the other hand free to cast a shield or grab

his pistol if he needed to. The profile of the nearest Saethrian grew larger as it came closer. And came closer. And kept coming. Tangaroa shivered as he remembered that his earlier tangle with one of these creatures had been with a juvenile one...

Then there were footsteps, of several people approaching fast from around the corner. Friend or foe? There weren't supposed to be any other snipers positioned for a few score yards around. Best to assume foe.

"Yi'khadiji?" Tang asked in a poor approximation of a Lyran, using one of the few words he'd picked up from the servitor prisoners, that only because it was itself an approximation of an English word.

"Ni'kha?" came the confused response, and the footsteps kept coming. Tang glanced at the Saethrians to determine they were still a few seconds off, drew his pistol with his free hand, and charged around the corner. The risky gambit worked, as to his fortune the group of servitors was smaller than he expected and he caught them by surprise, quickly and permanently incapacitating them with his fire and a single gunshot.

Tangaroa turned around in time to throw up a shield to block the first Saeth to leap down upon him, canceling his fire spell to do so. The creature slammed into the shield, its limbs and extremities wrapping around and brushing against Tangaroa, but it was too disoriented from the impact to use them to effect. Tang pistol-whipped it in the jaw as its head jolted forward from the collision, then shot it in the mouth, dropping the shield as the creature recoiled backwards.

Jogging backwards to open up some space, Tang raised his gun and fired two shots at the next Saeth. The flying alien flinched slightly as the bullets hit and adjusted its dive to compensate. Noting the uselessness of that, Tang dropped his pistol and fired a force beam into the Saeth's face, then adjusted the attack to hit lower on the beast's belly. This lifted the diving Saethrian, causing it to overshoot him and crash into a building down the way as it tried to turn around.

Meanwhile, the first Saeth was starting to get up, spitting fluid from its wounded mouth. Tang rushed forward and cast his flame sword spell, plunging the fiery weapon into the skull of the fallen Saethrian. The unharmed creature whipped out tentacles at Tangaroa's ankles. Tang sliced off the appendages before it could drag him down, then recast the fire into a thinner spear of energy and shoved it into the Saeth's eye. As the beast retracted its arms, Tang jumped on its back and rushed forward across it, ordering his seekers to track the other creature.

The beast didn't appreciate having its eye scorched out or being used as a carpet, and squirmed to throw Tangaroa off. Tang stumbled slightly as he landed, but kept to his feet as the Saethrian rose and leapt at him. He threw up a shield for it to smack its face into again and swung his sword at one of the creature's extremities. It reeled backwards as the sword seared into a forearm, giving Tang the opportunity to run around it. He felt the seekers behind him tell him that the other Saethrian had gotten up and was charging.

Tangaroa dashed forward, scrambled around a corner, and dissipated his sword

to swing himself through an open first-floor window. With both Saethrians now on one side of him and some time as they tore into the building to reach him, he cast fire swords in both hands and merged the two columns of flame together into a single weapon white-hot at its core.

Mal did his level best to keep Owsen focused on him as he backed off into the street, biding his time until he was right in the center of the fire zone. A quick glance around assured Mal that he was almost at the right spot, and Owsen's madness kept him from noticing that he was being set up. Mal mentally thumbed open a communications link on his neural lace. **NOW! Hit him with everything you've got!**

Silence.

**Um, guys? Crossfire? Where's my killzone?**

"Something the matter?" Owsen asked mockingly as he pressed his attack.

"Nothing I can't handle," Mal lied smoothly, while trying to find out where the hell his backup went. **Where are you!? Respond, dammit!**

**We've got problems,** replied Delgado, the designated spotter for the operation. **Owsen's backup from Pennsy just showed up! We're trying to keep them away from you, but things are kinda hectic right now...**

**Acknowledged,** Mal sent back, **I'll try and keep Owsen busy until you've dealt with his minions. Good luck.** "Okay," he said out loud, "time for Plan B."

Owsen quirked an eyebrow as the two clashed. "Oh, this should be precious," he remarked. "And what, pray tell, is Plan B?"

Mal smirked. "Well, it's THIS!" As he said it, Mal parried Owsen's swing, knocked his sword hand out of position, stepped inside Owsen's reach, and drove his foot straight into Owsen's crotch.

Owsen staggered back, bellowing in pain, and Mal scrambled for some distance, scattering miniature landmines behind him as a deterrent. It wasn't much, of a deterrent, really, Mal thought bleakly, but at least it was \*something\*. He ducked into the shell of an office building and waited for his next shot.

Lacroix took a deep breath and stared down the sight of his rifle. A short distance away, Mal and Owsen were locked in a furious duel, nearly at the killzone the group had established when they set up.

Then things had gone wrong.

Very early in the duel, it was obvious that Owsen had brought help, as the sounds of scattered firefights and alien screams sounded across the town. Torn between trying to help out his companions and staying on the mission, Lacroix chose to stay focused on Mal. As Owsen came closer to the spot he'd ranged on his XRifle, Lacroix began to tighten his finger on the weapon's trigger. One way or another, this would be settled shortly, and he could go to help his friends. Lacroix's 'Linker, close at hand, suddenly beeped with the tone of an incoming message. "This is it,"

he thought, lining up his shot.

Movement in the storefront across the street, where there weren't any Jihaddi. Letting survival instincts take over, Lacroix glanced at the movement to be sure. As soon as he turned his head, a stutter of automatic weapons fire began punching into the wall uncomfortably close to him. Cursing, Lacroix ducked and rolled over to the next window, popping up long enough to fire a short burst back.

"Um? Guys? Crossfire? Where's -" Mal's voice came over the linker. It was interrupted by a second burst of gunfire, which punched through the wall where Lacroix had been, shattering the communicator. Across the street, a constant suppressive fire was being kept up. Worse, it was coming in what sounded like phases; there were at least four of them over there, leapfrogging their way towards Lacroix's building to make him keep his head down.

Cursing a blue streak in French, Lacroix began working his way towards the back door of the room he was in, throwing a grenade out the window to slow them down. As soon as he heard the muffled explosion, he got up and bolted for the stairs, trying to get some high ground.

After about a minute of quick searching, KJ located the source of his driving intuition. There were a full dozen of them, all armed with a handful of pistols and assorted melee weapons. They tensed, completely surprised by the sight of the immense man bearing down on them. The Lyran servitors recovered quickly, and with a blood-curdling alien battle cry charged towards KJ.

For his part, KJ was utterly unconcerned. He carefully unslung the bazooka from his shoulder, but instead of bringing it around into firing position, he got a firm grip on the rear end of the tube, bringing the bazooka into a position more suited for a baseball bat than a rocket-propelled weapon.

The first servitor to reach KJ, instead of running the Jihaddi through like he'd expected, got a face full of bazooka instead. The impact lifted the servitor off his feet and whirled him around to collapse in the dirt face-down in a profound state of unconsciousness. The other servitors fared little better, as KJ and his impromptu weapon battered their way through the ranks of his enemies.

The ones with more sense than battle lust stood off and tried to bring the giant down with their pistols. The Lyran agents were not, it must be said, the best shots out there; despite extensive training in the arts of Lyran magic and tactics, firearms were not something they were well versed in. Still, despite the deficit in their training, hitting a target that was over six feet tall at almost point blank range was relatively easy.

Unfortunately, the pistol shots didn't seem to do much more to their target than annoy him. Despite a series of hits to the torso that would have brought any other human down, KJ continued to swing his makeshift club around, battering the handful of servitors still functional enough to charge him.

The fight, such as it was, ended up being rather short. When KJ filed to drop

after being shot multiple times, any advantage the servitors had quickly evaporated. One by one, each servant fell to the might of KJ's impromptu meelee-adapted bazooka. Three frantic minutes of startled exclamations in Lyran and muffled clanging sounds later, KJ lowered his bazooka and glanced around at the ring of broken enemies scattered around him. "Huh, that it?" he wondered.

In answer to his question, the building to his left exploded in a shower of wooden splinters and masonry. From the cloud of dust and rubble emerged a trio of giant, tentacled serpents, each tentacle grasping a different weapon. The serpents slithered out of the destroyed building and each unfurled a pair of monstroid bat wings. Thus arrayed for battle, the Saetherians roared, waiting for their target to make the next move.

KJ's reaction to this was, like every other reaction KJ made, short, succinct and to the point:

"Aw, *crap*."

Back behind another row of houses, Tangaroa continued his solo duel with the two Saethrians. The beasts' aggressive charges were easy for Tang to anticipate and avoid or deflect with a well placed shield or force beam, and with the array of seekers he'd cast around him, he didn't need to keep an eye on both of them or watch his back. Tangaroa wasn't letting the Saethrians get close enough often enough for either of them to score strong hits on the other, but the otherworldly monsters were steadily running out of wings, appendages, and facial features.

Though he was starting to get physically tired from the constant dodging and running, Tangaroa wasn't starting to feel short of magical energy at all, even while holding and casting several spells at once with more effort than he'd spent in years, if ever. He started to wonder how long he could keep up the magic and whether he would run out of power in a slow depletion or sudden stop, then forced the thought out of his mind.

The Saethrians, for their part, were starting to slow down their attacks and consider different angles of attack as their target wasn't going down as easily as he looked like he ought to. A badly wounded one was now actively holding back, limping around the edge of the battle and hissing while the other took on Tang. That one started to lunge forward and found itself scabbling in the dirt, going nowhere as Tangaroa force-beamed it head-on.

The badly wounded one picked this time to attack. It swiped at one of Tangaroa's seeker spells as it arced through the air, disrupting the small ball of energy out of existence but also notifying Tangaroa of its exact position. Tang dropped the force beam and concentrated more power into his magic sword, which had weakened as he cast the beam. Having chosen this tactic for his defense, he got out of the way of the simple ballistics of a giant worm falling at him and brushed his sword along the beast's side, burning a another shallow furrow in its plating. A shield cast at the Saethrian's side kept it from then rolling over and crushing him, but as a side effect



glued his feet to the floor and weakened his sword at the second Saethrian leaped at him. Tang dropped the shield and dived out of the way as it crashed into the Saeth on the ground.

The Saethrian rolled from the impact to find itself facing Tangaroa, and sprung forward to attack again. Tangaroa hurriedly threw as much energy as he could muster into his fire sword in the short time after he scrambled to his feet and charged to meet the Saethrian, dodging aside at the last second as he held his sword out to attack. The sword cut a deep slice in the Saethrian's face before the massive beast's body brushed against Tangaroa's shoulder. Tang spun as he was hit and lost control of the sword, which reverted to a simple arc of loose flame spinning around his body and dissipating. As the Saethrian wrapped a tentacle around Tang, he regained control of the sword, violently freed himself, and counterattacked, running down the creature's side and chopping off its limbs.

A tentacle caught Tangaroa from behind and lifted him into the air. He quickly chopped it away and saw the other Saethrian's jaws snap inches above him as gravity dragged him to the ground. The creature lunged for its lunch again and bit its jaws into Tang's shield, then reared back as its face was suddenly engulfed in a wave of magic fire. Tang crawled to his feet and backed off defensively, glancing up and quickly jumping aside another attack.

The one he'd run the gantlet on was doing the Saethrian equivalent of whimpering and crawling away on its remaining legs, but the other was pressing on Tang and had the stumbling Warrior at a serious disadvantage. Worse, Tang's seekers were gone from loss of concentration but he was in such distress that he didn't bother to watch his back in case the badly wounded Saethrian decided to attack again.

Dodge, dodge, strike. The Saethrian ignored the strike and kept going, whipping its tail at Tang. Tang blocked the attack with a shield and seared a minor gouge in its tail, then both turned to face each other head on and attack. Tang's sword came close enough to the creature's remaining eye that it reared back from the heat, affording Tangaroa the time to fall sideways a few steps and cast another handful of seekers.

The Saethrian with the singed tail spun and leaped at Tang. Tang ran forward under it and raised a shield above his head for it to land on, then thrust his flame sword up into its body. As that didn't do much, he concentrated and increased the flame's power until the Saethrian shuddered in pain, then he dropped the spells and rolled away before the other one could hit him. The wounded Saeth collapsed to the dirt and didn't make any effort to get up.

Tangaroa now faced down the last Saethrian, which climbed over its fallen comrade and charged at him. Tang sent the seekers to watch his back in case anything else showed up, then turned to the enemy in front of him. Down to a one on one fight against an already severely wounded enemy, he fought this one closer in and more aggressively, concentrating power into his attacks and burning one gash after another in its extraterrestrial chitin until enough attacks went through to bring it

down.

Then two of the seekers behind Tang bounced away from a sudden wave of magic appearing between them, probably a Lyran teleporting in to back up his pets. Tang spun and swung.

Katze phased into existence and shrieked as Tang nearly took her head off.

"Oh!" Tangaroa quickly cancelled his fire sword spell mid-swing and glanced around to make sure there were no more enemy. "Sorry about that."

Still in too much shock to say anything, Katze put a hand to her neck, which had been warmed a bit but was not damaged.

Tang watched with concern. "You're okay? Good."

"You almost killed me!" Katze blurted out.

"Sorry," Tang apologized. "I thought you were a hostile." Hearing gunfire elsewhere around town, he started heading out. "There are more of them out there?"

Seeing one of the Saethrians rise to attack, Katze raised her bow and fired, sending the arrow through its heart by way of a hole Tang had earlier punched in its armour.

"Thanks," Tang said, looking back. "Maybe we should finish these ones off first."

Three small, blue, glowing balls of energy sped along about five feet above the dusty streets of the empty city, splitting and dashing off in three directions as they came to an intersection. A tall bowsman suddenly blinked into existence on the top of a corner building, then disappeared just as quickly.

Katze crouched and peered down the streets from her newest high vantage point. There were no enemy in sight other than the ones pinned down a few blocks away. She tapped out a linker message to Tang and teleported to another rooftop closer to the action.

Tangaroa ran through the intersection and stopped to lean against a wall to catch his breath. He put down the rifle he'd lifted from a servitor's body and flipped on his JihadLinker. Trusting Katze's report that the streets were safe, he cancelled the seekers so as not to alert the enemy and continued on towards the sounds of battle.

Katze notched an arrow into her bow, aimed for the back of one of the servitors, and waited. After a while, she nervously glanced around to see that there was no one behind her, especially to be sure that there weren't any of those giant flying things in the air anymore. It took another half a minute before the rifle shot rang out and a servitor fell over to report that Tang was finally in position. Katze quickly readjusted her aim, fired, drew another arrow, and continued her relatively silent surprise attack, the two of them quickly cutting down the doubly flanked enemies.

Then Tang stopped firing for some reason. A few survivors noticed the arrows, found her, and aimed their guns in her direction. Katze quickly ported down to the street behind the building before they could fire.

Tangaroa cursed at his jammed rifle and felt for his pistol, but he'd dropped it

in the fight with the Saethrians. He threw a force beam at one servitor aiming at him, but other servitors took aim as the target struggled through it. He saw others aiming off to the side and up before he spun behind the corner, moments before the bullets arrived. Katze was in trouble. He cast several seekers and larger energy balls and sent them towards the enemy, using the seekers to guide the larger balls around those approaching his position and into the servitors who were standing further back, harassing them away from aiming at Katze.

Lacroix surveyed his new vantage point on the third storey of the building, firing back across the street at his opponents while moving from window to window. It looked like there were at least six of them after all. Three were still across the street, firing at him from two different windows; one was lying in the street, victim of Lacroix's grenade and very dead.

And, from the sound of it, two of them were in the building, pounding their way up the stairs.

Nice one, Sep.

Lacroix took his two remaining grenades and threw them through the door of the upstairs office. They bounced down the stairs and exploded, spectacularly loud in the cramped quarters. Voices shouted downstairs - two of them, sounding more affronted than injured, dammit - and they began moving for the staircase.

Remembering the wounded "spongin" from the cottage outside Blanca, Lacroix lowered his rifle and fired a long burst through the floor, hoping the building wouldn't burn too readily. A shout downstairs hinted that he'd gotten one, but two sets of footsteps continued to pound up the stairs. Getting out of line of sight of the windows, Lacroix took aim at the doorway and waited.

These guys were good, but the first one screwed up for the first and last time. He didn't know what hit him as he charged into the room, only to turn left when he should have turned right to survey it. A burst of rifle fire cut him almost in half and he dropped. Lacroix waited for the second one to come in, but he didn't.

His first sign of his other enemy was a thump sound on the wall, uncomfortably close to his head. On reflex, he dove for the opposite corner of the room and rolled behind a desk just as a breaching charge exploded, collapsing a large part of the wall near where he stood. Before the dust cleared, the other "spongin" charged into the room, assault rifle at the hip and blazing. He loosed a long burst through the room at chest height and then stopped, briefly puzzled. Slowly, he stalked through the remnants of the room, trying to find Lacroix as he fumbled to reload his rifle.

As he came towards the desk, Lacroix began raising his rifle to fire. His target noticed too soon, though, and threw a kick at the rifle as he snarled something in Lyran. Lacroix's shots went wide into the ceiling as he lost his grip on the weapon. The Lyran minion quickly threw another kick, this time at Lacroix's face, but he caught the boot and rolled, twisting. Losing his balance, the minion stumbled and fell headlong to the floor, his own rifle clattering out of reach.

Lacroix tried to get to his feet, but was met with a third flailing kick, which *did* connect with his face this time. Knocked back into a kneeling position, briefly stunned, Lacroix gave his opponent time to get back to his feet. Snarling something in Lyran again, he drew a long, angry-looking knife from his belt as he rose. Lacroix blinked, stumbled up himself, and reached for his own, only to realize it was downstairs.

"Figures," he grouched, and charged the minion.

His opponent was good; almost too good. Sidestepping his attempt at a grapple, he swung with the knife, scoring a deep cut on Lacroix's left arm. Cursing, Lacroix closed, grabbed the servitor's knife hand by the elbow, and threw a wild punch with his free hand. This time he connected solidly. The minion reeled back towards the wall, dropping his knife, and gave Lacroix the opportunity to follow up with a second punch. He recovered quickly, however, and in moments the two opponents were back on the floor, trading a very unscientific flurry of punches,

kicks, knees, elbows and foreheads at one another. Lacroix wasn't sure who had the upper hand.

Sometime during the brawl, a huge blast sounded from below and the building lurched. The combatants were too preoccupied to notice, but the second blast a few moments later broke through their business. This blast was not only louder, but the building was lurching again, far more unsteadily than before. Creaks and cracks sounded from all around as the third storey began to admit it was about to let go.

Lacroix and his foe stared at each other, with mutual looks of confusion rapidly moving towards dismay as another lurch made the floor tilt sickeningly to one side.

"Um... shit," Lacroix offered.

"...Hakhai," the minion said. It sounded like agreement.

Light outside the window. A third blast sounded, directly beneath them, and the building gave up any pretenses of being a building. Suddenly, they were falling through a flurry of debris and crashing noises. Something struck Lacroix hard on the side of the head somewhere between then and the ground. Things got pretty unconscious for awhile after that.

"Come out, come out, little Jihaddi," Owsen called. "I know you're around here somewhere, and I'll gut you like a trout when I fiiiiinnnd you! You can't hide from me and you can't hide from the Scourge. It's coming and it'll destroy you and all your loved ones and there's nothing you can do about it! Now be a good little boy and come out and take your mediciYARGH!"

Owsen's rant was cut off in the middle when, intent on his taunting, he stepped on a landmine that had been hastily placed in his path. The mine's location had been pretty obvious, but Owsen's mind had been too busy mocking his opponent to pay much attention to his surroundings. The blast threw Owsen flat on his back, causing little damage to anything but his dignity.

Mal dashed out of the building he was hiding in and took cover behind another across the street. “God DAMN but you hairy freaks like to hear yourselves talk,” he muttered as he crouched behind the red brick facade.

The downed Feral scrambled to his feet, a wide grin on his face. “Oh my,” he crowed. “My my *my!* You’re the most fun I’ve had in all of my hunts, little Jihaddi. I’m going to enjoy killing you. The others were for business, but this one is just going to be *fun.*”

“Shut the hell up and fight, goddammit,” Mal growled, adjusting his grip on his staff.

“Let’s see now... eeny meeny miney MOE!” Owsen let fly a blast of energy from his hand, punching through a nearby storefront. Mal winced as bricks and glass flew uncomfortably close to his position. “No? Well how about... THERE!” Another explosion ripped through the building, this time further away from Mal’s hiding place. The building, now missing large chunks of its base, began to creak ominously. “Hm... not there either. Well, split the difference.” Owsen let fly a third time, this time punching straight through the center of the storefront. The already-wrecked building gave way under the assault and collapsed.

As the building started to crumble, Mal dove out of his hiding position and into the street, rolling to a stop ten yards in front of Owsen. His X-Pistol sizzled into life in his hand as he rose to a firing crouch and let three shots fly. One grazed the Feral low on his left side. The other two plasma bursts missed entirely.

Owsen bellowed with pain and let loose a great gout of purple light that quickly filled the street. Mal dove for cover, just barely missing getting chopped in two by the energy wave, rolled to a stop in a side alley...

...right in front of a grinning wyrm-minion with a fist full of nasty-looking gun.

“Well, *shit.*” Mal said.

The minion’s grin widened as he leveled his weapon at the stuck Jihaddi. He said something that Mal didn’t understand, but the context was clear: try anything funny and die. Not taking his eyes off Mal, the minion called out to the street. “My Lord Herald, I have him!”

“Good,” Owsen called back. “Hold him there!” Mal saw the flash of light reflect off the minion’s face and waited for the next blow...

...but instead the energy flowed around him and caught the unfortunate minion square in the chest, hurling him straight into - and partially -through- - the brick facade of the building sealing off the alley. The minion lay crumpled halfway through the new opening, covered in broken bricks. Mal leaped up and whirled around. Owsen was standing ten feet behind him, staring mildly at the wrecked wall and minion.

Owsen shrugged. “Shouldn’t get between a dog and his meat,” he remarked. “Now, let’s see, where were we...”

Thel’Akhai heard the Cub’s cry from his vantage point near the outskirts of the

city. For the briefest of moments his blood turned cold - this was his first true combat, and the first time he had been anywhere near the White Death. The fear passed, and the Lyran mage quickly cast a few of his specialities before turning to cast a detection spell.

The Cub was nearby, Thel'Akhai knew that much, but it was proving difficult to find using the normal means. No matter; the mage turned back to observing the battle, confident that if he could not find the Cub, it would find him.

A minute later, he was right. With a deafening cry, Nemesis the Feral leaped from the roof of a nearby building and dove towards the Lyran, claws extended and ready to grab the seemingly unsuspecting mage. The roar of the Albino's rage echoed in Nemesis's ears as he went in for the kill, everything else drowned out.

Two feet away from the Lyran's head, Nemesis's claws hit solid air with a tremendous ringing sound. Concentric hexagons rippled outward from the point of impact as the Maenad bounced off the shield spell and tumbled to the ground. Scrambling to his feet, Nemesis snarled at the Lyran. Thel'Akhai gazed placidly at the Maenad, waiting for his next move.

Nemesis sprang towards Thel'Akhai again, only to bounce off the shield a second time. The Lyran sooceror, for his part, made no sound, only standing as if rooted to the spot. Again and again, Nemesis battered at the shield seperating him from his prey, only to fail to break it.

Thel'Akhai broke his silence, cocking his head as Nemesis regrouped for another assault on the shield and said blandly, "You're persistent, I'll give you that. But you lack tactical skill. You see," he mused, "while I am immune to your attacks, I can hurt *you*."

As he said it, Thel'Akhai cast a simple lightning spell and hurled a bolt at his opponent. Nemesis howled as the electricity washed over his body, sparking off his claws and scorching his hair. The howl trailed off as Nemesis fell to his knees, gasping in pain. The Lyran continued to watch, impassively.

"Now," Thel'Akhai mused, "you have a choice. You can accept the natural order of things and submit, or I can kill you. Decide quickly; there's much to be done today and I don't have the time to wait for your little animal mind."

Nemesis rose to his feet and stared at the Lyran for a long second. Then he did something that made Thel'Akhai's bland expression freeze.

He grinned.

Nemesis let out an ear-splitting roar and lunged forward like a cobra. Instead of slamming into Thel'Akhai's shield and rebounding like before, this time the enraged Maenad's claws caught in the center of the field and held there. Thel'Akhai retreated a single step, surprise evident in his posture, as Nemesis pried at the shield like a man trying to force open a pair of sliding doors. The Lyran recovered his compsure quickly and cast another lightning spell, this time twice the strength of his last salvo.

This time, the lightning seemed to have no effect. The blue-white sparks washed

over Nemesis's body without scorching his skin. For his part, Nemesis continued to pry at the shield, completely ignoring the attack.

The spell finally gave under the intense pressure, and with a sound like shattering glass the shield disintegrated. Thel'Akhai stumbled back in shock, left arm raised in an attempt to cast another warding as Nemesis launched forward again. The Maenad's claws flashed out, and Thel'Akhai's outstretched arm was cut off at the elbow. The Lyran screamed, more out of shock than pain, as he grasped the bleeding stump and saw Nemesis approaching at full speed.

A second later, it was over. Nemesis the Feral stood triumphant over the bloody ruin of Thel'Akhai's body, his raised fist clenched around the Lyran's heart. Nemesis cried out in triumph.

Then, like generations of wild beasts before him, he began to feed.

The crunch of gravel and sound of an action being racked was the first sign that anything was wrong. "Shit," Dee called, ducking across the peak of the roof to the other side as bullets started whining past. Damo was already across, flinging a pair of grenades in the direction of the fire to get people to put their heads down. The machinegun, in its nice sandbagged area, was on the other goddamned side of the roof in view of the squad that had infiltrated the area.

"Yup," Damo replied casually, aiming a pair of shots at a soldier who had rushed up as they'd been fired upon to keep him from coming around a corner and firing on their piece of roof. Dee pulled the revolver out of the thigh holster and snapped off a shot at someone thinking about coming around the other side.

"Whoever these guys are, they're not bad," Dee muttered. "Stalemate though, kinda. You pin the snipers down, then try to shoot at them... and if that fails..." A gunshot rang out from inside the building. "Yup."

"Don't you just love those tripwire shotgun shell things?" Damocles commented with a grin. Dee fired a pair of shots and nodded.

"Yeah, but..." there was an explosion. "The great trick was counterweighting a couple so that a frag grenade goes off if you cut the wire."

"Don't brag, that just means stalemate, and there's more of them. Figure out a way out of this..."

"Ah, crap," KillJoy muttered. There had been a tradeoff in toting a rocket launcher and forgoing additional weapons and armor. On the one hand, he had managed enough additional speed to intercept the troops looking to flank the fight between Mal and Owsen. On the other, he had one shot to use against three Saethrians.

He took it, a gout of flame spewing out the back of the launch tube. The pineapple-sized explosive obligingly blew the rightmost Saethrian apart, but the other two objected, swooping down on him, until a huge black blur blindsided the leftmost one, barrelling landing them both on the ground and erupting in a flurry of black and purple fangs, scales, claws, and blood.

Trusting that Shad's dragon form had that Saethrian where he wanted it, the huge man dropped the bazooka tube and jumped the remaining monster while it was still confused about the sudden change in odds. Moving with a sudden speed, KillJoy rolled backwards at the same time as he hooked fingers of one hand between segments of the giant bug's carapace, then a moment later kicking up from the ground with both booted feet. With a thud, it changed course, smacking into a building before it could stabilize itself. KillJoy came off not much better and instant later though when, despite its momentum, the second plunged a harpoon into his back as it flew past. The added momentum screwed up the former Lieutenant's movement of flipping back to his feet, but the barbed point sticking out the front of his stomach displeased him even more as he slammed face-first into the ground.

"Sonofabitch," he muttered as he pushed himself back to his feet, breaking off the shaft protruding from his back and then grasping the spearhead and pulling it the rest of the way out. Ignoring the spurts of blood before his body sealed the holes, he spotted the two Saethrians. The first was still lying stunned in the street, while the second was just starting to circle around for another pass. Scooping up a rifle from a fallen enemy, he sprayed that one with fire.

The bullets did little to penetrate its heavily armored body, but did hit several of its tentacles and the root of its left wing. With a roar of pain and rage, the giant centipede finished its dive by slamming into KJ.

It's been theorized by some in the Jihad that grappling with a Saethrian is one of the dumber things possible. The large mass, large teeth and 4 tentacles and made it a poor dance partner. As it simultaneously wrapped around his lower body with one tentacle, repeatedly stabbed him with the long curved knives in the other two functional ones, and rolled around trying to crush him with its body mass, anyone watching would have concluded that conventional wisdom was right. What was less obvious was that the balance of the damage was going the other way. The knives were glancing off the bone shell under the skin of the former wrestler's chest without doing much more than flesh wounds. In exchange he had stiffened the fingers of his right hand into a point and driven them into a gap between carapace segments, using that to hold himself stable while he pistoned his left fist again and

again into another area, the blows beginning to crack an area the size of a dinner plate. Both roared.

Realizing full well the way things were going, the Saethrian twisted its mouth around and caught KillJoy's left arm in it before the next blow fell, then started to shake him like a wolf with a rabbit. Jagged teeth tore muscle from his arm, but very quickly the insect realized the downside of biting into something with highly corrosive blood. It spat out the morsel of food and quickly started into the species equivalent of retching in pain. Rolling to his feet, face twisted into a grimace and blood sizzling to the ground, the Jihaddi grabbed a traffic sign with his good hand and pulled with all his might. The decades-old concrete cracked and pulled out in a



rough cone about a foot in diameter.

Improvised club in hand, he waded back into the fight. His adversary was still trying to spit out the acidic chunks of KJ and barely saw the first blow before the 40 pound chunk of concrete slammed into its head. It didn't see the next dozen as the enormous humanoid bellowed in fury and pounded it one-handed.

When it had finally stopped twitching entirely, he looked up from the bloody mess just in time to see a vicious claw swipe tear out most of what passed for the other Saethrian's throat, and it went down. Shadur did not give it time to get back up and leapt into the air, neck curling back then lunging forward like a striking serpent, vomiting forth a torrent of flame and incinerating his opponent. The dragon looked over at him and nodded in acknowledgement, then wheeled around with a sweep of his wings and flew towards the town center.

Dee frowned and fed a speed loader into her Smith and Wesson, her last six rounds aside from the speed loader with the special iron rounds she really didn't want to use. Then it was her normal Sig P210 and its two spare magazines, which didn't have the range of the revolver. They had, despite a few casualties, far more ammunition and thus time. If the stalemate went on, the enemy would win... if only there were some way of eliminating the cover factor.

"Hmm... hey, got an idea." Dee opened up a her arm computer's warcracking suite, and tabbed to a list of government intelligence providers, some of the most heavily encrypted information around... but at least 5 technological generations below her own computer, kept up to VRDET's state of the art up until it dissolved.

"What're you doing?" Damo yelled as he swung his M-14 to fire at a target that should have been hers. She muttered and awkwardly drew her Sig out from her shoulder holster with her left hand. Her right arm, magnum clamped in its grasp, was frozen in place... the cracking program, given top priority, was using enough processing power that even very basic level functions such as movement weren't working.

"Sorry, burning a metric shitload of CPU power," she apologized, aiming and firing with her off hand. The recoil, something she'd gotten used to ignoring because of the bionic arm's far greater strength, brought the muzzle up and made her miss the second shot. She bit back an expletive. "You might have to cover my area a bit; I'm temporarily lefty."

"Right-o." A minute passed, then the feed from the first satellite came up, remarkable in its clarity despite being taken from orbit. Deciding that since it was watching a town in California it probably wasn't doing anything too important, she sent the intrusion program to get the last few minutes of feed and loop it. She then slewed the cameras to about their current location and brought up both thermal and visible light readouts.

"Neat. Okay, I've got sat reece now," she muttered, starting the next part of her idea.

“Cool, that mean you’re done? I need to reload.” Dee fired her magnum in cover as he replaced magazines on his rifle.

“Nope, not quite... another half minute.” The tech fired another shot with her revolver, then opened up the full suite of programming tools and turned her full attention to the computer. Statistics on the satellites gave her the distance between the cameras, which combined with the angles gave her the distance. Current magnification scales combined with approximate rifle sizes gave a correlation to get the vertical location of things to within about a foot. The next trick was to combine that with Jihad-linker signals to distinguish friend from foe, and finally use all that data to figure out relative positions.

Another pair of shots from her left hand; the program was compiling so she could divert her attention. “Almost...” The compiler finished and she ran the program. “Okay!” She squeezed off the last shots from the magnum, holstered it, then swapped her automatic to her right hand and holstered it as well.

“Now what?” Damo asked. Dee grinned at the green rectangle superimposed over his torso, then unsung the cut down railgun that had remained unused since the first mad dash to cover. Chambering a round, she brought it to her shoulder and aimed at one of the red rectangles. Her companion raised an eyebrow at the fact that she was apparently aiming at a random part of the roof that they were sitting on.

“Let’s hope I got this right is what.” There was a crack and a flash, then in an instant a fist-sized hole appeared, heading straight through the building. Silence followed for a second, then screaming. Dee frowned and opened up the programming tools.

“Did it work?”

“Mostly, took off a leg. Gimme a sec to code something to correct for shooting through buildings, then we should be able to retake the beltfed.”

Pupp and Aris were not having the best possible day. They were crouched down behind the remnants of a low wall, exchanging bullet and magical fire with a small gang of servitors. Neither the Jihaddi nor their enemies had hit much of anything except the landscape, despite several minutes of constant activity.

“Goddammit,” Aris grumbled, “we’re never going to get out of here!” Pupp nodded in agreement, popping up over his cover to throw another fireball...

... when a stray bolt from the blue clipped off the top of Pupp’s pointy wizard hat. The battlefield seemed to come to a complete stop for the second it took for the scrap of cloth to flutter to the ground. Pupp blinked as he looked down at what used to be the top of his hat.

There was a brief pause in the action as the mage reached up and fingered the charred edges at the top of his hat. He scowled and stepped around the wall, right in front of the assembled servitors.

“Allright,” Pupp growled, pushing up his sleeves, “I’ve had JUST about ENOUGH

of this horseshit! Time for me to unleash my SECRET WEAPON!"

The servitors smirked mockingly and readied their weapons. Aris hung back, gunblade at the ready. Pupp jammed his left hand into his coat pocket and rummaged for a second. His hand closed on his secret weapon, pulling it out of the pocket and moved as if to lob a fastball at his enemies.

"THINK FAST!" Pupp yelled as he let his secret weapon fly. Everybody tensed as it flew through the air, then tumbled to the ground in a cloud of dust. When the dust settled a bit, friend and foe alike stared as Pupp's secret weapon proved itself to be a small, yellow apple. The servitors tensed yet again, waiting for the fruit to explode or hatch into a monstrous servant or open a portal for the White Death or whatever.

Five seconds passed. Pupp stood there smugly, arms folded, while Aris stood behind him utterly nonplussed. The servitors realized that nothing was happening and burst out laughing. The leader stooped to pick up the fruit, all the better to throw it back at the upstart human idiot before resuming the attack.

As the servitor reached out for the apple, though, so did the other three. The four servitors collided, the impact knocking the back. Again, they scrambled for the fruit, only to almost run into each other a second time. Angry-sounding Lyran words filled the air as the four confronted each other, arguing over who got to pick up the apple.

The leader barked something in Lyran and pointed his sword at his comrades. Another snarled and drew a pair of wicked long knives from his belt. The third said nothing, but greenish lightning crackled around his fists. The fourth fingered a battleaxe and eyed the leader speculatively. For a moment there was no sound at all, then a sudden gust of wind hit the apple and made it tip over.

Things got a bit hectic at that point. Aris eeped and dove for cover as the general area seemed to explode into a whirlwind of black magic and extremely sharp metal. Pupp however remained completely unfazed by the sudden burst of activity, and continued to stand unmoving amidst the chaos. Thirty seconds of frantic battle later, and it was all over. The four servitors lay strewn across the street, most of them not entirely in the same configuration they started in. The apple lay undisturbed in the exact center of the devastation.

Pupp strode calmly through the wreckage, paying no heed to the ruined servitors. Picking up the apple, he dusted it off on his sleeve. "You know," he mused, sticking the apple back in the pocket from whence it came, "I wasn't -entirely- sure that would work..."

Aris picked herself off the ground and stared at Pupp. "And just what the hell was that?!" she demanded.

Pupp grinned. "My secret weapon, of course."

Aris shook her head. "Right, whatever. Now c'mon, we've wasted enough time as it is. Let's go find out what everybody else is doing."

Malaclypse was in a world of pain. Over the years of often-baroque adventures he'd had the opportunity to be injured by professionals several times over. He'd been hurt worse, but not often. The part of his mind not occupied with trying to force down the pain and reknit cracked bones noted ruefully that this was the first time in... oh, ten years or so that he'd been used as a building demolition tool by a deranged parahuman. Of course, the buildings that time had been made of less sturdy material.

Shaking off the force of the impact, Mal stood and attempted to square off again. Owsen, for his part, was standing five yards away, sword ready and a little half-smile on his face. "Well," Owsen said, "are you going to give me what's mine now? Or do I have to keep it up?"

Mal cocked his head a little. "Well," he said with exaggerated thoughtfulness, "after considering the options, I think it's better that you don't get the sword."

Owsen sighed. "Pity." His aura flared as he drew back the dark Slayer. Mal tensed, readying himself for the inevitable leap and attack, when Owsen surprised him. Instead of jumping to the attack like he usually did, he swept the dark Slayer out in front of him in a great arc. The violet light of his aura whipped off the sword and lashed out towards the wreck of the building standing next to Mal. Dark magic hit brick with a terrible crashing noise, and Mal looked up, surprised by the sudden change in tactics, to see the wall falling down towards him.

The dark Maenad regarded the pile of debris. It wasn't exactly what he'd intended to have happen, but in the end the Jihaddi *did* ask for it. Owsen sighed again, noting that now he'd probably have to dig the information on how to get his sword out of his opponent's corpse, but that was probably easier than continuing to try and beat it out of him...

Cecrops Tangaroa had just rounded the corner after dispatching a pair of servitors, just in time to see the building fall on Mal. In the sudden stillness that followed the building's collapse, Tang could clearly see Owsen standing alone in the street. Nobody else appeared to be in the area. Tang ran through his available options, then came to a decision. Owsen had to be stopped, and if nobody else was there...

Tang stepped out into the street.

"Owsen!"

"Hm?" Owsen stopped and peered over his shoulder to eye the intruder. It was a man in black with a few scratches in his face and clothes, someone already weary and wounded who didn't look like much of a threat. Then this one cast a spell, and Owsen got the feeling that he might be fun after all.

Tangaroa smiled. Got his attention, now to keep it. He assumed a fighting stance and leveled his fire sword at Owsen. "Lord Tilden Owsen. I am Warrior Cecrops Tangaroa of the Doberman Empire. You killed my commander. I will avenge him."

Owsen laughed and turned around to face his challenger. "Will you, now. I'll tell

you what, Iniego Montoya; you run away now and I'll let the Scourge take you. Otherwise, hold that thought and I'll be killing you in just a second."

"Could we talk about that?"

Owsen spit at the unexpected question. "Talk?" he laughed. "No."

"Really? 'cause I mean, it seems like there's a lot we could—"

"I've done enough talking!" Owsen shouted. "There's nothing more to explain. There's what is which will not be, and *you* will not be!" With that, Owsen raised his sword and charged forward with superhuman speed, a dark purple aura surrounding him.

Tangaroa always fought battles with the doctrine of attacking with overwhelming force, but he had never been on the defending end of it. He rose a hand to fire a force beam at the attacking madman, who jumped aside to dodge the expected attack before Tangaroa even launched it. Tang started stepping backwards to keep some of the quickly diminishing distance between the two, then aimed and fired a beam. It hit Owsen squarely, not slowing him down or appearing to affect him at all.

Owsen swung the Barney-Slayer at his target, who wisely dodged out of the way. Tang dodged again and risked losing an arm to cast a weak shield in the sword's path. As Tang expected, the enchanted sword cut through the shield as if it wasn't there.

As Tang jumped back from another swing, Owsen growled. "Are you going to fight back, or just keep running away like a coward?"

Tang dodged again. "I prefer to avoid getting hit," he answered, attempting to sound less panicked than he was.

"And what of your vengeance for your commander?"

"I think he'd want me to win." Tang reached inside his coat as he dodged another swing and fired his pistol from the hip, through his coat, until it clicked, out of ammo. "Fuck."

Owsen momentarily glanced down at the already closing holes in his torso, then looked up at Tangaroa and grinned. "My turn."

Tang again assumed a fighting stance with his flame sword and tried to exude his best air of false confidence. "Let's see it." He was just about out of tricks, but still had one of his oldest and best. So many fighters in close combat have made the fatal mistake of thinking they could use a physical weapon to block a sword made of magical energy, and Owsen didn't seem like the type to think over such possibilities. Of course, Owsen was also swinging the great sword so quickly and skillfully that it was a minor miracle Tang had survived this far, and Tang might not get a chance to test this theory.

Tang ducked low under Owsen's swing and rushed forward, reaching out his free hand to cast a shield to block Owsen's hand from swinging the Slayer back down on him, and rose his flame sword high. Owsen punched him under the arm so hard

that Tang was thrown out of the range of Owsen's follow-up swing.

Tang coughed and scrambled to his feet, ignoring the pain in his ribs. "Could we try tha-" he started, then quit to dodge as Owsen came upon him. He re-cast his flame sword between dodges and, when he got the chance, tried a swing at Owsen's free hand. Seeing that Owsen saw it coming and not really having the fullest range of motion in that arm anymore, Tang commanded the flame to leap from one hand to another, reforming the blade in his other hand. Owsen hesitated a bit to consider this new development, and Tangaroa struck. Owsen intuitively brought up the Slayer to block Tangaroa's attack.

What Tangaroa had hoped to be a kill shot left only a pink streak on Owsen's face which soon cleared to pale flesh.

"That was a mistake." Owsen steamed.

"Yes. Yes it was." Tangaroa agreed.

Owsen charged again, and Tang desperately tried to come up with a new course of action while he more importantly tried to stay alive in the immediate term. Being so afraid of the sword, Tangaroa didn't react quickly enough to throw up a shield when Owsen feinted and punched him in the face. Owsen followed up with a roundhouse kick that threw Tang through the air, landing him some distance in the dirt.

Owsen twirled his sword around and calmly stepped towards the fallen Dobe, whistling as he approached. Tang glanced up, and seeing that Owsen wasn't attacking, took his time getting back on his feet.

Owsen smiled as the Dobe straightened himself to stand toe to toe with him. He idly poked the cursed Barney-Slayer into the dust and looked his weary opponent in the eye. "If you don't mind, I'm going to kill you now. Even if you do mind, actually."

"Why?"

Owsen made a frustrated noise. "They always ask that," he growled. "In your case it's because you were STUPID and you got-"

He drove the fist holding the dark Slayer straight into Tang's stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

"-in-"

Owsen followed it up by bringing his other hand, clenched in a fist, up in a right cross to the Doberman's jaw.

"-my-"

He shoved the stunned Jihaddi backwards and opened his empty hand, his aura of purple light flaring up.

"-WAY!"

Owsen let a surge of power rush out from his hand, creating a concussion wave that picked Tangaroa up and threw him down the road. He landed in painful tangle of limbs, tumbling head over heels until he came to a stop on his back ten yards away from where he started. He stalked over to Tang's landing spot and glowered

at his fallen foe. “Hmph,” the dark Maenad grunted, “they just do -not- make Dobermans like they used to.”

Finally, Owsen stood over Tangaroa’s battered body, preparing to strike the final blow. “Any last words?” Owsen inquired. “Speak now or forever hold your peace.”

“Just a minute.” the Dobe groaned.

“You don’t get a minute.”

Tang glowered at Owsen. “Ah. Then go to hell.”

Owsen smirked. “Been there,” he replied, “done that.” He lifted his sword in order to cleave the meddling Jihaddi’s head right down the middle. Tangaroa, for his part, attempted to maintain eye contact with his attacker through the red haze of pain. “Ah well,” said Owsen, “one less human for the Scourge to ta-WAGH!”

Owsen’s statement broke off in mid-sentence as a black blur slammed into his right side in a perfect tackle, throwing the deranged Maenad to the ground. The dark copy of the Barney-Slayer tumbled to the ground only inches from Owsen’s grasp as he struggled with his opponent. The two rolled away from Tang, finally breaking apart several yards down the street. Owsen pushed himself to his hands and knees, and blinked, surprised, at the battered, dusty face of his opponent, who had come to a fighting crouch in the middle of the street.

“Pick up your blade, you Irish fuck.” Malaclypse the Seeker growled as his staff appeared in his hands, “I am not finished with you yet.”

Owsen thrust out his arm, his violet aura flickering into life for an instant. The dark Slayer twitched, then flew from its resting place to land in Owsen’s outstretched hand. “You’ll regret your insolence, whelp.” he muttered as he stood.

“Well, come ahead if you’re going to, Owsen.” Mal taunted. “Unless you’d like to stand there like the *puppet* you are.”

Owsen stiffened, his aura flaring up. With a roar of rage, he launched himself forward. At the same time, Mal sprung out of his crouch, letting Owsen’s first wild swing pass harmlessly over his head, then let his staff sweep out across the enraged Maenad’s feet, tripping him up. Using the momentum from the now-falling Owsen, Mal grabbed his opponent’s leg and swung, hard. The ultimate effect of this was to send Owsen headfirst into the pile of rubble that used to be the general store.

“Guh, argh, rrr...” Owsen sputtered, as he attempted to right himself. “When I get out of here, I’m... I’m...”

“Getting old?” Mal inquired, a cold smile on his face.

Owsen went rigid again. Mal shifted his stance, waiting for the next berserker attack, but instead Owsen did something that surprised him.

Owsen laughed, a loud, deep laugh. “Oh,” he chortled, “when we’re done with this dance, I am *so* going to enjoy carving all of your insults onto your hide. We’ll have hours of fun, you and I. But first...” The deranged Maenad’s aura flared violently into life, scorching the rubble as Owsen levitated out of the pile and returned to face his enemy.

“First we have to finish this little charade. Now -give me what’s mine-.”

The deranged Maenad threw himself towards his enemy, throwing all of his Lyran-given energy into the attack. Mal parried frantically, trying to keep his guard up as the attacks rained down faster and faster. Owsen had fought well before, but now he fought like a man possessed - which, a small corner of Mal’s mind mused, was probably pretty accurate.

The battle continued for some minutes, Owsen’s strength seeming to build even as Mal started to get tired. The other Jihaddi, fresh from wrapping up their own combat with Owsen’s reinforcements, emerged from the wreckage of the city and watched silently as the duel raged. Mal managed to get strikes in from time to time, but the ferocity of Owsen’s attacks kept him from following up on them. The battle continued like this for another few tense moves, as the spectators waited for somebody to make a mistake.

The mistake finally happened when Mal overextended on a parry and left himself wide open. Owsen saw it a split second before Mal realized it and prepared to relieve his opponent of his head. Mal saw the rage on Owsen’s face change to glee, and realized what he’d done. Mal jerked his head back hard, just enough to keep from losing his head, but not far enough to avoid the tip of Owsen’s sword. The blade carved a narrow line across Mal’s left cheek, bare millimeters from destroying his eye.

Mal roared in sudden pain, falling out his defensive stance. Owsen cackled with triumph and unleashed his magical power on his adversary. Mal had just enough time to realize that his head wasn’t indeed going to spit in two when a wall of violet light hit him like a speeding truck, picked him up, and threw him to the ground. The battleground was still for a long note as the dust cleared, revealing Mal, obviously stunned by the blow, wobbling rising from the ground.

Owsen hauled Malaclypse up by his shirt and held him off the ground. “What’s the matter, *boy*?” Owsen sneered. “No glib remarks? No pithy comebacks? No defiance in the face of your death? I’m disappointed. I expected more from a Jihaddi.”

Mal’s unfocused expression evaporated as he straightened and locked eyes with Owsen. Mal smiled viciously. “What’s the frequency, Kenneth?” he said, and he triggered his last trick.

The microscopic laser array concealed in the rims of Mal’s eyeglasses activated, focused on what Mal was looking at, and fired. Several thousand tiny beams of coherent light shot out from around Mal’s eyes and concentrated right inside Owsen’s pupils. The beams burned through his retinas and impacted directly on the optic nerves, blinding him instantly. The charge lasted only a thousandth of a second, but it was more than enough. All Owsen saw was a flash of blue light, then darkness and incredible pain as his nervous system caught up to the damage.

Owsen shrieked, a high, piercing sound, dropping Mal and his sword as he brought both hands up to clutch at his eyes. Mal tumbled to the ground, rolling back a few yards into a fighting stance, recalling his staff. Owsen continued to



stumble around blindly, back to Mal.

“ARRRRRGHDAMN you... GODDAMN you...” Owsen growled, groping for his sword. “KILL you... EAT you, eat your FAMILY, eat your CHILDREN, eat EVERYTHING... Eating life, shitting SKULLS. You’ll PAY, damn you.” His hands found the hilt of the sword, and with a flash of violent light he spun. His eyes were hidden behind pools of violet light, the same light now surrounding him like a corona. Owsen bared his teeth - no longer grinning, this was the gesture of a beast. He screamed and charged towards Mal, sword held high.

Mal held his ground. Drawing his twin plasma pistols, he thumbed their over-charge switches. The whine of the guns’ capacitors charging to well over their rated limit blended with the deranged Maenad’s howling. Mal straight-armed both pistols, aiming carefully, then closed his eyes. Owsen continued to close the distance.

And then Mal pulled the triggers.

There was a flash of white light and a terrible, sudden roar.

There was a terrible, sudden silence.

The dark copy of the Barney-Slayer fell from Owsen’s hands. Owsen’s headless body pitched forward, landing on top of the sword with a muffled thud. Mal dropped to his knees in a seiza-like stance, limply holding onto the guns. The other Jihaddi emerged cautiously from the combat zone, eyes and weapons ready for any stragglers. They slowly gathered around the tableau in the center of the street.

Mal opened his eyes and looked into their faces, one by one. He smiled faintly. “Well done, my friends,” he said softly. “Well done indeed. We’ve all done very well today.”

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## ***25: No Rest For The Weary***

VRDET HQ  
BLANCA MOUNTAIN, COLORADO  
7:50 PM LOCAL TIME

The mood at Blanca that night was distinctly odd. There was the post-battle thrill of surviving, coupled with a good deal of straight-up fatigue and pain. Added to that was the fact that they'd killed one of the original Seven. However much of a good thing it had been, there was still that wrinkle.

The first place most people had headed was the infirmary. Nobody had come out of the battle unscathed, though some reacted better than others. KillJoy reached for the duct tape, Aris started pounding N!thren'das, Lacroix was trying to ignore the ringing noise in his ears and Mal waited with disquieting good cheer as Minerva and the automatic medical facilities stitched, bandaged, and epoxied him up. Since everyone was clustered around for one injury or another, that's where Mal decided to hold the post-catastrophe meeting.

"Question one should be," he said as soon as everyone had been patched up enough to gather around, "What have the Mundanes seen?"

"I'm picking up a little chatter," Minerva said. "The sheriff's department is out there taking a look, but so far nobody else."

"What are they saying?"

“They’re confused, but not dangerously so. The money’s on asteroid impact right now.”

“What I want to know,” Damocles said, waving a bandaged arm, “is what we’re going to do with *that*.”

*That* was the dark Barney-Slayer, propped against the wall next to Mal. Its bright twin was scabbarded and lying on a shelf next to it. Dee cleared her throat and said nervously, “I hope the Lyrans can’t trace its location.”

“I gave it a scorching before we brought it here,” Pupp said. “That should have broken any links. I think. I haven’t had too much experience with Lyran-corrupted Owsenite.”

Everyone winced a bit at that.

“The Lyrans already know where we are,” Mal reminded them. “Or at least Owsen did. Nonetheless, we should put it somewhere secure, and this is as secure as we get. I’ll put it in storage in Sublevel 2. That should fool even a Lyran tracking spell.”

“So what do we *do* with it?” Damo demanded again.

“Hey,” Aris said, staring at the two swords with childlike interest, “Maybe we should try putting them together. Then maybe they’ll merge and turn into a super-claymore ultimate weapon with lasers or something!”

There was a brief, awkward pause.

“It’s possible,” Mal said thoughtfully. “It’s also possible that they could react like matter and antimatter and blow up the state.”

Aris’ face fell. Mal smiled. “Tell you what. I’ll file it as Proposal Form Blazing Sword and we’ll hang onto it as a last resort, okay?”

“Groovy.”

“So we’re just gonna keep it?” Damo said.

Mal nodded. Katze piped up, “It’s probably better to have it under surveillance. And we definitely want to keep the original. Just in case...”

She trailed off. Nobody really wanted to think just in case *\*what\**.

Shadur cleared his throat and adjusted his sling. “I move we formally reconvene the Jihad.”

Felton shot him a glance, then looked around. “We’re still missing Mel.”

“Right,” Aris said. “Pupp, you’re promoted.”

“Guh?” Puppeteer said, nearly rocking back out of his seat. “But... but Katze’s been here longer than I have!”

“Point.” Aris looked over. “Katze?”

“Uhh...” Katze blinked a couple of times. “Well, he’s right, I do have more experience. But shouldn’t Mal... I mean,” she said, turning to Mal, “you had the job before.”

“Not interested.” That tone brooked no argument.

Aris and Shad traded a look. Shad nodded silently. “Great,” Aris said. “Katze, you are hereby raised to the position of Triumvir Praetor, with all the powers

and responsibilities inherent in the office. Pupp, you're Katze's adjunct now." Aris grinned. "Shad requested we reconvene. I vote yes."

Katze took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Yes," Shad said. "Adjuncts?"

"Yeah, sure," Pupp said.

"Aye," Felton said. "That makes it official."

"Great," Tang said sardonically. "So what does that mean in real terms?"

"For one that we can order you around," Shad said.

"He's right, though," Katze said. "We don't have any sort of official structure any more. And some of us have lives."

"Okay, so we take a break."

Shad looked at Aris sideways. "We just reconvened the Jihad, and you already want to take a vacation?"

She spread her hands. "I'm serious. Those of you with actual lives need some time to get things in order. The rest of us can do cleanup, try and get some surprises in place in case the Wyrms do come back, and do intel work. In the meantime, keep eyes open and come back here every so often to exchange notes. Now that the Gate's up, that'll be a lot easier."

"Are we recruiting people again?" Dee asked.

"Good question," Katze said.

"We don't know if the Wyrms are actually back yet," Mal said. "If I can suggest a course of action, we should determine that before opening our doors to members again."

"Okay. So we should spend some time trying to figure that out," said Katze. "How about we meet here in a couple months to formally compare information and hash out a new plan of attack?"

"That long?" Dee asked, blinking.

"Life-patching-up and information-gathering takes time," Aris said. "And in an emergency we can all Gate in here."

"I have to get to Japan and back," Tang said. "Though with the Gate, it'll be a bit easier..."

"Right. We all have things to do and new cover stories to invent," Katze said.

"I'm going to be needing one of those," Lacroix said. "If I'm going to have to be on duty here at all, I'm kind of going to have to explain why I'm skipping out on teaching for the rest of the semester. Or irregularly during it, for that matter."

"Oh, that's easy," Minerva said. "What were you going to do over the Easter holiday?"

"Well, I had planned on catching up on the Pile," Lacroix said, alluding to the mountain of as-yet ungraded assignments and other busywork every high school teacher had to deal with.

Minerva's facial expression went distant for a moment; she was either deep

in thought or interfacing with the base computer network. “No, you hadn’t,” she said at length.

“Uh?” Lacroix uhhhd. “Yes I -”

“You went back home to – Quebec, right? – for the holiday to meet with some friends and relatives,” Minerva said, a tone of amusement in her voice. “Unfortunately, while you were there you got involved in a tragic and spectacular car accident. Everyone will come out of it alright, but it seems that you’re going to be bouncing between a few hospitals and specialists for the next, oh, three months. You’ll be back by the start of the next school year, of course, apologizing for the timing.”

Lacroix gaped at Minerva. “But -”

“Joseph, you’re a Canadian citizen and a Canadian citizen only in reality. To reality, you’re an American ex-Marine Gulf War veteran with a Purple Heart. Considering the Jihad managed to slip twenty thousand fictitious lives without a slip-up, do you *\*really\** think it’s going to be hard for me to fake a car accident?”

Everyone laughed at Lacroix’s somewhat sandbagged expression. “Well... point. Go for it, as long as I don’t have to *\*actually\** break anything,” he added with a chuckle.

“That’s one settled,” Katze said. “If anyone else needs a cover, we know who to ask. In the meantime, let’s all get some sleep, and make sure the Mundanes didn’t pick up on that fight before we all decide to go home.”

“All right, people, time for drinks and Red Dwarf in the officer’s lounge!” Aris crowed, levering herself off her bed. She then collapsed in a heap as her knees gave out. “Erm,” she said as Shad gave her a hand up. “Maybe we should just call it an early night instead.”

The next afternoon everyone kept an eye on the news as they prepared to take off for home. Aris and KJ turned out the stores in order to find equipment for everyone; replacements for lost linker chargers and light body armor were the biggest requests. It wasn’t until two that Minerva announced she’d started seeing mentions on the news. The Jihaddi headed to the briefing room, clustering around the display as CNN ran down the list of events.

“This is Chet Hugelarge reporting from Dry Well, Nevada,” babbled the newsmuppet, “where government officials are reporting that an asteroid hit this ghost town and destroyed most of its center. The object was seen by a number of people streaking over the western United States before it finally came to rest here, just near the center of town. As you can see behind me—”

Mal turned off the screen. “Well, it looks like the Secret remains a secret for another day. That was a close one.”

The other Jihaddi nodded. Either the authorities hadn’t realized that the blast patterns looked very little like a meteor strike, or they weren’t telling.

“So,” Mal said. “We can start Gating people home as soon as you’re ready.”

He swept a stern glare over the assembled. “Keep your ‘linkers with you and charged up. They’re the best means we have of locating you in an emergency.”

A chorus of “Yes, Mal”’s answered him. As the others headed out the door, he leaned back in his chair and breathed a small sigh of relief.

“Boss?”

He looked up to see Minerva, a slightly worried expression on her face. “Yes?”

“About Agharti?”

Oh, yes, that.

“Leave things as they are.”

Minerva looked even more worried. “Until September?”

“Oh, it won’t be all that bad.” He smiled reassuringly. “I know what I’m doing.”

#### THURSDAY, APRIL 15, 2004 WASHINGTON, D.C.

Laurel Eisenhower had a new large stack of paper on her desk. This wasn’t too unusual; her desk was the dumping ground of the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research, the place that weird casefiles went to die. And ever since the DHS has suggested a few reforms to streamline intelligence gathering, her desk had become the dumping ground for the rest of the US intelligence world as well.

The one time she’d managed to get moved to an active unit after three years of poking through files filled with UFO sightings, she’d watched a man jump off a building and turn into a dragon. At that point she’d decided to go back to digging through other people’s dementia instead of trying to deal with her own.

So here were a bunch more UFO sightings for her to look through today. Bright purple comets sighted in small towns from Pennsylvania to New Mexico. And speaking of New Mexico, here was a summary of what the FBI had pulled out of the buildings in Dry Well after that meteor strike. Scorch marks? Bullet holes?

Men turning into dragons?

She got out a map of the United States and started plotting all the towns where the sightings occurred. When she was done she had a picture of a bright purple object moving at the speed of a ballistic missile from Pennsylvania towards Dry Well, Nevada.

The next file was thankfully unconnected with bright lights in the sky. It involved an eyewitness report of monsters in the sewers of New York City. Large, gray, scaly lizard monsters. Apparently one of them had asked the sewer worker where the rest of the “Zuh-hurk battle force” was before he’d turned and fled.

Laurel sighed and picked up the next report. It was going to be a long night.

**FAR, FAR AWAY...**

“The Herald is dead.”

Silence. The servitor knelt, trembling, in the darkness, hoping that his master would not simply strike him down for the news.

**AND THE OTHERS?**

Relief. Although his master’s voice always conjured fear, the servitor would have at least a few more fleeting moments of life.

“We have... news, my lord. Of a few living. But we did not find any great number of them.”

The servitor knew better than to look up, but he got the faint impression that his master was pleased with the news. **GOOD. WE WILL PROCEED.**

As the servitor scurried out the door, Charn’El, High Mage of Lyra, leaned back on his throne and smiled.