

1. Phantom: Wander

I

Beneath the grey clouds rolling over Vivimor, Isaac Riel went striding into the delicate heat of the afternoon, racing towards the western Wall.

Don Quixote High School wasn't out for another few minutes, but Isaac's last teacher of the day always let them go early, and Isaac was already out the door and down the hall before his teacher had quite finished giving him permission to go. He slipped through the doors and out past the crowded buses idling around the Don Quixote statue near their school's front, and his grin widened with every step.

He was of medium height and rather thin, though he had broad shoulders made broader still by his occasional boxing matches with his father. He had a tan, angular face, with a slender nose and a mouth that always seemed to be on the verge of twitching up into a smile. His sandy hair was loosely clumped above energetic blue eyes that never seemed to rest too long in any one place.

He headed west beneath the wan grey light of afternoon, winding his way between the squat cookie-cutter buildings of Central Vivimor — mostly stores, offices, and government buildings, all built according to the same blocky pre-fab template. His friend Kate sometimes walked this route with him, but lately she'd been taking other roads so as to avoid the Muertos, and he didn't want to waste time waiting for her. Days this sunny were a rarity in Vivimor, and he didn't have that much time if he was going to make it to the lookout before sundown.

He turned down Main Street, not sparing a second glance for the various members of the District Police in their glossy black-and-grey uniforms. From the corner of his eye he saw several turn to face him, but none moved to stop him, and Isaac kept his own eyes fixed on the gargantuan concrete overpass that divided East Vivimor from West, a sprawling monolith severed at either end from the highway that had once run over this place, back when it was a speck of a town on the California/Nevada border. Without the highway, the overpass had been transformed into a relic of majestic mystery, a gate between worlds.

Several DPs floated on the shadowy border beneath the overpass, but Isaac paid them no mind as he sped into the darkness, and as the cool air washed over his skin Isaac thrilled a little more. On the other side of the overpass sprawled the decayed tenements of West Vivimor. Just against the overpass and running out along the narrow sidestreets were shops, churches, and poorer schools, and these soon gave way to shoddy firetraps and government housing, and at last to the broken buildings abandoned right

after the first flight from the Wasting. This section of the city was thick with menace — people were always moving in the shadows, and the figures you saw from the corner of your eye were gone as soon as you turned to get a better look at them.

As Isaac wound his way deeper into West Vivimor, he spied a hulking Cormorant, recognizable from the white bandana on his head with its emblem of black wings emblazoned on the front, pacing to and fro just down Bell Street. Isaac vaguely recognized the guy and raised a hand in greeting, but the Cormorant didn't seem to see him, and kept pacing. Isaac shrugged and started whistling, but his whistle screeched to a stop when he rounded the corner ahead of him.

The man standing in the middle of cracked and pothole-ridden street was slender in the same way a whip was slender — there was an implicit ferocity and cruelty in his every moment, from the snapping of his dark eyes to the drooping curls of his greasy hair. He wore the long grey coat of Los Corazones del Infierno, with a black band on its left sleeve marking him as a captain in their ranks. The right sleeve bore the emblem of the Hearts' Boca Branch — a sinister smile, all teeth. Around him were five men of various shapes and sizes, but all were similarly greasy and all wore the grey coats of the Hearts.

Isaac turned on his heel and found the way behind him blocked by four men, one of whom was an impressive brick whose muscles visibly rippled even through his grey coat.

“Hey, Eastie,” the Boca Captain called softly from behind him, his voice all predatory menace. And yeah, Isaac could sense the danger, but the racing of his heart made his whole body thrill again, and his grin didn't quite fade even as he took two quick steps backwards and adjusted his hands so that the switchblade he'd slipped into the lining of his jacket was within easy reach.

“How's it going, guys?” Isaac asked.

“Not so good, chico,” the Boca Captain said. He sounded closer, and when Isaac turned to face him, he discovered that his men had closed the gap, so they now formed a ring around him. “Little whiteboy like you comes walkin' through our streets, I start to get nervous.”

“Streets are free,” Isaac countered. “Joe's orders.”

A chuckle rippled through the ring of men around him. “Joe's orders, Marco!” called someone behind Isaac, practically giggling.

“Right, right,” Marco said, lifting his hands. “Joseph Sanchez says we gotta respect you shits. Gotta make you feel safe.” Marco leaned close, so Isaac could smell the stink of his sweat. “But what Sanchez don't know won't hurt him, neh?”

“Empty your pockets,” growled one of the men behind him. Isaac shrugged, trying to act casual even as he relished the drained sensation of adrenaline pumping through his body, and turned out the pockets of his jeans. Empty, of course. What kind of idiot brought money into West Vivimor?

The same kinda idiot who goes looking for trouble there?

“No money, huh?” Marco whispered. “Too bad.” But there was still menace in his tone, and Isaac stepped backwards, his eyes flickering around. The circle of Hearts seemed so much tighter now, like a noose closing about his neck.

“So I should go,” Isaac said.

“Yeah?” Marco asked. “I dunno, chico. Whiteboy like you, I think you got somethin' of value. Maybe your implant, eh?”

Isaac's heart beat faster still. “You gonna take my ear?”

“Might be worth something, yeah?” Marco asked. “Don't really want to let an Eastie like you go without learning your place.”

“Try it.” The challenge flew from Isaac's lips before he had time to think, but there wasn't time for hesitation now. As his heart thundered in his chest, he locked eyes with Marco, trying to focus his eyes in a defiant glare. For a long time, no one moved

“Oh, for fuck's sake, Isaac,” Kate growled. “Just tell him your damn name!”

Isaac's fluttering heart gave a start and he glanced over his shoulder. The fierce blonde woman walking down the street was shrugging on a grey coat with the black band of a Hearts' captain on the right sleeve. The left bore the insignia of a hand, palm first, all fingers up. The girl herself was lithe and muscular, her every movement flowing like a river. Her hair was tied back into a ponytail that exposed a broad, pale forehead, and her thin lips were curled back in her habitual scowl as hawkish green eyes swept about the gathered Hearts.

“Back off, Hammond,” Marco said, eyes still fixed on Isaac.

“Shut it, Marco,” snapped Kate. The note of warning in her tone brooked no argument. “Isaac. Tell them your name.”

“But-”

“*Isaac.*”

Isaac grimaced. “Riel,” he muttered. “Isaac Riel.”

Horried gasps rippled through the men around him. Kate strode to Isaac's side and turned her glaring gaze to Marco.

Marco's face hadn't changed. “Riel?” he repeated. “As in Captain Riel?”

“You know the name, right?” Kate asked. “The man who helped build the Wall Guard. The man who saved the city from Ghosts. The man who trained Joe. Get it?”

Marco glanced at her. “Think that protects him?” he asked.

Kate took a step forward, and there was a terrible power in that step, like a thunderous wave

crashing upon a beach. Marco and Isaac both flinched at the sight of it.

"Hearts absorbed the Cucarachas, Marco," she said. "You little shits were thieves and bullies, but that's not what we are. You don't get to harass people, and you sure as shit don't get to take ears. Got it?"

Marco glared at her and then spat on the ground. "Fuckin' Eastie," he said, and then turned and headed down the street. His men followed him, none of them quite daring to look at Kate.

When they were out of sight, Kate turned her baleful gaze on Isaac. "What the hell was that?" she demanded.

Isaac shifted uncomfortably. "I was fine," he said.

"You were about to get your ear cut off."

"I can handle myself."

"Not from what I've seen."

"Look, just because you went and started leading a revolution doesn't make you tougher than me," Isaac said.

"No," Kate agreed. "I've been tougher than you for a *long* time." She glanced around for a moment, then added, "And don't call it a revolution. As far as anyone knows, we're just criminals."

"Right," Isaac said, rolling his eyes. "No one knows what you guys are doing."

"Not officially," Kate said. "Why'd you get here so early? Weren't you supposed to wait up for me?"

"You never take Main Street anymore," Isaac sighed. "Too many Muertos, right?"

Kate shrugged. "Yeah."

"So I came by myself," Isaac said.

"And almost got your ear cut off."

"I would have been fine!"

"You'd have gone into shock and died."

"You're entitled to your opinion." He turned his gaze west. "Got some free time?" he asked.

"Wanna come to the lookout?"

She shook her head. "Sorry," she said. "I'm on duty."

"Ugh," Isaac grunted. "Always on duty."

"Some of us actually want to do something with our lives, Isaac," Kate said.

"And some of us spend all their time working," Isaac retorted. But there was a certain tension to Kate's face that he didn't like. In the years he'd known her he'd rarely seen her look at ease, but he hadn't seen her look this harried since before she'd decided to join the Hearts. "You okay?"

Kate hesitated, then shrugged again. "Close as I ever am," she said.

"You look tired."

"There's a lot going on," Kate answered.

"Anything I can help with?"

Kate gave a single bark of laughter. "You?"

Isaac grimaced. "Gee, thanks."

Kate clapped a hand on his shoulder. "I appreciate it. Try not to get killed out there, okay?"

"I'll do my best." He gave her a jaunty wave and set off again, relishing the faint feeling of weakness in his arms and legs, the memory of danger and the cold look in Marco's eyes.

2

He was well off the beaten path — solidly out of gang territory and into the forsaken stretch of crumbling buildings near the Wall where no one who could help it lived anymore — when his implant started chirping in his ear. His eyes darted to the little screen embedded in the skin beneath the knuckles of his left hand. His dad was calling. He mouthed the word, "Answer."

"What are you doing in the Wall District?" his father said through the implant in his left ear, the gentle authority of his voice making Isaac's neck reflexively prickle with guilt.

Isaac frowned. "Aren't you only supposed to use the monitor for emergencies?"

"I'll admit that's true if you promise me you've never used it to make sure your mother and I weren't on our way home."

Isaac's frown deepened. "You're a terrible father."

"Probably," his dad agreed. "What are you doing in the Wall District?"

"Obvious, isn't it?" Isaac said. "I'm headed up to the lookout, gonna get a good look at the Wastes. It's the perfect day for it."

His father was silent for a moment. "You usually let us know."

"Mom's working until tomorrow," Isaac replied, rolling his eyes. "And I didn't know you were going to get off garrison duty tonight."

"Samuels traded me — apparently he's got a hot date Saturday."

"Wasn't the last one a spy?"

"Technically she was just a secretary at the Chinese embassy," his father mused. "But Samuels is a talkative guy."

"Yeah," Isaac said. "Either way, glad you're getting time off."

"You and me both, kid," his father said. "Means you can come home, see your old man."

Isaac sighed. "Why do you want me home so bad?"

"Just..." His father broke off, and the hesitation in his dad's voice made Isaac stop walking. He focused on his implant.

"Just what?" Isaac asked, a trickle of excitement racing up his spine and making his fingers spark.

"Nothing," his father said.

"Dad!"

"Just a couple things I've been hearing," his dad amended.

"Like what?"

"Some stuff going on with Geneton," his dad said. "And crime's way up this month. We're seeing a lot more murders than we're used to, and it looks like things with the Hearts and the Muertos might be coming to a head. I don't want you out by the Wall this late, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," Isaac grunted. "Look, I won't stick around, okay? I'll get up to the lookout and come straight home."

His father considered this for a moment. "Alright," he agreed. "Straight home?"

"Dad..."

"Right, right. Be careful, okay?"

"Always am. Love you."

"Love you too." Isaac ended the call and continued on his way. He was distracted, however — distracted by the excitement still making his fingertips itch and his insides dance. Isaac sensed there was something his father hadn't told him. What was he hiding? Were the Muertos about to raid West Vivimor? Were the gangs acting up? Did it involve Ghosts?

The thought of a Ghost free in Vivimor sent thrills up Isaac's spine. He'd seen the videos of soldiers fighting Ghosts in the early days, their piercing shrieks ringing through the air as they tore through walls and tanks and whatever got in their way. He tried to remember that a Ghost in the city would be dangerous — his father always got this haunted look on his face when they came up, and they'd killed hundreds during the Wasting — but still electricity crackled behind his eyes and he wondered if he could face such monsters, the way his father had.

Isaac was alone with his thoughts as he walked towards his lookout. This close to the Wall, there was rarely a soul in sight — although the Kopelsburg Defensive Field ostensibly kept the Wasting from reaching the city, old fear kept this place pretty empty. Made sense, Isaac supposed — he dimly remembered, from one of his mother's lectures, that about a third of those living in the Wall District had contracted PPS. Those had been the first cases, before anyone had understood how dangerous the

disease truly was.

He ducked into an alley and immediately wrinkled his nose at the stench seeping off of the colossal pile of trash bags at the far end, the black plastic nearly grey with dust and torn where it had not simply burst so that the rotten sludge within spilling out onto the concrete. The pile was roughly as tall as Isaac himself — he'd often wondered why the people in the area had dumped their trash into this alley. Just to the right of the pile of trash was a fire escape; after taking a moment to clear the tears from his eyes, Isaac began to scamper his way up.

Some of the steps were missing, and the whole staircase occasionally wobbled and groaned in protest at Isaac's bounding steps, but he trusted it to hold up — it had done so for two years now. Three stories up his bounding strides slowed to a weary trudge; five stories up, and he was panting as he crawled up each step, clutching at a stitch in his side.

He took a moment to breathe and leaned against the building, staring up at the low grey clouds that perpetually loomed over Vivimor, warping what sunlight leaked through. His mother claimed those clouds were simply the result of the dust of the Waste itself (which, for whatever reason, was not actively dangerous — the Wasting effect did not extend to all the dust and ash it left in its wake). But Isaac loved those clouds. He loved the strange, pale sunlight that leaked through them, leaving everything a little murky, a little dangerous. It suited Vivimor; it blurred the boundaries, left everything in an ambiguous haze. Then again, he'd never seen normal sunlight, except in movies.

He broke off staring and resumed his climb.

It was fourteen stories to the roof, and by the time he got there Isaac was exhausted again, his legs quivering beneath him as he struggled for breath. The view, as always, was worth it.

The Wall stretched out before him, two or three miles in either direction, before it began to curve around to cut Vivimor off from the outside world. Beyond the Wall towered the enormous, silver pylons which projected the prismatic cascade of Kopelsburg Defensive Field from one side of the continent to the other. Its neon hues shimmered, twisted, danced — Isaac tried to find patterns and pictures (here a rabbit racing across a field; here a dragon, winging its way across the sky). Red, blue, green, yellow, white — they swirled and pulsed, waves undulating in every direction.

The Field was a marvel of opaque light, but from where Isaac was standing he could just see over it to the Wastes beyond — the rising dunes of grey ash and billowing dust, the crumbling ruins of buildings barely visible through the haze, and the distant white crosses of hibernating Ghosts scattered like stars against a dull backdrop.

The view so entranced Isaac that it took him several seconds to realize he was not alone. There was someone else on his lookout.

He had his back to Isaac, revealing fine dark hair cropped close to his head. He had a powerful body — every bit as powerful as the huge brick of a man who'd threatened Isaac at Marco's behest. His shoulders were broad, and muscular arms and back bulged beneath the thin fabric of his white undershirt. His blue jeans (pulled taut along lean, strong legs) were tucked into a pair of well-worn black boots.

In the the two years since Isaac had started coming here — the tallest building in the Wall District that was still safe to climb — he had never seen another soul atop his lookout.

"Hello?" Isaac said, and the man turned to face him.

2. Aegis: Recon

I

Kate Hammond paced back and forth along the corner where she'd seen Isaac Riel, and every time she turned on her heel her face seemed still more grim. She almost wished she'd gone to the lookout with Isaac when she'd seen him an hour ago, but she had other business in West Vivimor tonight. The Cormorant representative she was supposed to be meeting with was thirty minutes late.

The absent Cormorant wasn't the only problem occupying her anxious mind. She kept thinking back to Marco and his squad, threatening Isaac. Yeah, it was stupid for Easties without gang affiliations to be in West Vivimor at all, but part of the reason the Hearts were so beloved was because they were a benevolent alternative to both the chaos of the gangs and the brutal oppression of the District Police. Absorbing the other gangs into Boca boosted their numbers and their resources, but it also added a whole army of bullies and thugs to their ranks, and it made Kate uncomfortable. She'd been a Heart too long, and these little compromises were beginning to feel dangerous.

Footsteps sounded from around the corner. Kate's head jerked up, but the girl who rounded the corner was definitely not a Cormorant. She was far too thin, her threadbare shirt and jeans clinging to her skeletal figure like rags. A mane of tawny hair hung over feverish brown eyes that burned with manic intensity from the confines of a dark-skinned face that would have been pretty if it weren't so gaunt.

"Hey!" Kierra called cheerfully, bounding towards Kate and engulfing her in a hug.

"Hey yourself," Kate said, her scowl fading a little. "Haven't seen you in awhile."

Kierra was something of an enigma to Kate. She was only a little older than Kate and Isaac, but she never seemed to be in school. They'd started running into her in the days when they'd first started wandering West Vivimor, but Kate hadn't really gotten to know the manic woman until after she'd joined the Hearts. Kierra was a perpetual ghost on the fringes of the trouble in West Vivimor. She'd definitely been involved in the destruction of both the Reapers and Lucas Galgoa's sex trafficking ring, but no one she talked to seemed to know how.

"Yeah, well, you know me!" Kierra said, releasing her grip on Kate and stepping away. "Don't like to stay idle long. You get it, yeah?"

"Yeah," Kate said. "I get it."

"You keeping busy?" Kierra asked, hopping from foot to the other and staring up at the grey sky.

"Trying to," Kate said, looking down the street for the fourth time — still no sign of the Cormorant

she was supposed to meet.

"How's the gang?"

"They're..." She frowned. "Fine, I guess. But we're not a gang."

"So you're an army?" Kierra asked.

Kate grimaced. "No," she said. "We can't...that makes us sound pretty damn treasonous."

"So it is a gang."

Kate sighed. "Fine, yes, it's a gang."

"So you're a gangbanger."

Kate's eyes narrowed. "Don't you have some place to be?"

"You don't want to be a gangbanger?" Kate glared at her, and Kierra laughed. "But yeah, I've got shit to do." She kissed Kate on the cheek and waved a hand over one shoulder as she went bounding off down the street. Kate sighed again, scuffed one tennis shoe against the ground, and then leaned back against the wall. Kierra could be abrasive, but Kate was sorry to see her go. She was a welcome distraction from Kate's worries.

The Cormorants were a gang of tech thieves, and though they were not the largest gang they were organized, disciplined, and fairly well-liked. They would bring a much-needed financial boost to the Hearts and gain the protection of a much stronger organization all without adding to the trouble caused by the other gangs that joined the Hearts' Boca branch. She and Tom had been pushing for this meeting for months, and Joe had finally agreed *and* put her in charge of making the initial offer. This was a huge opportunity for the Hearts, for the Cormorants, and for Kate. So where the hell was their contact?

Her implant chirped in her ear. She mouthed the word "answer" and waited, counting off in her head the time it should take to switch to the new network: 3, 2, 1...

"Izquierda 5, this is Izquierda 1, are you receiving?"

"Tom, this is Izquierda 5, you're coming in just fine. Montebanc's running smooth?"

"Smooth as we can hope." Tom Patton's voice was as quiet and thoughtful as always, but Kate had known Tom a long time and could hear the strain in his words.

"You okay, Tom?" she asked.

"I'm alive, Kate," he replied. "You made contact with the Cormorant's rep yet?"

"No sign of him," she said. "Been here awhile, Tom. We heard anything from them?"

"We have, actually."

Huh. They'd called Hearts command directly? That was a bit strange. Were they trying to negotiate for better terms? "What, do they want something extra?" Kate said. "We're givin'em a pretty sweet deal already."

"They were wondering where their contact was, actually," Tom said. "Beginning to suspect foul play."

Her mind raced through the possibilities — a missing Cormorant who was supposed to meet with a Heart to discuss the possibility of a merger. Who else but the Muertos would profit from preventing such a meeting? "We're sure this isn't a stalling tactic?" she asked. "Their contact goes missing, they threaten to turn on us, maybe get a little something extra for their troubles?"

"Joe considered that," admitted Tom. "But we don't think so. They didn't even accuse us. Apparently this isn't the first Cormorant they've lost recently."

Kate frowned. "Tom," she started. "Do the Cormorants have their own network?"

"They've got some security," Tom said. "But they're not as strong as us, so they can't buy space on Monteb Blanc."

"So it could be the Muertos."

"Just call them the District Police, Kate," Tom said. "You don't know Spanish."

"Muertos sounds more intimidating."

"Does that *matter*?"

"It's more fun to say, too." She was frowning at the concrete below her feet. "Is there something else bugging you, Tom?"

"Boca 16 was supposed to report a half an hour ago."

"Boca six..." she repeated. "Hang on, is that Marco's unit?"

Tom didn't answer at once; she tapped her foot against the ground, waiting. "Uh, yeah, actually," he said. "Are you memorizing the roster? Because you don't have to do that."

"I saw Marco about an hour ago," she answered. "Harassing Isaac Riel."

"James Riel's kid?" asked Tom. "Joe wouldn't be like that."

"No, he wouldn't." Kate grimaced. "I don't like Boca, Tom."

"Take it up with Joe."

"He won't listen!" she exclaimed. "They cause more trouble than the rest of the Hearts combined! Tom, I'm telling you, one of these days they're going to do something monumentally stupid, and—"

"Kate," Tom cut in. "This really isn't the time to be talking about this."

Kate took a deep breath, counted to three, let it out. "Yeah," she said. "Yeah, I know." She lifted herself from the little patch of wall she'd been leaning against. "What do you need from me?"

"When do you need to be off duty?" Tom asked.

Kate frowned and calculated. Her dad was on a book tour, and her mom was working until later tonight — still, she'd catch hell if her mom made it back before she did. "Let's say 8," she said.

"Alright. I'm putting you and all your active members on the network for maximum coordination. Try and find the Cormorant contact, and make sure B16 isn't in trouble. Clear?"

"We know where B16 was when they went missing?"

"No idea."

Kate frowned. "We don't have them on the network?"

"We prefer to keep Boca off the network when we can, and Marco's new enough we don't owe him anything. Need anything else?"

Kate shook her on. "I'm on it."

"Be careful, Kate," Tom said, and ended the call.

2

She headed down the street, her face creased by a thoughtful frown. Most of her unit was made up of people around her age, which made it easier to allot them a spot on the network, but it also meant that most of them were busy today. Charles and Fred were both tied up in work until late; Rob, Mike, and Ken were all having trouble with their parents and were lying low for a few days; and Daniel and Nick were on probation and under investigation for being possible Hearts, so she couldn't call them. Matt was free, though, and knowing Jack he was already on patrol.

She rounded a corner and nearly ran headlong into someone walking the opposite direction. She jerked backwards and nearly fell. Across from her, Olivia did the same, and without thinking Kate wrapped a hand around Olivia's wrist to steady her. There was a precarious moment where they both teetered uneasily on the edge of collapse: then Kate gave a firm pull and righted them both.

"Thanks, Katie," Olivia said, shaking out her long dark hair. Olivia was a bombshell of a girl — her bangs framed her pale oval face with its slender nose and full, pouting lips. Her curvy figure was currently hidden beneath the rougher clothes she tended to wear when she was doing work in West Vivimor. Today, that mean loose jeans and a baggy t-shirt.

"No problem," Kate said, her words clipped. She took a step back and nodded before stepping around the girl, but Olivia turned after her.

"Hey, Katie?" she said. "I could sorta use your help with something."

Kate closed her eyes and took a deep breath, marshaling her control, before turning back to Olivia. "I'm sort of busy, Olivia," she said. "Hearts' work, I-"

"It'll just take a second!" Olivia rushed, big brown eyes blinking innocently.

Kate sighed and rubbed a hand across her eyes. "Sure," she managed. "Sure. What is it?"

"I'm looking for some of the guys I help out," Olivia said, hefting the bag on her shoulder. "Pete and them, you know? They usually stick together."

Kate thought for a moment. The name Pete did ring a bell — a short man who wore an extremely dirty poncho and a hat made of equal parts tin foil and old newspaper.

"Haven't seen him," Kate said.

Olivia visibly deflated, her shoulders slumping and her eyes falling to the ground. "You sure?" she asked. "I mean, I guess Pete's easy to recognize, but—"

"Olivia," Kate said, trying to keep her voice level. "If I see them, I'll let you know. You're not exactly hard to get a hold of."

Olivia hesitated. "I...I guess that's true," she said. "You okay? You sound kind of on edge."

Kate forced a smile. "Just kinda worried, is all. A lotta stuff going on."

"Oh. Okay." She stared more intently at Kate. "Anything I can help with?"

Kate hesitated, then slowly nodded. "Yeah, actually," she said. "Let Sanchez know if you see Boca 16?"

Olivia's nose wrinkled. "That little shit Marco's group? Do I have to?"

This time, Kate's smile wasn't forced. "I asked Tom the same question."

"Ugh, fine," Olivia sighed. "Good luck, yeah?"

"Yeah. You too."

Kate walked away before Olivia could think of another reason to stop her, taking slow, even breaths to help regain her calm. Even when she ran into Olivia at DQHS, the other girl always left her feeling prickly, uncomfortable, unbalanced. It wasn't really Olivia's fault, Kate told herself — although she was always so goddamn presumptuous, always expected people to do her work for her, always...!

She was getting upset again. Ease off. Relax. What really set her off was she had no idea how to act around Olivia. Joe had made it clear that she was due no respect besides her safety, but then, Joe was only human, and anyways they wouldn't want to piss off her miserable, brutish father. They already had enough trouble with the Muertos, why did Joe have to—

Focus. Missing people.

"Call Matt," she said into the air, and her implant started to ring in her ear. It was time to get to work.

3. Leviathan: Search

1

There was no sign of Pete or the two men he watched over in all West Vivimor. She had asked some of the other regulars — James, who worked in the Main Street food kitchen, said he hadn't seen them in some time, and John Gibbons (a homeless man with a faint British accent and immaculate teeth), told her they hadn't shown up in the abandoned but well-preserved apartment complex they shared with twelve other men and women.

Olivia bit her lower lip in thought.

Ted was a bit slow on the uptake, and Angus suffered from severe PTSD, but Poncho Pete (or the Man with No Name, as he always insisted) looked after them as best he could and kept them safe through three years of DP raids and gangs and all the trials of being homeless in Vivimor. She didn't know their story (besides the fact that Ted had fled an abusive home and Angus had never recovered from his time as a member of the California National Guard) but they always managed to stay safe. So where were they?

"Time?" she asked her implant.

"5:17," the voice of Audrey Hepburn whispered into her ear.

Plenty of time yet — her parents were both working late tonight. Anyways, she wouldn't be out much longer. There was only one place left to check.

The Church of Our Lady was an old but dignified little church just inside West Vivimor, well outside gang territory. The main chapel, which was older than the town Vivimor had grown around, had a sloping roof with a few tiles missing and a freshly-painted exterior, and was ordained with a statue of the Virgin above the main door and crosses to either side. An angular modern wing, white-washed and gleaming with numerous windows, swung out to the side of the chapel. The chapel contained an expansive library Father Rodriguez had built mainly for the purpose of educating his parish, but the library's usual occupant was Ryan Caloin, a student who attended the Geneton Institute with Alejandro Sangre.

When she arrived at the Church, Alejandro was standing in front of the modern wing, serving soup to a long line of men and women clutching Styrofoam bowls. Alex was a skeleton of a man, with stringy black hair and dark eyes sunk deep into the contours of his skull. His bones protruded at awkward angles through his skin, giving him a jagged look not at all helped by his perpetual thin-lipped frown.

"Alex!" she called.

He held up one long finger and served another bowl. She waited as he served a second and then a third; on the fourth her eyes narrowed into a suspicious glare. "Alex," she repeated.

"I am busy, Miss Valisgrad," he said, serving a fifth bowl. "You shall have to wait."

She rolled her eyes. "Get one of the others to cover it."

"There is no one else," Alex said.

Olivia glanced past him and through the door into the modern wing. The offices were all dark.

"Where's Father Rodriguez?" she asked, turning back to him. His glare was strong enough to crease his jutting brow, but his hands never ceased their clockwork motion — scoop the soup, ladle it into a bowl, push the bowl into outstretched hands.

"He had to meet with the Bishop today," Alex said. "I was left in charge."

"Okay," she said. She waited another few seconds, but Alex showed no sign of breaking his serving rhythm. She cleared her throat. "I need your help."

"You will have to wait until I am finished. Patience is a Virtue, you know."

"So is Kindness," Olivia retorted.

He glanced at her without missing a beat in his ladling. "Charity and Diligence are all well and good, but there are limits to what I can do, and I cannot simply—"

"Oh for Christ's sake!" she exclaimed.

His eyes narrowed further. "And now you take the Lord's name in vein."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Look, I have to go home. Can you hold onto these for me?" She pulled the bag from her shoulder and offered it to him.

He looked at the bag for a moment and then back to the bowl he was filling. "If you remember in the night as you go to sleep, 'I have not done what I ought to have done,' rise up and do it," he said, pushing the bowl into the hands of a waiting woman.

"This from the man who just told me he was too tired to help?" she demanded.

His eyes flickered towards her, dismissive and disdainful, and to her disbelief he actually turned his nose up a little. She rolled her eyes again and continued, "They're sandwiches for Pete and them."

"Pete?" he repeated, breaking off his clockwork serving to stare at her. "The man with the poncho?"

Olivia shifted, the skin on her neck prickling. "Yeah?"

"That is...strange," Alex admitted. "They usually stop by around this time, but I have not seen them."

Alex's frown further twisted the thin layer of skin covering his skull, but his eyes weren't on her.

"Troubling," he said. He hesitated, then extended a hand. "Very well. If I see him I shall provide. And I

shall ask after him."

Olivia offered him a bright smile; Alex shifted uncomfortably and looked down at his feet. "Thanks, Alex," she said. She gave him the bag and headed east, towards home.

2

She did not get very far.

They materialized from the buildings around her — grey coats with an open eye emblazoned on their left sleeves. Their leader was a Chinese man a little older than she was, whose every movement bespoke a clockwork efficiency even Alex would have envied. His coat hung over slacks and a fine button-up shirt, all immaculately pressed.

"Drop-out," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Technically I finished school, Miss Valisgrad," said Andrew Zhao. "I simply found more important things to occupy my time than a traditional career."

She placed her hands on her hips and pursed her lips in a pouting glare. "You think being Joe's errand boy's more important?"

"Yes."

She threw up her hands in exasperation. "You're always so damn serious."

"And you are eternally mercurial."

"That English degree was totally worth it, Andrew."

"Thank you."

She opened her mouth, thought better of her retort, and then closed it, taking a second to gather her thoughts. "Right," she huffed. "Let me guess. Joe wants to see me." Andrew inclined his head.

"Couldn't drag his lazy ass out of that warehouse to tell me himself."

Andrew coughed. "Come now, Miss Valisgrad—"

"Stop. Calling me. Miss."

Andrew shrugged, ignoring the faces of the Hearts all around him (each was trying to hide a smile as they stared at the ground, save for old Gregor, who was grinning avidly as his eyes flickered between the two of them). Ojo's members were generally older than the other members of the Hearts, and were automatically given wages for their service, since they were permanently on-duty. Ojo 1 were the elite of the elite, Joe's handpicked staff who served his immediate needs. She knew these men well — Gregor, the oldest man in the Hearts; Vic, who never used a gun; Roberto, who had an enormous, carefully waxed mustache. And of course Andrew himself — quiet, efficient, completely obnoxious.

"Olivia," he said. "Are you coming or not?"

"You bet your ass I'm coming!" she growled, stalking forwards as the Hearts formed a loose cordon around her. "Sending his men to fetch me, I'm going to-" She cut herself off and settled for an especially nasty glare at the Hearts around her; they collectively avoided her gaze.

They wound deeper into the Wall District, then cut north through a network of decayed buildings which eventually came out onto an old concrete warehouse. Joe had once told her it had been built hastily by the army to house food for the California refugees; once Vivimor (Internal Refugee Camp B, she recalled from her father) had begun to develop into a proper city, most of the diseased tenements near the Wall had been abandoned. This warehouse had been well-built, however, and had stood the test of the past twenty years.

The Hearts around her all stopped and lifted their fingers to their ears. Olivia's felt an odd buzz in her right ear, a vibration in her implant that shivered its way out into her skull; then it passed, and they were moving forwards again.

"We're in a blank spot?" she asked.

"Along with two other spots in the city," Andrew said. "They should just assume it's satellite trouble."

"Actually taking risks this time, is he?" she growled. "How sweet of him."

Andrew shook his head. "Miss Valisgrad-" he started.

"Don't you dare," she hissed. "He makes me wait *this long* and then sends you guys to fetch me? There's no excuse."

The small rusting door set in the side of the warehouse swung open as they drew near, and they streamed forwards in single file, led by Andrew with Olivia following close behind. He nodded to the two massive Hearts standing in the shadows of the door; she swept past them and him, storming through the aisles of neatly-stacked crates and to the back of the building, up the metal staircase and into the office complex which the Hearts had remodeled, knocking out walls and building new ones.

Joseph Sanchez was staring at a holographic display of Vivimor, chewing his lip as he looked over several red dots moving here and there through illusory streets. His hair was kept short in the military style, exposing his sloping forehead and dark, brooding eyes. There was something oddly ship-like in his whole bearing; his rudder of a nose and his powerful, curving jaw, the undershirt pulled tight against his broad chest like a sail stretched by a breeze, his arms and legs like masts in their stalwart solidity. The gun he wore on his hip seemed almost an afterthought, the holster sloppily slung along his belt and missing two or three loops she could see. Two other members of Ojo One were looking with him, while a third worked a console in the corner. All looked up when she entered.

"You're going to yell at me, aren't you?" Joe asked

"Why would I do that?" she asked, her voice all brittle, mocking sweetness. "Because we haven't seen each other in weeks? Because you didn't even send me a message? *Because you sent your men to get me?*"

"All of those seem like reasons you'd yell," Joe agreed. "Come on."

He turned and headed to a little door tucked away in the back; Olivia, scowling, followed. This section of the warehouse had been turned into a small apartment, complete with a couch, a desk, a computer, and a comfortable queen-sized bed. He closed the door behind them and turned towards her.

"Where the hell have you been?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "Busy. Lot of people getting killed over the last few days, in bad ways. And the Muertos are sending patrols in all over the place."

"I haven't noticed."

He smiled dryly. "You wouldn't."

She pursed her lips. "You could've called."

"I can't connect to the official network, you know that."

She folded her arms. "You could put me on *your* network."

"You're still on your dad's family cluster," Joe replied, heavy eyebrows arching. "I will not have you or my men exposed for the sake of an unnecessary luxury."

Unnecessary? That stung. "I'm willing to take the risk."

"I'm not."

"You're such an asshole!" she yelled, turning away from him. There were two quick steps, and then huge arms folded around her.

"If it'll keep those I care about safe, gladly," he breathed, his breath tickling her ear. She leaned back into him, and his lips trailed their way down her neck before he bit down. Then all her objections and anger were lost in a haze of loving lust.

4. Prophet: Doubt

Alejandro Sangre trudged his way home through the dark, tired but satisfied; he had managed to quietly boil two more pots of stew while still serving what he had, so none had gone hungry. He had even cleaned a little, though he'd left some dishes behind; there were limits to diligence, and anyways Sharon would come in the next day to finish up.

His apartment complex was actually further into West Vivimor than the church, but Alex was a familiar figure on the streets and was left alone. It did not take him long to creep his way up the dilapidated staircase to his apartment, weakly flickering lights revealing the tearing, peeling wallpaper which exposed a hollow framework of plastic and concrete. Their building was falling apart, but it was the best they could do for now.

His door was slightly ajar, and he nudged it open and slipped quietly into the living room. His mother was asleep on the couch, greying hair a wild mess and the lines on her thin face cast in wicked depth by the ghostly illumination of their malfunctioning holoscreen playing colorless reruns of some old sitcom. Alex grabbed a blanket from one end of the couch and pulled it over her, tucking it around her shoulders and neck. He stumbled into the kitchen, stepping over discarded clothes and books and ignoring the sink full of dishes he didn't have the energy to clean. He pulled the fridge open, stared mournfully at its gleaming empty expanse, and then sighed and closed the door.

He still had the sandwiches, though. Pete had never shown up to claim them. And worrying as that was, Alex was very hungry.

He moved into his room and flicked on a light. In contrast to the rest of the apartment, which was thick with his and his mother's accumulated clutter, his room was neat and spartan; a twin bed with a thin sheet, blanket, and pillow and a single desk with a hard-backed chair and book-sized console atop it. "Sync," he said, then took a bite out of the sandwich in his hand (turkey, ham, cheese, lettuce, some kind of sauce he couldn't identify...)

"Synced," said a calm female voice into his ear.

"Display," he said, and the little black disc on his desk suddenly flickered to life and offered him a holographic screen, clean and crisp and easily manipulated. He could never have afforded all this on his own, but the Geneton Institute provided such equipment free of charge to any students who needed it — the voice, the screen, even the console. He pulled out his chair and sank into it, staring at the screen. "Assignments," he said, and the screen changed, revealing his agenda. He frowned at it; he had fifty pages of reading to get through for Carmichael's class, equations to finish for Havery...

He ran a hand over his eyes and sighed. It was late, he was tired, he was hungry, but he was

struggling to maintain decent grades and he really couldn't afford to slack. But that was always the case, wasn't it? A Sisyphean struggle to keep up with all his responsibilities, all his obligations.

No matter how much he planned it was never enough — something always took too long or was harder than he expected. Something always fell through and went wrong. He might well be trying to do too much. But he couldn't cut back on his hours at the church — Father Rodriguez needed his help, he was being entrusted with more and more responsibility, he had to prove he was equal to the task.

Still, it was all starting to feel a little overwhelming, like he was drowning in it.

“Incoming call from Ryan Caloin,” said the voice in his ear.

Alex's face twisted. Ryan was probably calling to beg for help on Havery's equations — he never paid any attention in class and when he ran into trouble he inevitably turned to Alex, who kept diligent notes. Well, today Alex would simply be firm with the slacker; there were limits to charity, and sloth should not be rewarded.

“Answer,” he said. “Ryan, I am unwilling to share my-”

“Alex!” gasped Ryan. “Thank God! I need your help!”

Alex pursed his lips. “Ryan,” he said. “Theatrics will get you nowhere.”

“No, you — fuck, Alex, I need a place to hide.”

Alex hesitated. Whatever else could be said of Ryan, he was no delinquent. Lazy, childish, petty, but not a criminal

“What is wrong?” Alex said. “Why do you need to hide?”

“I...something attacked me.”

Alex felt the skin on his neck prickle. “Some *thing*?” he repeated.

“I don't know! It looked human, but it was — Christ it was so FUCK!”

Alex twitched at the roar in his ear. “Are you alright?”

“Just...I got hurt. I need help.”

Alex felt the cold weight of another's need settle over him. “Call the police.”

“No fuckin' way.”

Alex shook his head. “You still cling to your grudge?”

“Alex, I just — I need a place to hide. You've got the keys to the church, right?”

Alex glanced down at the keys bulging in his pocket. “Yes...” he said tentatively.

“Alex, you know I wouldn't call if it wasn't important. But I...I had to run and now I'm too far from home and...and it got my leg.”

“It got your leg?” Alex repeated, as his own leg twinged in sympathy.

“Bit it. Jesus.”

“Do not take the Lord's name in vain,” Alex said, but internally he was panicking. Something had bitten Ryan? What? How? Why?

“Fuck, Alex,” Ryan hissed. “I can't get far from here and I don't know who else to call and I just want to lay low for a few hours. Please?”

Alex grimaced. Leave the home he'd just returned to, leave his mountain of homework behind and go hungry for the sake of that ungrateful-

No. Do not resent. Do not complain. There was someone who needed his help.

“Very well,” he said. “Will you be able to reach the church without any help?”

“I'm almost there. I just...I don't want it to find me. Alex?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks, man. I...hurry.”

The call ended. Alex took a moment to breathe. What had Ryan meant? It looked human, but it wasn't? It had bitten his leg?

For a moment Alex was tempted to simply call the police — proud tyrants though they were, they seemed more equipped to handle something like this. But Ryan had reason enough to hate them, and Alex didn't want to betray his friend.

He frowned and got to his feet. He hastily wrote out a note to his mother — told her what had happened and where he was — and taped it to the fridge. He took one look at her, unconscious as the holoscreen blared, and hesitated. Should he wake her up?

No. She deserved every chance she got to rest, and Alex was yet equal to the task before him.

He headed out the door, grabbing their aluminum baseball bat as he went. Violence was to be avoided, but there was no need to go into the night unprepared. The Lord helped those who helped themselves.

5. Visionary: Potential

I

Guy Geneton was not a tall man, but he towered over his surroundings. Every detail of his person — from his dark hair, quite untamed, to his bright green eyes darting from face to face in the crowded lecture hall to the careless and yet somehow forceful sweeps of his disproportionately long limbs — indicated a restless energy barely contained by the body hosting it. He looked much younger than his forty-five years.

“We are limitless,” Geneton said, flashing a warm, confident smile. “Let no one tell you otherwise. Let no one tell you that we are meaningless, that we are dwarfed by the universe that looms around us. Let not the youth of our magnificent human race make us appear weak. We are infants, and in our infancy we have shaped the earth, built and leveled cities on a whim and turned the wheels of nature to our service. Our advent will be greater still.”

He brushed a piece of dust absently off his slightly rumpled suit and flashed another smile to the lecture hall. “I loathe so many of my peers in the scientific community for precisely this weakness — this refusal to accept the vast power of our intellect. It is a trend that has long historical roots, and it is a trend I intend to weed out. It does not matter that we cannot obtain absolute knowledge, that the universe is vast and unimaginable. We have overcome every limit nature has seen fit to impose upon us; we rule the oceans and ply the skies as effortlessly as we walk from one street to another. The challenges of the universe will be greater still, but we are equal to them!”

Sitting a little ways up in the lecture hall, Ryan Caloin — a hunched, hulking teen with too much acne beneath his mop of brown hair — leaned forward. He'd intended to take notes, but as soon as Geneton had begun to speak he had become too focused on the man's words to do anything but listen. Guy Geneton was normally something of a recluse (his apartment, Ryan had read, was beneath the Geneton Institute itself, somewhere in the midst of its elaborate scientific facilities), and in spite of attending the Institute for two years Ryan had never seen the man in person. So when he'd heard Geneton was going to be giving a lecture, Ryan jumped at the chance to attend, and the more Geneton spoke the more Ryan glowed with...what? Ambition? Pride? Pride, yes, but also knowledge with the force of an epiphany. Geneton's words touched a fundamental truth burning at Ryan's core.

“To be ignorant is not shameful,” Geneton said. “To be unaware of something is not a personal fault. But to know, for even an instant, that there is a larger truth to be discovered or a greater power to be gained and then to settle back into complacency is to be among the living dead. Mistakes are

inevitable. Hardship is inevitable. But we toddling scholars have already learned so much, and we will learn still more.” He tapped his temple. “We will understand everything. And when we do, there will be no more mistakes.”

The lecture hall hung suspended on his words for a moment before applause slowly swelled up. As half the room rose for a standing ovation, Ryan remained seated, staring at the energetic man at the center of the room. A part of him simply envied Geneton's confidence — Ryan, who tended to the pudgy and had always been clumsy, had none of the energy and force that Geneton wielded so effortlessly.

The applause had barely died when Geneton strode from the room, his black-suited bodyguards falling into a loose formation around him (Ryan had read that he'd been the victim of numerous assassination attempts over the years due to his controversial scientific pursuits). The gathered audience began to file out of the lecture hall, but Ryan remained seated, his green eyes fixed on the place where Guy Geneton had spoken as though he could absorb that audacity by osmosis.

“Incoming call from Raynor Laroque,” the voice of Sean Connery remarked conversationally into his ear.

“Answer,” Ryan said automatically.

“Yo!” Raynor said, voice buzzing like an especially energetic fly. “You done getting monologued at by our villain of the week?”

Ryan's face twisted. “He's not a villain!”

“He owns a genetics company at the edge of an apocalyptic wasteland!”

“So?” Ryan said. “He does good work.”

“As a front!” Raynor exclaimed. “Geez, how genre-blind can you be?”

“You watch too many movies,” Ryan said.

“Uh-huh. What's the speech he always gives? The one about how limitless people are? That screams egotistical extremist villain!”

“You're a paranoid freak,” Ryan said, slowly clambering to his feet.

“Could be. You at the Institute?”

Ryan grimaced as he exited the lecture hall and went stumping down the hallway towards the exit. There was no one else in sight. “Are you hacking into my implant again?”

“Bitch, please. I have your location at all times.”

“For the love of God, *why?*”

Raynor chuckled. “You never know when that kinda thing can come in handy.”

Ryan grimaced again. “I hope you didn't call just to make baseless accusations.”

“Would it surprise you if I did?”

Ryan pushed open the double doors and hopped down the steps. “No,” he replied.

“Good man. You need a ride?”

Ryan stopped walking, and pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Are you offering?”

“Maybe.”

“What's up?”

Raynor sighed. “Don't know, dude. Lots going on. People missing. People dead.”

Ryan shrugged. “Always people dying in Vivimor.”

“Not like this, dude. There's some seriously creepy shit going on.”

“Such as?”

“Well...” There was a moment of silence from Raynor's end, and Ryan immediately stopped walking and focused on his friend. Raynor might be eccentric, but Ryan owed him far too much to ever ignore him. After all, it had been Raynor who'd screwed with the District Police computer network so that Ryan had never quite reached central lock-up after he'd been arrested.

“Thirty people missing in the past week,” Raynor said. “No ransom demands. No clear suspects. And eighteen bodies. Brutalized. *Cannibalized*. That doesn't even get into what happened to the Cormorants.”

“What happened to the Cormorants?” Ryan asked.

“Same thing as the others. Only all at once.”

Ryan's mouth went dry. “Jesus.”

“You sure you don't need a ride?”

Ryan considered for a moment. Raynor's words seemed to flicker throughout the darkness, filling it with half-seen monsters menacing him from the corner of his eye. Each lonely island of light spilling out beneath the orange streetlamps seemed so fragile, besieged by shadows on all sides. “It's fine,” he forced himself to say. “My house isn't far. It's...it'll be fine.”

“You sure, broski? I really don't mind.”

“No, it's...” Ryan took a sharp breath as a particularly gut-wrenching memory swam up from the depths of his mind-

(rough hands in the dark, shoving him against a wall, the barrel of a gun pressing against his back, Christ, weren't these people supposed to protect them?)

“It's fine,” he repeated, through gritted teeth.

“Alright, man. But you can call if you change your mind, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Ryan said. “Thanks, Raynor.”

“No worries. Peace!” A beep signaled the end of the call.

2

Ryan took a moment to breathe, trying to control his fear. Vivimor was a dangerous city, but the area around the Geneton Institute was pretty safe, and his middle-class neighborhood was only a few blocks west of here, between the Institute and West Vivimor. Still, he felt a little isolated. His mother was working a night shift at the hospital tonight, and wouldn't be back until early tomorrow morning. Likewise, his sister was at a friend's. So even if he made it home, he would be totally alone.

He glanced back over his shoulder and took in the reassuring sight of the colossal Geneton Institute — an elegant white fortress designed by Geneton himself, equal parts jagged, intimidating angles and gentle, deceptive curves. It housed both the school and the day-to-day offices for the Geneton Corporation's local operations, and always glowed like moonlight at night thanks to several strategically-placed floodlights. Its central cylindrical tower — the tallest building in all of Vivimor — seemed mere inches from scraping the clouds with its domed top. Ryan had been afraid of the dark for a long time and had spent more than one night walking through home through these frightening streets, but the sight of the Geneton Institute always proved as inspiring as the man himself.

Ten blocks west and four blocks to the south, and he'd be home. Guy Geneton wouldn't be afraid of the dark.

He forced himself to step off the stairs and onto the street, dimly lit by the quiet orange glow of the old streetlights. As he walked, his fear faded into the background and Geneton's words started to play through his mind once again. Power, potential...Geneton had no fear, or so it seemed. From all Ryan had read, he his acts spoke just as loudly as his words. His Panacea was employed by every government and every hospital, funded some of the leading research on PPS, and pursued retroviruses capable of altering the human genome even in adults. Fascinating research. Controversial, but...

He'd done so much, learned so much, and in so few years. He'd started building the Corporation when he wasn't all that much older than Ryan. A toddling scholar? No way. Guy Geneton was a fucking giant, a man among...

A man among...

Ryan stopped and glanced over his shoulder. He thought — he wasn't sure, but he *thought* — that he'd heard someone behind him, footsteps echoing on the pavement. But there were no shapes apparent in the shadows behind him, and no footsteps in the shadows.

No one there. Just his imagination.

In spite of his self-assurances, Ryan walked a little faster, his ears open for any new danger. His mind was filled with images of monsters from a half-dozen horror movies, and he kept imagining shapes moving in the darkness, things looming just out of-

There it was *again*! He whirled about, but there was nothing to be seen but empty shadows. He swallowed, his hands balling into fists at his sides. He hated being out at night — gangbangers, addicts, and bastard fascist cops, all equally dangerous, all equally corrupt. He didn't want...

He closed his eyes. *Breathe*, he told himself. *Breathe*.

He started walking again. No need to let his damage freak him out. There were plenty of dangers in Vivimor, but not here, not in this part of town. The Muertos weren't likely to grab him here, and the gangs were hardly going to make their way this far east. He was fine. He was-

There was something underfoot, something that tripped him up and almost sent him sprawling. As he whirled his arms and tried to keep his balance, he heard it again — a single footstep, loud as a gunshot to his frightened ears.

When he glanced over his shoulder this time, there was someone standing beneath a streetlight.

6. Mayfly: Crossroads

Raynor's room was swimming with the loud hum of his computer, interrupted only by the moans of the girl beneath him as he slid his hand up her shirt. She wasn't the greatest kisser in the world — way too much tongue — but damned if she wasn't stacked.

His implant chirped in his ear. He immediately withdrew his hand, disentangled himself from the girl, and got to his feet. He jerked a finger absently at his CPU (a low-slung black box that ran the entire length of the wall opposite his futon) and then studied the blue-tinted hologram which popped up above it. The holo illuminated Raynor — a short, scrawny boy with close-cropped brown hair and a thin, eternally-grinning face. Then dark eyes above the grin were thoughtful as they examined the map laid out before them; Joe had more of his guys out than usual, it was going to be a little trickier working through the network...

“Hey!” the girl — Leslie, Raynor reminded himself — said, sitting up. “What are you doing?”

“Getting back to work?” he said, not bothering to look directly at her.

Leslie frowned at him. “While I'm here?”

“I needed something to do while it was loading.”

“While it was...” Leslie's jaw dropped a little. “Did you invite me over just to keep you from getting *bored*?”

“Babe, I was *still* bored.”

He'd already known she was fast, but hadn't realized how true that was until her open palm had collided with his face. As he rubbed at his cheek, Leslie moved to the sole large window in his room and swung it open. Another girl slid through, knocking her out of the way. “Are you kidding me?” Leslie said, staring in disgust at Kierra

Raynor glanced over as Kierra got to her feet. “Weren't you leaving?” he said, not sparing Leslie a second glance.

Leslie flipped him off and climbed out the window. Kierra, twigs in her hair and grey dust on her black jacket, watched her go. “She was cute.”

“Bad kisser.”

“You're such an asshole.”

“You're the one climbing through my window at midnight.”

Kierra shrugged. “Busy night. Thought it might be worth talkin' to ya.”

“Yeah?” Raynor asked. “What about?”

Kierra shrugged again. “Not sure.” She glanced towards his holo — a map of the city, with a great

host of red dots glowing throughout West Vivimor. “What's going on here?”

“I asked first,” Raynor said.

“So?”

Raynor sighed. “Sanchez is mobilizing most of his Hearts. I had to fix some stuff — try and cram more into the space he's rented on Montebanc.”

“He paying you extra?”

“This is within the terms of our agreement.”

“You gotta learn to make people pay you, Raynor.”

“It's fine. What's up?”

Kierra shook her head and sank back onto the futon. Her eyes narrowed. “This is, like, uncomfortably warm.”

“I have that effect on a lot of girls.”

She grabbed a pillow and threw it at him. He ducked it. “You tracking anything?” she asked.

Raynor's attention snapped back to Kierra. She was staring at him with a disconcertingly intense expression on her face. “Not sure,” he said. “Why're you worried?”

Kierra shook her head. “Just a feeling.”

Raynor pointed casually at his hologram, tooling with the settings and trying to compress as many of the implants as he could into the Hearts' private network as he mulled over what Kierra had said. Kierra could be counted on for weird tips. She'd been involved in the Muerto raid which led to the shutdown of one of the city's most prominent sex-trafficking rings, and she'd also given him the heads-up when the Reapers — one of the city's most vicious gangs — had gone to war with the Hearts. Her warning had ended with Raynor being hired to help run the Hearts' networks during the fight — a job he still had now — but he'd never quite gotten the story on how she'd known what was about to go down.

“Does your feeling maybe involve a god damn cannibal?” he asked, drawing up the report from the Cormorant base.

Kierra perked up. “What's that mean?”

“Means bodies have been found with parts of them *eaten*. Means there's been eighteen weird corpses and thirty people missing under weird circumstances over the past week. Means the Cormorants...”

He trailed off, and Kierra gave a shaky nod. “Yeah,” she said. “I heard about that.”

“Yeah.” Raynor finished organizing his notes, then opened up Facebook and dropped a message in his status. “Work's finished!” he said. “Now to party!” The words appeared; Raynor flicked a finger

and the screen went away.

“You're using Facebook for code?” Kierra said.

“Just another status to anyone looking,” Raynor said, grinning. “Muertos won't be able to prove anything, and I can wipe my hard drive remotely.” He tapped his implant.

“They could get to it first,” she pointed out.

“They could *try*.”

Kierra rolled her eyes. “You're insane.”

“So I'm told.”

“What's your theory?”

Raynor eyebrows arched as his lips quirked up into a sardonic smile. “My theory?”

Kierra's gaze caught him and held him fast. Her eyes were burning with a feverish intensity. “You have a theory,” she said. “What is it?”

Raynor considered her for a moment, running through his thoughts over the course of the night. “No ransom demands,” he said. “So the disappearances ain't being done by gangs interested in the money. And the deaths are...variable. There's no clear connection between the victims. Hearts, Easties, young, old, rich, poor...hell, even the way they're being killed, slow and fast and with weapons and without. But they're happening too fast for one person to get them done.”

He gestured at his screen, calling up a different map of the city where he'd marked the found bodies and the last known locations of those who had been taken. “Let's assume the disappearances and the deaths are connected — that the missing people are just bodies that haven't been found yet. That means seven people are dying a day, excluding the Cormorants.” He looked back at her. “Gotta be an organization, but I don't get why. If it's a gang, they'd have been noticed, or their vendetta'd be clear and their victims would make sense. If it were the government, they'd be going after dissidents. But there's no pattern between the victims or the way they're killed.”

Kierra waited a moment. Raynor said nothing else. “That's it?”

“That's it,” Raynor agreed.

“You don't have any idea who's behind it?”

“Who knows?” Raynor said, shrugging. “Could be a legion of supervillains. Allied serial killers. Maybe a mutant from the Wastes. Can't say for sure.”

Kierra rolled her eyes again. “You really need to cut back on the TV.”

“Girls are only so distracting. Speaking of, are you sleeping over tonight?”

Kierra pursed her lips. “Don't push your luck.”

Raynor grinned. “You like stayin' here.”

“Not if you get pushy.”

“I'm always pushy.” But he wanted her to stick around, so Raynor shrugged and looked back to his screen. “Why're you interested in this, anyways?”

“Bad vibes,” Kierra said. “Gangs are tense. City's tense. You can feel it.”

“City's always tense.”

“Not like this.”

Raynor's grin was gone now; his focus was wholly on the information on his screen. “Yeah, I know.”

He heard Kierra shift behind him, “What's up?”

“I'm just...” His skin crawled, his innards thrilled, and he leaned forwards and stared at the data. “I don't know what did this. Something big. Something weird.”

“We live in a city at the edge of a wasteland,” Kierra scoffed. “Everything's weird.”

“There a reason you keep trying to pretend things ain't weird?”

“There a reason *you* keep trying to pretend things aren't weird?”

Raynor shrugged. “Keep an open mind. Consider all possibilities. Don't want things to stagnate. You?”

“I just like being stubborn.”

“That I'd noticed.”

Quite without warning, Raynor's window swung open, and Isaac Riel collapsed onto the floor of his room. Raynor, quite unfazed (it was pretty much impossible to hear anything going on in his room from the rest of his house, and his numerous illicit activities had strange people dropping by at all hours), looked down at the other boy and then back to Kierra.

“Busy tonight,” he remarked.

“City's tense,” Kierra repeated.

Isaac lifted himself slowly to his feet. The taller boy did not look good — there were dark circles under his eyes, and he moved with a certain stiffness that bespoke a lot of exertion and possibly a beating. “It's cool, don't help me up,” Isaac said. “Not like I haven't had a rough enough day.” He blinked at Kierra. “Kierra?” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“You two know each other?” Raynor asked.

“Does that *matter*?” Kierra retorted, glancing at Isaac. “What happened to you?”

Isaac took a ragged breath. There was a hollow exhaustion in his eyes punctuated by sleepless dark circles.

“You look like shit,” Raynor observed.

“I've had a rough day,” Isaac said, and his voice carried an intense weight behind it. Raynor wanted to feel afraid, but at this moment the wheels in his head were turning, running through the possibilities.

“Marco's dead,” Isaac said.

“Marco?” Kierra repeated. “That bully from the Cucarachas?”

“That's the one,” Raynor said. He was the one who'd done the background checks on the guy — a nasty piece of work with several felony charges to his name, all mysteriously dropped by terrified families. His squad of Hearts hadn't been part of tonight's mass mobilization.

“How?” Kierra asked.

Isaac hesitated, then turned his eyes to Raynor. “I need your help.”

“You got it,” Raynor said.

Isaac paused. “I haven't asked for anything yet.”

“I said you've got it,” Raynor said, waving a hand. “What is it?”

“I think I need to break into the Geneton Institute.”

Raynor's small fears vanished, replaced by a whirling excitement. He was already thinking about the logistics — how to get in, how to stay covert, he'd never managed to hack Geneton's network, was there anyway he could do it now, how would they avoid getting caught...

“Why?” Kierra said, her voice raw with fear.

Isaac swallowed. “There's something in Vivimor,” he said. “Something bad.”

7. Visitor: Quiet

Day in and day out the thoughts of Vivimor weighed on Kierra. At times they were light, annoying but easy to ignore — faint itches that fell by the wayside when she found something new to focus on. But at times they were as heavy as stones, weighing down her ankles and wrists, her neck, her mind. At times it was all she could do to stay standing, much less smile.

She needed a place of quiet. She needed a place to be light.

Kierra snaked her way through the little-known back alleys of Vivimor to a building on the city's crumbling fringes, mere feet from the monolithic presence of the Wall. In theory, every inch of the Wall was monitored by sensors and periodic inspections, but the UN and US had both slashed the budgets of the Wall Guard from its heyday ten years prior so they could fund their respective friends inside the city proper, and anyways there had always been flaws in their defenses, pre-existing holes and new cracks that the Guard was stretched too thin to address. A clever Ghast could easily sneak it way into the city. If there were such a thing as a clever Ghast.

She made her way to the far edge of the building, until she reached its back wall. She put her hand against this wall and let her mind drift through her fingers and into the steel and concrete.

Her mind shook, torn between her body — limbs and beating heart, pulse, hormones, chemistry — and the stone, solid, unaware, stressed above and stressed below, its solidity unwavering even as it was battered and pressed on just as severely as Kierra's psyche. The stone was tempting — in it she, too, could go blind and deaf and dumb, at least for a little while.

But today there were other pleasures to chase, so she slipped her mind into the concrete, widened the cracks until with a groan one section of the wall gave way in a rain of pebbles and threw up a cloud of dust that just obscured a narrow tunnel down into the dark earth.

Good, her senses hadn't misled her. This wasn't her usual passage into the Wastes; her old pathway, concealed within the ruins of an old army bunker, had recently collapsed, and she'd had to spent the last few days with her mind half-buried in the ground of West Vivimor, searching for a new route. She hopped into the tunnel and with a thought forced the rubble behind her to spring back up into a cracked facade.

She crawled through the darkness, her mind probing ahead so she could avoid any pitfalls or collapses. She felt the bone-shaking hum of the KDF far above, protecting Vivimor from the insidious Wasting. Gradually, the dark around her brightened and eddies of stale air drifted down to her from the tunnel's exit as dust hissed beneath her hands. For a moment, her mind was lost in the revelry of the air, and she savored its chaotic freedom. Air went everywhere and worried about nothing. It was consumed,

reformed, returned. It flowed without restraint.

For a moment, she was tempted to go with it, let her mind go riding free along the invisible currents of the world. But true relief was too close at hand, so instead she wrapped the air like a cocoon around her body. It would not change how she felt or looked, but whatever sensors could see through both the KDF and the Wastes would not read her as anything more than an errant breeze. It might also be the only thing protecting her from the Wastes — it was as good an explanation as any she could think of as to how she could walk so often through the ashen grey and suffer so little for it.

The Kopelsburg Defensive Field was behind her, twisting and twining in aurora hues between the pylons that made it reality, a neon shimmer that severed the Wastes from the world. And the Wastes stretched out like a grey ocean in all directions, dust and ash billowing around the skeletons of cars and the gutted wrecks of buildings, the last vestiges of California's corpse. Here there were no thoughts impinging on her. The ground beneath her feet was numb even to Kierra's peculiar senses, and she was glad for it. She inhaled, breathed in the decay, the dust, the vast empty lifeless Wastes. She relished the faint burn in her nostrils, the slight staleness, the acidity. She exhaled, smiling.

She strolled over the ashen dunes, ignoring the itching pressure of the city at her back (that ghastly prison of shrieking thoughts she'd return to all too soon). Unless she stayed here in the Wastes, where the ground itself was numb to her touch and no thoughts existed to scream at her and crush her beneath their weight. God, that thought was tempting. Bury herself in this infinite numbness, and forget.

But that would be a temporary freedom, as fleeting as the numbness of concrete or the wildness of air. Her mind always reached some far limit, returned to her body and all the pressures that weighed against it. No hope in those retreats, but for now, the Wastes gave her the rest she so desperately needed.

She wandered through the grey, wound her way around the husks of cars half-buried in the dust and through the hollow shells that had once been buildings. And through it all she heard nothing save the wind moaning through the ruins as it shaped the dust into dunes. Out here, there were no thoughts needle at her. Only a blessed mental silence.

Out past the first dunes, she found the familiar hibernating chrysalises of the Ghosts. The dogs were x-shaped white bulges half-buried in the ash. The dozen humans she could see were roughshod crucifixes leaning in the shadows, their overgrown skin crystallized like amber into foreboding leprous white.

She had never seen a hibernating Ghost return to life. She wondered what it would be like.

As she always did, she laid a hand upon one of the crosses. But her mind could not quite cross the threshold into the living creature beneath the bubbled chrysalis. The Ghosts were nearly as numb to her

touch as the ground of the Wastes. Deep down, she could feel the faintest hint of life — pulse, chemicals, twitches of muscle — but no thoughts. Like the body of another entwined with hers, half-mindless with lust, trapped in a vortex of pure sensation. It was a sweet reprieve from the constant pressure of foreign thoughts, and the Ghast offered it freely.

She withdrew her hand, heard a scratch and a whine behind her, and turned.

Ghast dogs had the general shape of their pre-Waste forms, but there the similarities ended. This particular Ghast had a patch of lumpy skin where its eyes should have been, and teeth so long that it could not fully close its mouth. Its skin, like the skin of all Ghasts, was an unhealthy, blached white. Its front legs were overdeveloped, muscular and massive. Its rear legs had been torn off, and it had left a long trail of black ooze in the ash behind it.

Kierra stepped towards it. Its nose — two vertical slits in its face — flared and it growled weakly, pitifully. But it would not do to underestimate it — a Ghast was dozens of times stronger and faster than any living things its size should be, and even wounded as it was it could likely kill her if she got too close.

Kierra shook her head and dropped to one knee, placing her hand on the ground. She could barely sense anything — the packed ash beneath her feet was numb, draining, drowsy. It left her feeling deliciously weak, like the aftermath of a hard fuck. She swayed on her knees, almost fell...

With a hissing *thumph*, a shaft bored its way open beneath the Ghast. The beast lunged towards her, its enormous front legs scrabbling for purchase. But the ash and dust left no room for claws to dig in, and it fell with a piteous howl. Kierra lifted away her hand and the dust and ash shifted back into place, filling the hole.

She could feel it struggling far beneath her, whining and writhing, but with its hind legs gone it did not have the strength to claw its way back to the surface. The dusty ash beneath her shifted and trembled, but with each passing second the trembling weakened, until at last it stopped entirely.

She got back to her feet and walked along the edges of the Ghast's black trail. She wasn't sure whether it could be called blood — it was a black fluid, viscous and far too shiny. It had no clear smell, and she had no desire to touch it; her power had so far protected her from the diseases of the Wastes, inflicted on its inhabitants, but she didn't want to push her luck. The trail led her up and over a nearby dune. When she reached its crest, she stopped and stared in astonishment.

The ground in front of her was awash with black ooze and shredded white flesh, scattered and splashed all about, in splattered arcs and wide congealed puddles. There was no sign of an intact Ghast. From what Kierra could see, there had been an even mix of dogs and humans, as well as a larger something she didn't recognize (and she would have no chance to figure out what it was, as only a

single leg, high as her chest and as thick as she was, remained).

Ghasts — monstrous Ghasts — had been slaughtered here. Had they killed each other? But Ghasts were supposed to leave others of their kind unharmed, and anyways she'd never seen anything like this in all her years wandering the Wastes.

Then it hit her — a searing sensation, like burned ozone or electricity in the air before a storm, crackling out of her thoughts and down along her sinuses so her whole head spasmed with it. She swayed unsteadily on her feet, her mind tingling from the contact with this strange cloud of energy.

As her mind reeled from the touch this new, exhilarating feeling, she saw them — the black bootprints winding away from the massacre.

How could something human scorch the air like this? How could something human leave this electric wake her mind could taste?

Well, she knew where to find her answer. After all, the footprints were heading east. They were heading towards Vivimor.

8. Phantom: Emperor

I

The muscular man sharing the roof with Isaac was undeniably handsome, with a broad nose and powerful jaw outlined by the shadow of a beard. His skin was as dark and smooth as polished mahogany, and his jutting cheekbones lent him an air of easy authority. Coal-black eyes glowed merrily above the colossal grin that dominated his face.

“Out for a walk?” the man asked. His voice was deep and resonant as a cave, bubbling with laughter.

“More like a climb.” Isaac stretched out his legs, still aching from the fire escape. “You come here often?” This far into the Wall District, most of the people he saw were dangerous, desperate or both, which always added an electric adrenaline rush to his frequent trips to the lookout.

“No,” the man said, laughing. “But it seemed to have the best available view.” He eyed Isaac. “Hardly a climb, boy.”

“Speak for yourself,” Isaac snorted.

“I was.”

The man hadn't moved towards Isaac. Isaac was glad for that — the man looked far too strong for Isaac to fight, and though Isaac didn't feel like the man was threat it was nice to have a little space in case he was wrong.

“And you?” the man asked.

“Me?” Isaac said.

“Do *you* come here often?”

Isaac smiled. “Yeah, actually. Whenever I can.”

“Really?” The man leaned closer, his high, thick eyebrows arching still higher, his grin widening. “Why?”

Isaac, confused, blinked and searched for an answer. “Like you said,” he replied at last. “Has the best view.”

“Of what?”

“Of...” Isaac trailed off. “What do you mean?”

“What is it you come here to see?”

“I-” Isaac gave the man an exasperated look. “You *just* said you liked the view!”

“Oh, I do.” The man turned away and stared off into the distance. As he turned, his feet squeaked a

little. Isaac looked down and noted that there was something black and sticky on the underside of the man's boots. Fresh tar, maybe?

“But I know *why* this view appeals to me,” the man said. “What so catches *your* eye, boy?”

Isaac bristled. “Boy?”

“Compared to me. Don't avoid the question.”

Isaac frowned at the man's back and out at the vista just beyond him — the reassuring cracked facade of the Wall, the neon cascade of the Field, and the bleak grey of the Wastes rolling out beyond the horizon. On the one hand, he had no reason to answer the stranger. On the other, it *was* an interesting question. No matter how many times Isaac came here, the view always captivated him. Why did he find it so entrancing?

“I don't know,” Isaac said, staring at the rippling Field and at the vast wasteland just visible behind it. “But it's...it's not about the Wastes, or the Wall. It's something...” He struggled, searching for the right words. “The Wastes are so big, and there's such — my dad fought during the Wasting, killed Ghasts, he...” He trailed off, realized he was talking about things this man didn't want to know. “They're...like in stories, you know?” He seized upon that. “They're this big, unknown thing — no one knows what they are or why the Wasting happened, but it did and it was unstoppable. And then we *stopped* it!”

All at once, he understood why the display was so irresistible, why he came back to his lookout time and time again. The Field they'd built, running thousands of miles to contain the vast, unknowable force of the Wastes, and their city, battered and baffled and beautiful, enduring at the very fringes of this no man's land. So how could he not return here, every chance he got? How could he deny the giddy vertigo of staring at the impossible made real?

“And you can see it!” he exclaimed. It was an visible conflict of epic proportions, a testament to the fact that humanity had defied the inevitable.

He was so entranced with his new insight and the depth it gave his familiar view that it took him a moment to realize that the man was shaking. His shoulders quivered as his head bowed low, and then after a moment Isaac heard his quiet chuckles. Then the man threw back his head and howled with laughter.

Isaac had never heard laughter like this, perilous and impetuous as a storm on the open water, carrying destruction for any poor soul caught in its battering waves. It pealed like a bell, tolling out across the nearby building, filling the Wall District from end to end.

“Again the obsession!” the man gasped between bursts of laughter. “This relentless fixation on dichotomy!” He gestured at the distant KDF and the ashen Wastes. “Civilization and nature, order and

chaos, good and evil, men and monsters!” He laughed harder still. “You fix yourselves on these conflicts and let them define you, ignoring the vast complexity of the universe. How very human of you. How very infinitesimal. How very short-sighted.”

Isaac felt dwarfed by that laughter, like a sailor adrift on a raging sea. But he felt the man's words like a harsh jab to his ribs. “So what?” Isaac growled through gritted teeth. “I'm looking at the wrong thing?”

The man stopped laughing all at once and whirled around, coal eyes burning intently. “Oh no!” he exclaimed. “No, these are quite admirable things to reflect on.” He leaned towards Isaac, smiling earnestly. “Because infinitesimal as you are you *can* do great things. You take your weak, puny bodies and you arm yourselves and you stop these huge forces and slay these great monsters. You shake the world apart, and sometimes you do so simply because it was an inevitable consequence of what you actually *wanted* to do.” His smile widened into a buoyant grin. “As a reason to look, it's not bad at all.”

Isaac shook his head, at once pleased and bemused by the man's words. “So...” Isaac said. “Why'd you laugh?”

“Because it's a foolish obsession,” said the man. “But a glorious one. Besides, I laugh at many things. I'd not take too much offense, boy.”

The man glanced back at the Wastes. Isaac stared at him for a moment, curiosity itching at the back of his mind.

“I answered,” Isaac said.

“Yes, I'd noticed that.”

“No, I mean-” Isaac broke off and swallowed. “What do you see? What...what do you like about the view?”

“What do I see...?” The man considered this for a moment. “I see a lair of Humbabas and great bulls; I see a breeding ground for minotaurs and hydras, chimeras and manticores, Gorgons and cypopses. That is the dominion of Grendel and his monstrous family, of hero-slaying firedrakes. You are staring at a kingdom of monsters such as there has never been upon the earth.” He chuckled. “How could I not want to get the best look at such a place?”

The excitement in the man's voice was infectious; Isaac's heart raced as it always did when he thought about the first days of Vivimor, of a refugee camp besieged by horrors that had once been human. “Have you fought them?” Isaac asked eagerly. “Fought Ghosts?”

The man laughed. “Ghosts?” he asked. “I've fought Ghosts and worse, boy. I have wandered the length and breadth of the world and I have faced heroes and monsters alike.” He shrugged. “Your Ghosts were interesting enough.”

Isaac leaned forwards. “Are you one of the Guard?”

The man's eyebrows arched. “The Guard?” he repeated. “Hardly.”

“So why?” Isaac asked, puzzled. “Why fight monsters?”

“Why?” the man asked.

And suddenly Isaac was suspended in the air, a strong hand clutched around his throat, and the man was grinning up at him. “They had the gall to challenge me,” he whispered. “And no serf should challenge its lord. No mewling slave should rise against its master. And no pathetic human, Ghast or otherwise, should challenge the EMPEROR OF MONSTERS!”

Isaac struggled but could not get free; he kicked, but the Emperor didn't flinch, and the corded muscle of his body was so tough it made Isaac's feet ache through his shoes. His grip was so tight around Isaac's throat that Isaac felt close to blacking out already, and yet behind those fingers Isaac could sense still greater power.

“I enjoyed our conversation, boy,” the man said, pulling him so close that all Isaac could see were those burning coal eyes. “But I'm afraid it's time I took your life.”

2

Isaac felt like he was drowning in the Emperor's gaze, devoured by a fiery will that paralyzed him with terror. The sheer joy in those eyes chilled Isaac down to his bones, made him want to vomit, to scream, but there was the hand around his throat and those eyes, stabbing at him, daring him...

Isaac lifted his hands and jammed his thumbs into the Emperor's eyes. They quivered jelly-like as they dissolved into a viscous rush of red and white, spilling blood and pus like tears. But there was not the faintest hint of pain or fear in the Emperor's gory gaze, not even when his grip loosened and Isaac slipped free and landed in a heap upon the ground.

His skin stung as it scraped against the concrete, but he barely felt the pain through the pounding of his heart, panicked drums ringing in his ears until they were drowned out by laughter.

The Emperor's head was thrown back as he cackled with wild abandon, his empty eye sockets weeping gore. Isaac looked down at his hands — covered in gooey white and blood — and felt bile crawl up his throat as the Emperor roared with glee. Isaac, shaking with fear and self-disgust, started to crawl slowly backwards to the fire escape, but his slick hands slipped and his jeans rasped against the concrete roof. His head and the Emperor's snapped towards each other at the same moment, and Isaac felt his heart wrench in his chest. The Emperor was chuckling still, his grinning mouth stained by the bloody pus oozing from his hollow eye sockets.

“A moment, boy,” the Emperor said. “I’ll need eyes to hunt you best.”

There was a flare of subtle force around the Emperor’s face, like heat shimmering off the sidewalk or the sun beating down on a bare back. With a sickening, squelching *pop*, those coal eyes reformed themselves, gleaming that same terrible joy above cheeks slick with viscera.

Isaac scrambled to his feet and hurled himself towards the fire escape. He felt the whisk of air as the Emperor’s hands (how was he so fast?) tried to close on his back, but Isaac leapt at the last moment, and the tips of those powerful fingers tugged ever so gently along the hem of his jacket.

He landed with a crash on the creaking fire escape and then raced down the steps, three at a time. “Police!” he barked at his implant, as the fire escape groaned all around him. “Call the police!”

“No service available,” his implant informed him.

No service available? How was that possible with a damn satellite in orbit right over them? How-
No time to think. Had to get out of here.

When he was four flights down he risked a glance behind him, and found that the Emperor was nowhere to be seen. Immediate paranoia flooded him — why wasn’t the Emperor chasing him? He whirled about, glancing every which way as the fire escape groaned around him, sure there was a trap, sure that, like a horror movie, the Emperor would be waiting the moment he looked away, and wrap those strong fingers around his throat once more.

As he whirled, he noticed that the creaking of the fire escape had never stopped. That, and the landing he was standing on had a noticeable tilt.

He looked up. Through the grate, he could just make out the form of the Emperor, hands buried in the metal of the fire escape. The tilt increased, and the fire escape began to shake violently.

Isaac stumbled down the stairs as his heart raced in his chest, but each step bucked beneath his feet, bruising him against the handrails. Soon, it was all he could do to stay standing, and the groaning of the metal climbed to a scream.

Isaac, clinging to the railing for dear life, stared over the railing to the alley far below. His eyes widened, and he swallowed as a dry wind rolled through his throat. He staggered back up the stairs, feet slipping over the slanted metal, struggling, almost...

As the fire escape tore loose from the building with a shriek of protest, Isaac hurled himself over the railing, falling in the opposition direction of the tumbling metal. The air whistled by him, and as icy panic flooded through his veins he had time to think, *Oh god I’m gonna die oh god oh god oh god-*

The immense pile of garbage bags far below broke his fall, leaving him winded but uninjured. He gasped in pain and then choked as rot clogged his nose and mouth. In spite of the stench, he curled deeper into the slimy plastic, cowering from the clattering rain of metal crashing down upon the

concrete.

But the moment the harsh clanging broke off, Isaac crawled out of the pile, covered in slime and pieces of unrecognizable trash. He took a moment to cough out some bile against a nearby wall and then staggered towards the street, picking his way over the twisted pieces of broken metal now scattered all about the alley. Terror made his guts buck and writhe in his stomach, but he breathed deep, trying to stay calm. He knew he didn't have time to waste. The Emperor was coming.

He broke into a stumbling run, tears of equal parts terror and revulsion streaming down his face. He struggled over the scattered debris, tripped over an unseen piece of scrap and jerked himself upright, terrified of falling because he knew exactly what would happen if he fell and the street was so damn *close...!*

The Emperor crashed to the ground in front of him, his feet digging two small craters into the concrete. Isaac yelped and collapsed backwards, scrambling along the ground as the Emperor gave him a broad smile.

“Impressive!” the Emperor exclaimed, stepping out of the holes he'd made and strolling leisurely towards Isaac, leaving shredded bits of boot in his bare-footed wake. “Go for the eyes, run without stopping, jump even at the risk of death!” He chuckled. “It's a pity you don't know more — you have exactly the right instincts.” Isaac managed to take his feet and his eyes flickered wildly about the alley, looking for something, *anything*, he could use against the Emperor. The Emperor shrugged. “Run if you want,” he said. “We both know I'm faster than you.”

Isaac's desperate adrenaline melted into a puddle of paralyzing fear. The only reason he'd survived so far was because there'd been some place to run to — the fire escape up above, the garbage pile down below. Now there was nowhere left to run. Now...

Now he was going to die.

A strange calm settled over him. He was still afraid — so afraid his insides danced and trembled and his heart beat so fast he could hear it in his ears and feel it in his throat. But as he reached back and pulled the knife from the lining of his jacket, his hand was steady.

He was going to die. Might as well make the bastard pay for it.

He flipped the blade out and glared at the Emperor.

The Emperor's smile widened. “Go out fighting!” the Emperor howled. “I approve!”

“Hello again, Isaac Riel,” said Marco.

Isaac looked up, and the Emperor turned. Marco and his cronies were standing at the edge of the alley. “Nice knife,” Marco said. “Think you're a tough guy, Mr. Riel? Trying to mug someone on our turf?” Marco clicked his tongue. “Can't let you do that, Mr. Riel.”

Marco's cronies laughed. The Emperor turned back to Isaac, coal eyes burning above a bloodthirsty grin. "It's your lucky day, boy," he said. "They'll cause much more of a stir, and you're much more interesting than they are."

"Hey!" Marco shouted. "You pay attention when I'm talking to you!"

The Emperor grinned at Isaac and then turned around to face Marco. "I have met your kind more times than I care to name," the Emperor said. "Parasites who think having strong friends makes *them* strong. I confess I've a certain weakness for you."

Marco snorted. "Are you high?" Marco asked, stalking closer. "You think you can take me?" His minions flanked him — including, Isaac noted, the thickly-muscled brute who'd made him so nervous earlier. "You think you can take *us*?"

They slowly encircled the Emperor, whose chuckle was getting louder by the minute.

Marco's face was an ugly sneer. "Miguel," he hissed, and the huge man from before tried to grab the Emperor.

The Emperor blurred, and Miguel's scream rent the air. He staggered back, clutching at his elbow, which was now where his arm ended in a jagged protrusion of bloody bone. The Emperor tossed the severed forearm between his hands like a ball, chuckling all the while.

Marco screamed out an order, and the Hearts drew guns and started firing. Isaac threw himself backwards, tumbled behind the remains of the fire escape, and watched through the slits as the Emperor, stumbling a little under the hail of bullets, casually tossed Miguel's arm aside. When the dry clicks of the Heart's guns reached Isaac, the Emperor's laugh became much, much louder, and his body shimmered as his bloody wounds knitted themselves whole once more.

Then Isaac watched as the Emperor tore Marco's gang apart.

Blood splattered against walls and concrete, pieces of flesh landed with meaty *thunks* in a wide circle. A leg crashed against Isaac's cover; he screamed as blood flecked across his face. The calm of moments before had vanished — now there was only the fear.

"Police, fire department, anyone!" he babbled.

"No service available," his implant repeated.

Marco's gang was scattered in a screaming circle around the laughing Emperor, who was still chuckling. It took Isaac a moment to realize that none of the Hearts had been killed, and he learned why they'd been left alive when the Emperor hefted a legless Marco into the air with one hand and then sank his teeth into Marco's throat. Shimmering force of the same kind that kept healing the Emperor's wounds swam up out of Marco's throat and into the Emperor's dripping mouth. Marco moaned, twitched feebly in the Emperor's grasp, until with one wheezing hiss he stopped moving.

The Emperor tossed aside Marco's lifeless corpse aside and reached for the next Heart. Isaac huddled shock behind his broken piece of fire escape, praying for some kind of help. Maybe the police would come, maybe his implant would work, maybe the Emperor had forgotten about him, maybe...

Maybe if I stay here I'm gonna die.

He threw himself over the broken metal he'd been cowering behind and hurtled towards the alley's entrance, fighting the wild terror screaming at him for being so stupid as to charge into the open. The Emperor was holding Miguel in his right hand, but he spun on his heel and grabbed at Isaac with the bloody fingers of his left. Isaac screamed in fear and desperation — he would not end up like those Hearts, maimed and sobbing as death took them one by one — and with every ounce of his terror and determination he thrust his knife, burying it to the hilt in the Emperor's throat.

The bloodstained hand released its awful grip. Isaac's screams turned to sobs as he sprinted from the alley, slipping on blood as moans and pleas rose to his ears, and then he was free and in the sunlight and he could not stop running, would not stop running, not while that thing was behind him, its chuckle still whispering into his ear...