

SHADOWRUN

The book cover for 'Shadowrun: NEAT' by Russell Zimmerman features a central illustration. A man with a beard, wearing a dark trench coat over a light-colored shirt and a striped tie, stands in profile, looking towards the left. He is holding a handgun in his right hand. Behind him, a woman with pale blue skin and long, flowing red hair is shown from the chest up, her hands resting on his shoulders. The background is a dramatic, fiery orange and yellow sky over a cityscape. The Space Needle is prominent on the left side. Several small, dark, insect-like flying creatures are scattered across the sky. The overall tone is gritty and futuristic.

NEAT

RUSSELL ZIMMERMAN



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*"To my mom for letting me read,
and my wife for letting me write.
Thanks."*

ONE

One day, when I was nine years old, my dad had absolutely no idea what to fix for dinner. He ended up hauling me to a waffle joint down the block, and as we both sat there and stared at each other across that table, I realized he also had no idea at all what to say to me. I was in a little black suit, he was in his Lone Star dress uniform, and earlier that afternoon we had stood in the rain and buried my mother in the family plot uptown. The silence dragged on between us until it filled the whole little diner and he couldn't take it any longer.

"Well," he said to me as I sopped up a syrupy bite. "I'm not sure you're ready, but here it goes anyways, Jimmy. This is all I know to tell you."

His eyes bored into mine as he started talking, all craggy features, lantern jaw, and salt-and-pepper buzz-cut. Even when he pulled the occasional twenty-four hour shift down at McMillin, I'd never seen him look so tired, never seen those strong workman's shoulders sag under some weight I couldn't yet understand, never seen him as weary-to-the-bone as I'd seen him for this last week.

"Never punch a man who doesn't deserve it. Always give the other guy a chance to quit if you can, but if he doesn't, you hit him so hard he'll never forget it. Do the right thing every chance you get. You don't like girls yet, but someday you will and when that happens, you treat them like queens, you hear me? It's what your mother would've wanted. And a couple years after that, when you get a car, you drive like everyone's out to kill you, 'cause

half of 'em will be."

I listened as intently as a boy can. I etched every word he said into my memory like carving letters onto stone tablets.

"Be hard but fair. Shoot straight. Never cheat, in sports or at work. Show up to your job early and do the best you can at it. Kill anyone that tries to blackmail you, ever. Refuse anyone who gives you an ultimatum, they're never worth it. Leave a fair tip when you eat somewhere, and take your hat off in someone's home. And always, always, keep your word."

And then he just stopped talking and went back to his black coffee, messy eggs, and strips of soybacon. He was done. He'd parented. It was out of his system. After that day, I barely saw him except for at games and matches. He started picking up extra shifts at the prison the next week and said it was to make up for mom's lost salary. Even young as I was, I knew it was to keep out of our empty apartment.

"Hey!" someone called out with a snicker. "Nice shirt!"

I blinked awake and glanced around. It wasn't like me to nod off at a bar. But then, the Nikko wasn't my usual bar, and I wasn't in my usual corner of the metroplex. It took me a second—maybe two, thanks to the empty shot glasses in front of me—to pin down who was talking to me.

A nearby table of loudmouths, a handful of guys with a couple of gals, all grinned in my direction. Sararimen. Business casual, the lot of them, enjoying their happy hour because the other twenty-three every day were a miserable grind. Turning to give them my full attention, I ran a hand through my hair and blinked away cobwebs and exhaustion.

"Ohhh, look," the loud one crowed, nudging his lady friend. "He's an elf! That explains it! Who else would wear a shirt like that?"

I was in no mood for this tonight. The only reason I was

in Downtown instead of back home in Puyallup was that a friend was staying at the Nikko and wanted to meet here. I'd gotten her call sixteen hours into tailing a wandering husband—a depressingly common case, for an investigator like me—and recording his every move, and the tedium and tiredness made me irritable.

Truth be told, I wasn't crazy about the shirt, myself. My ally spirit, Ariana, had made me wear it. She whined about wanting to practice her Fashion, so I let her cast it. The end result was that my usual suit was a gaudy topaz yellow and sapphire blue. This crew pokin' fun at it made me feel like they were pokin' fun at her. I didn't much like that.

But I was in Downtown. I had to behave myself.

"Whiskey," I spun pointedly away from them on my stool and waved at the barkeep. "Neat."

I'd initially ducked into the hotel bar instead of the restaurant because smoking was allowed, so I might as well indulge. The nicotine would help me stay awake anyhow. I missed the joke, but heard ugly laughter from the table behind me, even as I snaked a hand into my coat and plucked out my crumpled pack of Targets. If it wasn't for the company, this'd be a nice joint. Faux-rice walls, a sterile sort of corporate Japanese zen motif, soft music in the background. I didn't want to cause a scene, so I just lit up and kept waiting while I glanced at the chrono display of my headware commlink. My—friend? date?—was almost an hour late. That wasn't like her.

"So, hey! You are an elf, right?" Another slurred call from behind me.

"Not much of one," I growled over my shoulder, giving him my best stink eye. It was true. Dad had seen to it that my metaspecies didn't let me grow up soft. He'd pushed me into football, corp scouts, boxing, whatever he could to keep me from being 'too elfy.'

"So that makes you a full-on faerie, right? And not just a fag!" This time he was closer. My cyberaudio suite pinpointed him easily, just a meter and a half behind me. Standing.

I drank down my whiskey, slowly turning to give him a

look. It was just my luck, I guess. I couldn't just find a metaracist boozier, no, I had to find one of the last couple homophobes in Seattle to boot.

"Those aren't nice words," I said. That they weren't true didn't matter. "Why don't you sit down before I make you eat 'em?"

He was drunk enough to be brave, but that also meant drunk enough to be slow. Thanks to a little Sideways gene-twist and a lifetime spent brawling, I swayed to one side just enough to let his big haymaker past. I gave him a sharp left uppercut, right into his liver, as I slid off my stool. He folded and went down.

His two buddies untangled themselves from their dates and stood up. I tracked the sounds they made with my headware, dropping into a crouch next to the loudmouth. Tilting my head a little to one side, I looked him square in the eye as he writhed and tried to get the world rightside up.

"You gonna quit this," I sighed at him through a mouthful of smoke, "Before you really get hurt, kid?"

The bottle jockey at the bar waved his arms and screeched "No trouble, no trouble."

Between that, the scuff of their feet, and a flash of movement in the chrome-shining bar, I knew his friends were coming in behind me. I spun and flicked my Target at the first face I saw, a miniature comet that distracted the jackass in the lead and bought me a quarter-second. I sprang up from my three-point stance like the football player I'd been fifteen years ago, planted my palms on his chest, and gave him a terrific shove into the guy right behind him. It bowled them both over in a heap, and I sidestepped a few meters from all three of them, giving them one last chance to rethink it.

They didn't. They came in, instead, and I rushed to meet them, fists leading the way.

For most people, punching can hurt almost as bad as taking a punch. Skulls are thick, hands are full of fragile, little, delicate bones, wrists can break, knuckles get skinned, and basically the whole damned thing hurts.

Me? Something in my genes said otherwise. Something Sideways, a temporary high that had decided to hang on and rewrite my whole code. Ever since that genetic infusion had decided to stick around, I loved fighting. My knuckles were split and bloody, but I was laughing because endorphins told me it felt great, and there wasn't a second in the next half-a-minute when one of those three clowns wasn't on the ground, trying to climb back to his feet. I was too fast, too used to this, too damned mean, and I knew what I was doing.

The day three sararimen got the best of me in a good, old, roll-up-your-sleeves bar brawl would be the day I closed my office and gave up my badge for good. Unfortunately, maybe they knew that, 'cause it turns out they'd brought four. The brushed-steel barstool slammed into me from behind, but the idiot didn't really know what he was doing because he hadn't gone for the clean headshot while he had the chance. Coming back from a piss break, he'd just grabbed and swung. He did catch me between the shoulderblades, however, taking the wind out of me and staggering me long enough for his buddies to get their licks in.

Tough or not, a fella's still got to get a decent breath to throw a decent punch. There were enough of them I didn't get that chance. When I felt their hands grabbing my arms and legs, I started to really let them have it. I cussed up a storm and let loose with fists, knees, elbows, you name it. They managed to haul me out back, though, and I knew my night was turning from fun to bad. My ally spirit howled in outrage from the astral plane and my wand and Colt were just dead weight on my hip; I wouldn't let myself use them, any more than I'd let Ariana loose.

"Don't," I said, waving one arm away after they pitched me against a dumpster.

They all laughed, and a pair of them snatched my arms again.

"Stay away!" I growled after a solid face-shot turned my head halfway around on my neck.

"Aww, listen to him now! Beggin' us to stop!" With a

buddy holding each of my arms, the original jackson had found himself a two-by-four lying in the trash. Apparently it made him feel a whole lot better. He swung it like a bat, but I was able to hunch and dip and take the swing mostly on my shoulder.

I spat blood from my split lip at him, and grinned with red teeth. "I wasn't talkin' to you, pal."

Ariana tugged at my mind, pleading with me through our psychic link. I'd ordered her away, though, and away she had to stay until I said otherwise. It was in her nature to obey. It was in mine to not ask for her help. I couldn't risk her killing these guys. Not in Downtown.

The board came in again. I felt hot blood slither through my hair and down the side of my face, but just the usual tingling sensation, not pain. I can take a hit, but no matter how tough you are, a concussion's a concussion. My headware flashed red-tinted warning messages into my field of vision as my biomonitor let me know I'd sprung a leak. It was doing its job, just trying to help.

"Thanks a lot, buddy," I muttered to the dutiful *Corpsman* model mini-computer, snorting as a mental command sent the pop-up window away.

I turned my anger into power, and started to muster up a ball of sorcery to send at them. Fuck it. I hadn't lost all my magic to that vampire years ago. I could still take care of myself if I had to. Probably. He reared back with the club again as I spat blood and got ready to bowl them all over with a blast of concussive power.

"Freeze!"

The voice was feminine, but not for lack of trying. During training, that tone had been called the command voice, and she'd been a master of it. I turned my head to sneak a peek and grinned at her around bloody teeth. Jess was here. My friend from out of town, and her huge Savalette Guardian heavy pistol. She had the underbarrel light on its brightest setting, and they all squinted at her like deer in headlights. Her voice shot right through the good citizens' booze and anger, and they all locked up and waited for another order, just like obedient little corp-cattle

should.

“Put your hands where I can see them!”

I mouthed along with her, the commands coming straight from the proverbial—and literal—book. The chuckleheads on each of my arms let me go, and I staggered back against a wall to steady myself. I didn't feel much pain, but the world was still spinning from those head shots, and the wall helped me keep from embarrassing myself.

“Back away, slowly!”

I reached into my jacket pocket, hoping my box of Targets hadn't gotten crushed in the scuffle. Her hand-cannon swept back and forth from me to the suits, the big muzzle swaying from one side of the alley to the other.

“Well, look who finally showed up.” I grinned and spat a little blood towards the punks, then turned a smile towards Jessica Rucker, known in the shadows as Hard Exit. My dinner date. “Thanks for the help, offic—”

And then she shot me.

TWO

I came to somewhere I'd only rarely been before, in the passenger seat of my own car. I should have hurt all over—my insipid little biomonitor kept pinging in my ear and telling me so—but mostly I just felt stiff. Scratch that, I mostly felt angry. I looked down at the small burn mark her stick-and-shock round had left on my jacket and cursed. Shifting in my seat, I glared over at the woman sitting behind the wheel. The shadowrunner. The ex-soldier, the street samurai, my rescuer in the dark alley, Hard Exit.

"What'd you shoot me for?!" It's hard to say somethin' like that without sounding like a whiner, but I gave it my best shot.

"They looked like the sort to press charges." She, meanwhile, gave me a carefree shrug, dashboard lights gleaming off her cyberarm. "You aren't."

"And you wouldn't let me help!" Ariana leaned halfway into the front of the Americar, wedging her shining, gleaming self almost between our seat backs. Her skin shone like bronze, her hair like spun silver. Her eyes were an impossible blue, gleaming like sapphires. If she could have, I think she would have been crying. "I asked you and asked you, and you wouldn't let me!"

"C'mon, kiddo. You know I can't go lettin' you loose on every jackass that takes a swing. You might'a killed those guys!"

She had before. Her skin was hard as stone, and she could will her fingers into talons as sharp as flint. She'd pulled apart a couple Mafia tough guys right in front of me, just last year, after one had put a couple slugs in my gut. Those guys had been killers, though, not a couple of drunk

assholes in Downtown. I'd kept her clear from this scuffle for a reason.

"They had a stick! They might have killed you!" She hollered at me like a worried little girl, but she had a good excuse. After all, she basically was one.

"Ah, c'mon. Don't give me that, doll." I tried to smile at her. I noticed the blood taste was almost gone from my mouth, and that my *Corpsman* displays weren't as bad as they should've been. Ari must have already worked some of her healing magic on me while I was out. "I had it all under control."

"You need a shrink," Hard Exit snorted at me. Skeptic.

"Yeah? Well you need a watch," I shot back.

She almost took my Americar off the road, then gave me her favorite angry-Texan look as she straightened the wheel.

"I was there ten minutes early, James Mitchell Kincaid." Ah, shit. She'd busted out all three names, I knew I was in for it. "I told you the hotel *restaurant*, not the bar."

Oh. Well, she had me there. I couldn't dig up a witty rejoinder right then, and an apology was just out of reach, so I settled for dragging my flask out of a coat pocket and taking a slug of Jack. He was still loyal and obedient, at least...which reminded me.

"Hey. How'd you get here, anyhow, kid?" It was my mirror anyways, so I reached up to angle the rearview so I could see Ariana in it. I'd ordered her to stay on the Astral, but here she was, shining in the backseat of my Ford. I was the sort to disobey orders, but she wasn't. It wasn't in her. She was everything I wasn't. It fit one of the premier theories floating around Seattle University, after all. Ally spirits completed and complimented their masters, they didn't copy them. Ariana was gorgeous, polite, overtly elven, powerfully magical, naïve, friendly, open, soft-spoken, good-natured, obedient. Yeah. It fit. She was everything I wasn't any more.

"Miss Exit told me I could come over," she said, petulant and maybe just a little smug. "And you told me to listen to her, remember?"

No, I didn't remember. But I guess I must have said so, once upon a time, or Ariana couldn't have ignored my command. It explained why I wasn't beat bloody any more, if Ari'd crossed over and laid a little magical healing on me in the meantime. I took another drink of CAS black label from my little flask, since I found myself without a reply again. I was getting ganged up on all night, it seemed. And it wasn't over. Sliding and rattling around on the console were a half-dozen chips in hard plastic cases, and I gave Hard Exit another glare.

"Where'd you get those?" I knew damned well where she had; from my pockets while I'd been out cold.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," she drawled out, matching my glare.

"Sister, where d'you get off rifling through my—"

"You told me to, Mitch." She was the only one that ever called me that. It brought me back. Back to a rough time, when her metal-and-plastic hand had been one of the only ones reaching out to help me back onto my feet. She was right. I *had* told her to keep an eye on me since then.

I wanted another drink, but just glowered instead. She kept talking, since she knew my silence wouldn't last and she had to take advantage while she could.

"So, what are they?"

"Work stuff. Mapsofts of most of the Sprawl, some forensics manuals, up-to-date UCAS legal codes, Knight Errant procedurals, that sort of thing."

"And the empties?" A pair of the cases slid across the dash, empty shells without their datachips inside. She knew I had more than one datajack slot free for chips. I sighed.

"Slotted, yeah. But not what you're thinking, you loopy broad. One's a mapsoft of Downtown—I don't roll around up there often, okay?—and the other's a tutorsoft. Spanish, if you gotta know."

"I do."

"I know." I sighed. I'd told her to check on me, those years ago, for a reason. I had a thousand acquaintances, stoolies, contacts. Not many friends.

"I'm clean. Honest." I held up my right hand, fingers

tucked into the Cadet Scout sign from my days as a Lone Star kid. I didn't mention my third datajack. Ariana stayed quiet in the backseat. Good girl.

Hard Exit gave me a long look, then nodded. She steered my big Ford down an off-ramp and got ready to tackle the barren, ash-strewn, Puyallup streets. The engine roared.

"You and Bunny might've been bad as all hell for each other," she drawled at me, catty enough that her Texas twang came out whenever she gossiped a little, especially about a fellow high-and-mighty Jackpointer. "But that girl did wonders for your car."

The Americar snarled in agreement as we hit an empty straightaway, and Exit opened it up and let the horses run.

Ariana squealed in delight and clapped her hands, never mind that on her own she could fly a hundred times this speed. Hard Exit floored it. I smiled a little and rummaged in my coat for my pack of Targets. I whispered under my breath, concentrated, squinted at the tip of the smoke until it flared red, then took a long drag.

"You and those little spells," Exit smiled at me, one eye on the road.

"You know as well as I do, girl," I let smoke pour from my mouth as I sighed, and I did my best not to think about the vampire, all those years ago. "The little ones are all I got left."

THREE

Gunshots outside woke me up. It was just another Puyallup weekend, nothing headed my way, but it still sat me upright and had me blinking my cybereyes as I scanned the office.

I can tell dreams from reality because my dreams are in color. I live most of my life in muted sepias or black and white, depending on my mood. Every cyberoptics suite worth the nuyen comes with color filter options, but I'm one of the few that use the things. Every case I've gotten, I've worked this way, looking at the world without color. I take a break every once in a while, sure, but there's just something about it that sharpens me, that makes it all feel more fun. Coprocessors and microcomputers work in tandem with the color filter software and allow me to highlight certain objects—of particular importance or particular interest—to be shown in full color, contrasting remarkably with the shades-of-grey background, like Ariana does. But for the most part, only my memories and my astral jaunts are in color, and aren't dreams somewhere between the two?

Hard Exit and I had ended the night over Thai take-out from the joint two floors below my office, splitting a bottle of cheap wine. We'd had a short conversation about work, then a longer one about life in general, cases, jobs, that sort of thing. She also gave me a job. Nothing scandalous happened; she and I didn't have that kind of relationship. We were just two old friends talking work while one of them tried not to sound like a has-been and the other tried not to sound like a shadowy legend.

Talking to her hurt. Not a sharp pain, but a dull throb. Every time I saw her, I remembered how we met. I thought

about the cross-training exercise, Lone Star condescending to some CAS military police, and how wrong it all went. I remembered the beating I took in her place, and the legal fallout that had cost me my badge. The part that hurt, though, was how she felt about the whole thing. How she told herself she owed me something. How she felt sorry for me. Pity aches. It was still a good night, though. It was nice to have a friend I hadn't conjured.

Then I'd gallantly seen her to her armored cab—I half-heartedly offered to pay, but couldn't have if she'd said yes, as much as drivers charged to come here—and then she was gone. She had work waiting in Denver, she said. She'd look me up next time she was in town, she said. Sure, just let me pick the place next time, I'd said.

But today was a brand new day. Well, sort of. Four in the afternoon still counted as brand new, right? I clawed my apartment's refrigerator open to a selection of bottles, more than half of them Sylvan Mist, that fancy Tir-imported water. A few cases had fallen off a truck, someone assured me, and since they didn't have nuyen to spare I'd taken them as payment for a recent job. It was good water, I guessed. I grabbed a beer instead. The longneck was tall, blonde, and cool. Two outta three ain't bad, and it went down smooth enough to wake me up for a shower.

I stood under the spray of the shower until I felt something like metahuman again, and clean clothes finished the job. I'd left my bloody suit strewn around the apartment after Exit had left, but Ariana had cleaned up after me like she always did. There it was, crisp and pressed looking, back to charcoal and pinstripes, waiting for me after I dried off.

Ariana had even changed my fedora back to normal, and when she manifested halfway through me frying up some soybacon and egg substitute from a carton, I gave her a bright smile. She returned it, dazzling. Pleased that I was pleased, her frustration at last night's exclusion was long forgotten. She had a fantastic ability to move on. I envied it.

We chatted while I ate, and she pretended not to have

been astrally eavesdropping while Hard Exit and I had talked the night before.

"So it's a missing corpkid," I said, scraping at some congealed faux-egg with my fork. "Likes to go slumming here in Puyallup from time to time, and never made it home after her last little bit of club hopping. The whole thing's not really Exit's style, is all. The client's gonna come by about six and fill me in on everything else. Some corporate security type from Arboritech, wantin' the girl back."

"I hope you find her, boss," Ariana said, ruby lips turning into a worried frown.

"I will, kid. I've got the best assistant in town, don't I?" That cheered her up, and I made the smile grow a second later. "And since it's a job tracking someone down, you know who we'll probably call in?"

"Lizzie and Dawn?" The spirit positively beamed. She was no good with street names, sometimes.

"Call 'em Skip and Trace, kid," I grinned back at her. "Or they'll get mad."

Skip and Trace—sometimes just Skiptrace—were partners and, well, *partners*. An ork razorgirl from Carbanado alongside a hacker gal I'd first met in college, the pair of them were making a name for themselves in the bounty hunting business. Trace, she of the coffee-brown skin and chrome-gleaming headware, was a top-notch data retrieval operator, second to none at playing virtual bloodhound through augmented and virtual reality. Skip knew every ork in Puyallup, it seemed, and half of 'em in the Underground, and she was as nasty in a fight as anyone I knew. The pair of them were also Ariana's best friends in the world, after her wonderful boss and creator, of course, and even though the three of them made maybe the strangest trio in the whole 'plex, they got along great.

Me? Not so much. I settled for grudging respect with Skip. She hated that I'd met Trace first, that I'd known her back from our days when she'd tutored me through the Introductory Matrix Searches—MTX201—that I'd needed as part of my Criminal Justice degree. Never mind that nothing had happened, despite those being wild and

carefree college days. Skip just didn't like that I'd known her girl longer than she had. Skip also wasn't crazy about elves. Skip, specifically, wasn't a fan of elves that drank too much, or dabbled in things that she—and Hard Exit—thought folks shouldn't dabble in. Skip had nearly killed me the first time they caught me slotting a chip. Coming up in the shadowrunner crew of some Keebler named Deke meant she was a top-notch shooter, but it came with some baggage.

Still, the two were some of the best in their biz, and the three of us—four, really, since Ariana did the magical heavy lifting—did good work. We called ourselves consultants, detectives, bodyguards, investigators, bounty hunters, retrieval agents, bail bondsmen. Everything but shadowrunners. Puyallup already had enough of those.

Ariana used magic effortlessly as I struggled through a Magic Fingers marathon, but between us we got the place cleaned up. I'd kicked the bedroom door shut, we got the dishes under control, and we swept up the incessant Puyallup ash that tracked everywhere. Ari whisked the dust off my desk and a couple of plaques and frames, and I took in my certificates; top of my class at Lone Star Academy, Bachelor's in Criminal Justice, Bachelor's and Master's in Thaumaturgical Applications, printed hardcopies of my investigator's and magician's licenses, and—tossed onto the wall just to add quantity to wow the clients, not because I expected them to read 'em—my championship certificate from the Seattle Golden Gloves Youth (unaugmented) tournament, circa 2053.

My headware chirped at me about our security system tracking movement out in the hall, and a second later came a knock on my office door. I heard my client coming before I saw her, but when I did get the view, I stood up from behind my desk without realizing it.

She was gorgeous. Not the sultry coffee-darkness and curves of Trace, the girl-next-door sweetness Hard Exit mixed with swaggering physicality, the wholly artificial and inhuman beauty of Ariana, or even the augmented, edgy, street-dangerous allure that Skip could exude on a good

day. No, she was just stunning. Dressed head to toe in classy black to keep the ash from sullyng it too visibly, in an elegant dress that hugged her curves like a sportbike, slit high enough for mobility and to allow a second look at a leg that deserved a third. A custom holster rig was built into her outfit, and a pearl-handled Ares, jewelry as much as a weapon, peeked out at me from her waistline. Her almond-shaped eyes bespoke some Asian ancestry, but she wasn't dainty or petite, and she wasn't trying to look it to fit the stereotype. She had curves to die for. Her hair was platinum blonde, even dusted with Puyallup's soot, and all the least classy parts of me really wanted to confirm that it was a dye-job by checkin' the old fashioned way.

"Mr. Kincaid?"

"Please. Call me Jimmy," I gave her my best smile. Ariana crossed her arms and vanished in a huff, seeing my aura and reading my mood plain as day.

"And you may call me Ms. Johnson," my client said with a polite smile, subdued compare to mine, as she sank into the single chair opposite my desk.

"Is that really necessary?" I spread my hands and shrugged as casually as I could, disliking the, well, shadowrunner feel of such an obviously fake name.

"In this instance? Yes. Professionalism is always necessary. I'm not sure what you've been told about my assignment for you, but I'm here on behalf of Arboritech, looking for a missing person. Not a cat stuck up a tree."

Jeeze. You help a neighborhood kid out once, get a tom down from a high branch so her family can have something to eat that night, and word spreads like you're some pet retrieval specialist. This dame had a bit of a mouth on her, I'll give her that.

"Fine, Ms. Johnson, corporate cloak-and-dagger it is." I emphasized her name a little, then leaned forward in my chair, wishing I'd shaved that week. "My standard rates are ___"

"Inconsequential." One finely-manicured hand waved in my general direction, and she tilted her nose up just a bit. "I've been authorized to pay you five thousand nuyen for the

retrieval of our employee and certain data currently stored in her headware.”

Somehow she'd just gotten even prettier, in my eyes. Five thousand could keep the roof over my head for almost half a year, or really help me pay some debts. I'd be able to sling some nuyen to Lone Star for my back-payments on loans, catch up on my dues to the stick-in-the-muds from the Auric Aurora across town, and take the edge off my interest to Khayyam.

I managed not to let out a low whistle at the princely sum, just as well as I'd managed not to loll my tongue out of my mouth when she leaned forward—neckline dipping, creamy skin contrasting sharply with that black dress—to set a credstick onto my desk. It was an old-fashioned touch. I wondered if she just figured we didn't have proper wireless networks out here in Puyallup, or what.

“I trust this will suffice for the duration of the case?” Her eyebrows arched a bit, and the tip of her tongue slid across her lips.

“Sister, for five grand, I'm all yours for about a month.” And for another peek down that dress, the rest of my life. I wouldn't touch her credstick, though, not yet. I let it sit. I wasn't going to take her money until I knew for sure I could take the job. “My...contact was light on the details, though. What else can you tell me?”

“A girl, one Nishimura Kyoko, has gone missing. She was last seen headed towards the Daisy Chain in this district, as she often did on weekend nights.”

“This district, maybe, but it ain't for lack of trying. The Chain's way down in Tarislar, sister, about as far from here as you can get an' still call it Puyallup. And it's deep Ancients or Laésa turf.” The two lawless elf groups changed their minds every couple weeks about which of them ran the popular nightclub. The only thing they both agreed on was that it was theirs, not a Mafia or Yakuza joint. “If she went missing outta the Chain, those elves're the ones to talk to, not some gumshoe from the wrong end of the district.”

I owed my clients honesty every time. In this biz, my

word was all I had. I wanted her money—hell, I needed her money—but I wasn't gonna make some missing teen stay missing by lying to a client about what I could and couldn't do. I got along with those crews alright, but not enough to step on their toes like this. If the girl was mixed up in Ancients or Laésa business, my pointed ears and the half-dozen jobs I'd done for 'em wasn't gonna get her girl back.

"She never made it to the Daisy Chain," Ms. Johnson clarified, uncrossing and recrossing her legs in a way that made her more comfortable on my rickety old chair, but distracted me from business for a couple seconds. "Ms. Nishimura was attacked shortly after her vehicle exited the highway, her boyfriend was shot dead, and she was taken."

"Oh." *Oh!* I remembered hearing something about a snatch-and-grab shootout the other day, remarkable only because it had happened so close to the District Hall. I'd been scanning the screamsheet headlines while using my optics to snap incriminating evidence for a nasty divorce case. Nasty divorce cases were closer to my norm than this sort of thing. The carjacking had been a little unusual. Violence was second nature here in Puyallup, but most professional crews wouldn't jack an out-of-towner car that close to Knight Errant's district office.

I was on retainer with Mr. Campa, the ork that Puyallup had elected, and I handled wards and miscellaneous thaumaturgical security issues for his offices. Lots of Lon's council members didn't need my help, because they were already in the pocket of the Italians or the Japanese, and had mob or Yakuza spellslingers to scratch their backs. I worked for the rest of 'em, the ones who got voted in clean and tried to stay that way. The ones I liked. Someone getting away with a carjacking, kidnapping, and murder right under their noses wasn't doing any of my District Hall buddies any favors. I also had more than a few contacts in the local precinct, even if not all the cops liked me.

"So Knight Errant isn't bein' helpful enough?" For a legit corp job, hunting a legit corp kid, there was no reason for her not to go to the legit cops. Or try to, at least.

"In Puyallup?" She smirked at me a bit, and I nodded.

“Yeah, I figured. Still, I’m legally obligated to remind you to take a missing persons case to them.”

“I have. They seem to have accomplished nothing since I did exactly that twenty-four hours ago, so I’m exploring other options. Are you able to help me, Mr. Kincaid, or not?”

“Were you able to bring something like I asked?” I stopped musing and hoped she’d gotten Hard Exit’s call. I might not have to go butt heads with the Knight Errant office, might not have to go snooping around Ancients turf, might be able to handle almost this whole damned case from my office, if she’d been able to bring me...

“Something of personal significance to Ms. Nishimura, yes.” Johnson reached into her slim purse and hauled out a small toy. My optics tagged it as a yellow and white doll of a cartoonish horse, bright and cheery colors, all shining plastic and rounded edges.

“It’s a ponicorn,” the corporate executive from Arboritech said very primly. “We recovered it from her company housing. It’s my understanding it was her favorite when she was younger.”

As ritual links go, you could do worse than someone’s favorite childhood toy. I thanked Ms. Johnson for the help and the credstick, and let her know I’d give her a call if I found anything. These rituals took time, but I hoped to cut out a whole lot of middlemen with that little toy horse she left sitting on my desk straddling a credstick holding half a year’s pay.

She smelled like vanilla when I held the office door open for her. I kept an eye on her as she sauntered down the hall, watched the street out front to make sure she made it into her coupe okay, then reached for a Target and sank back into my cushioned chair.

Ariana wasn’t real happy with how I’d looked at my new boss, and she let me know it as soon as Johnson’s BMW had vanished down the street. She wasn’t too pleased with me for lighting up, either—y’ask me, I think her elemental-plane-of-earth self just doesn’t like all that fire and wind I’m inhaling—but whether she was cross with me

or not, I knew I had Ari's help.

I let her get her grouching out of her system as I spun up my headware Transsys and sent Trace a short message, just asking for a routine background check on our missing girl to see if anything of interest came up. There was no reason not to have her working the Matrix angle while Ariana and I worked the magic. I finished my smoke, then nodded at the ponicorn and Ari cooed as she carefully picked it up, the artificial colors of the little toy almost as bright as the artificial colors of my girlish ally.

We headed into the other room of my dive; not the one with the rumped mattress where I slept, or the fake-oak desk where I sat for clients, but the one where I got the real work done. Some hoity-toity types, especially Hermetic mages, called this sort of room a sanctum. Shaman preferred terms like medicine lodge. Me, I just thought of it as my library. A library reinforced with wards, shelf-lined walls full of datachips and old hardcopy books, summoning materials, fetish items and curious trinkets, sure, but basically still a library. My own personal brand of magic used whatever worked, and that meant I hoarded this sort of thing.

Ritual magic can take a lot out of you, and the hard truth was that I didn't have a whole lot left in me. I still knew what I was doing, though, still knew the tricks of the trade and the formulas and focusing techniques. Ariana supplied the raw mojo, I refined it and guided it, and with a toy that the girl had cared about, had handled and played with and named and loved through her childhood, we'd have a clear link to her.

Hell, this case was half solved already, right?

FOUR

The next morning I woke up to my headware commlink chiming. My meet with Ms. Johnson had been over for hours, Ari and I had focused and chanted the night away, and then she'd carried me—easily, like a parent hefting a sleepy child—to my messy bed and left me there to sleep off my exhaustion. Everything magical came harder to me, since the vampire attack had left two holes in my neck and a gaping chasm where my power used to be. I wasn't half the mage I used to be. I wasn't even close.

I answered on the fourth or fifth ring, trying to shake away dark thoughts and cold memories.

"You ready to go?" Trace popped into my vidphone box, at the corner of my field of vision until a flicker of thought zoomed in, enlarged and centered it.

"With you? Anywhere." I gave her my brightest smile, and she just snorted and rolled her eyes.

"Well, it's seven, Kincaid. Skip and I are downstairs, and we're just waiting on you."

"I'll be right down." She hung up, and I started across the room for my coat and hat. This case was almost in the bag. Ari and I had tracked the girl's location down to a shithole tenement not ten clicks away, and all that was left was the ugly part; blasting our way in and taking her. Luckily, we were all pretty good at the ugly part. The two of us had gotten a good look at the astral forms of the shadowrunners holding her, we'd seen that she was still in one piece, aura bright and clear, and we just needed time to recover and get Skiptrace along for the ride.

Yessirree, the girl was as good as safe, I figured.

Seven in the morning wasn't a time I saw real often,

but the nap had been enough of a help, the Sideways did the rest. I was ready to kick in doors, slay some dragons, and rescue the princess. I hoped the good little corp-girl had learned her lesson and stuck to safer neighborhoods after this, though. Her aura had been roiling with fear and anger when we'd seen her, flaring brightly compared to the muted colors and dispassionate rage of the augmented criminals who'd snatched her right off the street just for sitting in the wrong car.

I chewed three pieces of WhiteBrite on the way over to stay sharp, reassured by Ariana's upbeat chattering from my passenger seat, by the hum of Trace's sleek little Suzuki and the snarl of Skip's big Harley on the road behind me. Seven was a weird time for me to be up, but even moreso for these shadowrunners-turned-kidnappers. They'd all be either asleep or exhausted when we rolled up, slow to react when Trace and I went in the front door, quick and lethal. They didn't have a magician with them, so Ari was our real ace. It'd be a piece of cake.

We parked a block away and Skiptrace climbed into the back of my Americar, then waited in silence as I whistled us up some extra help. The Spirit of Man didn't get summoned as easily I might have several years ago, but it showed up all the same. I sniffed hard and ignored the taste of blood in my mouth—and Ariana's look of concern—as I chatted with it out my driver's side window. It was a miniature street urchin made of Puyallup ash, used condoms, a food wrapper, and a couple used slap-patches, all whipped together from the gutter in the blink of an eye and a rush of power. I told it what I wanted, and it complied; a heartbeat later me, Skip, Trace, and my Ford were easy to overlook. Ariana faded into the astral on her own, and my Americar carried us down the street, the next best thing to invisible.

The spirit's favor multiplied the usual Puyallup apathy a thousandfold. No one cared enough to pay attention as we parked outside their housing project. People standing not two meters from us glanced away and didn't notice as we piled out of my car and geared up for an assault. The

dealer on the corner didn't bat an eye as I popped the trunk and grabbed my old Mossberg CMTD, or Trace slung on her Smartgun X, or Skip noisily racked the slide on her big ugly AK-98. The gaudy, childish, pink polymer of her gun was the most feminine thing about her. Ari, who had wheedled her into the colorful purchase some months ago, floated alongside us as we made our way into the building and climbed up the stairs.

I hate the projects. They're egg cartons full of desperate people who live packed into buildings made of concrete and fear. Gangs run them, drug and BTL slingers run them, addiction runs them. The district can't afford anything but the most basic of upkeep and maintenance, so they're lucky to have water, power, and maglocks on their doors. I've seen the astral side of prisons—literally—with less fear and frustration soaked into their steel and glass. Life and brightness and magic didn't come easy in a place like this.

Ariana felt it, her colors muting a little as we got closer to our target. My professors called it "background count." I called it a pain in the ass. Skip sure as hell didn't mind, taking point with her augmented muscles, long legs taking steps two and three at a time. Trace didn't seem to notice, either, of course, but she was as mundane as a loaf of bread, just like her girlfriend. Me, though? Me, clinging to my Talent by the skin of my teeth? I was glad to have my shotgun and Colt with me and not just my wand, and we'll leave it at that.

When we slunk out of the stairwell on the seventh floor—Trace and I a little out of breath, Skip looking impatient, Ariana just looking sad to be here—we knew something else was wrong, though. We weren't just being overlooked; the hallway was empty. No chipheads sat on the stained carpet, burning their souls away with better-than-life programs. No punks wrapped in leather and spikes approached to sneer and swagger and revel in the fear they caused. No pushers lounged and waited for fresh marks. No children chased devil rats with dull knives and sharp sticks. No joygirls or pimps prowled and looked for

business. No parents hid their younger ones from the eyes of their neighbors, no couples bickered, no tired, old women limped down the hall on their way to serve up slop at a greasy spoon. Puyallup came more alive at night, sure, but even for early morning, even for the building we were in, something was off.

Skip's combat boot took the door clean off its hinges—I could pick a lock when I had to, and Trace could sure as hell fool a maglock, but we were in a hurry—and we rushed in. Ariana skipped through the wall and manifested in the middle of the room while the muzzles of our guns led the other three of us inside. Then we all hit the brakes. Dammit. Our magical camouflage fell away and a sidelong nod sent my spirit of man scampering back home, even though it technically owed me more favors. I didn't need it any more. The place was empty.

Or, rather, the place was full of corpses.

We lowered our guns, and I let out a long, low sigh. We'd all seen our share of violence, don't get me wrong, but this place was a regular charnel house. We cleared it anyways, just making sure, hoping against hope the girl might still be here despite the recent slaughter, but she was gone.

Skiptrace took off. Trace would scour the Matrix for more information and research, do some real digging try to piece together what had happened and why and what to do next. Ari and I stuck around to do the same thing the old fashioned way. Trace got more mileage out of her commlink than I did, but I knew more real-world tricks than her. I'd scour the place for clues and details, and put pieces together until I saw a clearer picture.

Ariana hovered in the middle of the room, and after I nodded at her she cast a handy piece of detection magic. It was a great little spell, and one that'd solved more cases for me than mana blasts and my Colt put together. She cataloged every item in the room, her inhuman voice clear as a bell, rattling off a list of everything in the place, one piece at a time. I half-listened, half-looked around, trusting my cyberaudio suite to record it so I could play it back later

if I had to. Lone Star had cut me a raw deal when they'd decided to throw me away, but at least they hadn't taken their headware back. I shut off the color filter on my optics to make sure I didn't miss anything, and went to work.

"One hundred sixty-four 9mm shell casings," she started.

They were hard to miss, and our initial rush had sent more than a few skittering across the floor. Most of the shooting had come from just where we'd stopped, the side of the tiny living room closest to the door. The Sideways parts of my brain counted the cases almost as fast as Ariana did, and found the pattern in their spray easily, comparing it to the pockmarked wall across the room. Three shooters had fired from near the entrance, the fourth up closer, hosing down the opposite side of the room willy-nilly. Terrible groupings, lots of muzzle climb, more misses than hits. Enough had hit, though. Four bodies sprawled out messily on the other side of the room, lending credence to the shooters' quantity over quality approach.

"—four spent twelve-gauge casings—"

So there'd been some return fire, but not much. There were more bullet holes than just those four shotgun blasts, and no other cases scattered around. I wasn't surprised, though. Caseless rounds were plenty common, it was really only here in the Barrens you saw much cased ammo any more, after all. Whoever had taken these four out had been using older, cheaper, hardware. It wasn't a shock that the runners, meanwhile, had opted mostly for caseless stuff. I leaned in close and checked a few of the return-fire bullet holes, guessed them to be from a big pistol not terribly unlike my own Colt. The main shooters, though, who'd won the fight, were poor enough for cased ammo, sloppy enough to leave the casings behind, but cheap enough to take any empty magazines before they left.

Ariana droned on in the background, dispassionately listing items. I nudged with a toe here and there, knowing the bodies had already been disturbed post-mortem to get looted. Three of the shadowrunners had big empty holsters that would fit a fat-framed Browning or, more likely, an Ares

Predator. None had credsticks on them.

“—one human digitus secundus mammas severed at the proximal phalanx. One human digitus tertius severed at the proximal phalanx. One human digitus annularis severed at the proximal phalanx...”

The big ork that was the closest to the shooters had gone down missing most of a hand. He was just another razorboy clawing up out of the gutters, but I'd seen him around before. He went by Yard Dawg, and I remembered toasting and cheering with him down at a corner dive during a live broadcast of the Super Brawl. He'd been an up-and-comer three or four years ago. Then a down-and-outer, just like the rest of us.

He hadn't died pretty. Something sharp, wicked sharp, had come at him low and to his right. He'd been chipped fast enough to try and block, but the blade had swept up, through his hand, and sliced neatly across his throat. He'd popped a cyberspur while he bled out, but never gotten it wet. The razorboy'd gone down swinging but missing.

Curiously, he had a broken nose that had been crudely taped up, a split lip, a black eye, and some blistering around the cranial injuries that looked like burn marks. Someone had hit him hard and fast and more than once, and done so well before this gunfight, but judging from the size of the wounds the fist had been pretty small. Huh.

“—four software chips, three twelve-gauge shotgun slugs—”

The shotgunner was behind the couch, covered in blood and cushion stuffing from the shredded furniture. He was a weedy little guy, built more like the elven stereotype than I was. He had a half-dozen datajacks high on his left temple, and in their rush his robber-killers had missed some of the chips he'd dropped as he died. I crouched behind the couch with congealed blood under my shoes, staring at their leftovers. Ari's spell—my spell, technically, but she cast it better than I could—didn't know exactly what sort of chips they were, but I did. CalFrees, and I

recognized the maker's mark, a tiny logo etched on each of the small gem cases. A couple years ago, I would've called it a jackpot. I tried not to think about Turbo Bunny, and made myself think about anything else, instead.

"...two sets of zip ties, severed..."

That made for a timely reminder of what I was really after, and a nice distraction from unpleasant memories. The girl. I was here for the girl. I stalked over to the old-fashioned heating unit. It's where we'd seen Kyoko hours earlier, aura blazing with anger and fear, tied to it by hard plastic restraints. They were cut now, and the slices that had freed her dug into the cheap metal, too. It was the same blade that had opened up the team's heavy, I was sure, and it was mono-edged or I'd turn in my license.

I tugged at my pocket and thumbed open my tactical knife, a folding Cougar shortblade. It was a weapon focus—vampire insurance, I called it—but not much of one. I kept it around more for the mundane sharpness than the hint of orichalcum and wisps of enchantment. I held it against the metal pipes and dug in gently, seeing how hard I'd have to press to match, or close to match, the depth of their cut. It was easy as pie, went in without hardly any pressure. Whoever'd cut her free had been careful about it, then. It was like they didn't want to hurt her, or they didn't want to damage a package. I shut my Cougar and clipped it back inside my pocket, then paced around the room sucking on a Target while Ariana kept rattling off the room's contents.

The other two corpses didn't bear any obvious gang ink—and obvious gang ink was the only kind worth having—either, didn't wear any patches, didn't get hits in my own steel-trap memory or ping anything on my facial recognition protocols. They were just some thugs Yard Dawg had picked up to help with a job, looked like. They were chromed up irregularly enough they had money to burn on augmentations, but hadn't gotten them together like gangers or syndicate soldiers might.

So. The apartment total was one ork, three humans. Dead from a hail of bullets that had to have come from something suppressed—like Trace's Ingram, or maybe

something smaller—that I figured came from four shooters, two magazines apiece, judging from the patterns in the spent shell casings. And one monoblade, don't forget. There was very little return fire for a group of professional shooters, and there'd been no signs of forced entry before Skip had knocked on the door herself. That meant they'd been let in, they'd been face-to-face with their killers and close enough that a draw-strike had started it all. A deal gone bad, maybe?

Fuck them, I didn't care. Where was the *girl*? I sighed out smoke and flicked my Target away.

"And one cigarette butt," Ariana said, right on cue. She glared at me for it, but only half-heartedly. I flipped my optics back to muted grayscale, and gave her a tired smile.

"You did real good, kid," I reached out and tapped her chin gently with a fist, and she dazzled me with her grin. "C'mon. Let's go get some breakfast, then head back to the office for a bit and see what Trace can dig up."

"Waffles?" Her eyes lit up, and I gave her a nod. She didn't need to eat, but she liked to. Waffles were her favorite, and with Ms. Johnson's certified credstick burning a hole in my pocket, we could afford a treat.

Ariana concentrated for a second, and the stone-sharp edges of her form wavered and softened, her skin tone turned from gleaming bronze to a human tan, her ears shortened to what you'd expect on any other elf. When she wanted to, she could look perfectly metahuman. She didn't bother most of the time, because she knew Skiptrace and I liked her however she was the most comfortable.

I gallantly offered her my elbow, and she daintily stepped over the spent shell casings as we made our way to the door.

During the drive, I spun up my Transys and sent mental commands to ring up autodial number four. I got ahold of a buddy down at the district Knight Errant office to let him know there'd been a shooting—Phelps cared about as little as I thought he would, but it cheered him up to know their carjackers were dead—and to let him know that if he wanted to spread the word from his desk that I'd done it, he

could. No one would actually investigate it, and they'd never press charges, but word of mouth was half my secret to success.

Phelps had been a Lone Star guy back in the day, a coworker of my old man, who'd hopped companies when the Knights took over. Part of why he did well was his long time in the district and local contacts, and part of why his local contacts still liked him was me. He returned the favor, always playing me up with his fellow cops, making sure they knew I was someone they could count on. Four dead shadowrunners wouldn't hurt my rep any, and him letting the department know I was on the trail of the missing girl just added to that rep.

I ate waffles with my imaginary friend, drove back to my doss, and went to sleep for a couple hours. Ari and I still had the ponicorn toy, and unless Trace really came through with a data-search miracle, that was still our best lead.

FIVE

I woke up early that evening feeling frustrated as all hell, with *Seven Steps to Heaven* jangling away in my inner ear. It was a fantastic jazz tune, but I'd long ago found my least favorite rendition of it—I swear, these mooks butchered the poor thing—and programmed it as the alarm clock in my headware. It didn't improve my mood any, always waking up to a seminal song getting molested.

Nothing.

It's what Ari and I had found trying to track down Kyoko again last night. We'd gone through the motions, followed the same rituals, focused on the gleaming plastic ponicorn, chanted in Enochian all through the rite. Nothing. Then we'd tried it again, and a third time before even my stubbornness had given way to the reality of it. Whoever had the girl now had her behind wards, and that meant trouble.

Checking my Transys, I found a datadump from Trace full of several interesting facts, and filed the documents away along with some guesses they led me to. It was a start. The puzzle wasn't complete, but the pieces were taking shape. She'd gotten somewhere, at least, and I piped her a quick confirmation message and let her know Ari and I were still working.

Then I slung my coat over my rumpled suit, settled my hat on my head, and hit the sidewalk. My real office. My real job.

Tech hadn't gotten us enough, and magic wasn't getting us anything new. That left the streets themselves; the living, breathing, secret-holding word of God spread between the thousands of souls who called Puyallup home.

Someone had gunned down a foursome of shadowrunners without getting scratched, swiped up a girl and hidden her under magic, and in doing so, had interfered with my case. I'd get the information from Puyallup itself. I knew the place. I knew the people.

I started outside the projects where we'd last spotted her. A pair of metas and a pair of humans had died, and everyone on that floor had been smart enough to keep their heads down and not see a thing. That didn't mean the whole neighborhood was blind, though, or deaf and dumb. Without a friendly spirit keeping me ignorable, folks knew me, and a few figured out what I was doing here. I went to work.

I bought a scoop of something gray and lumpy from a street vendor just out front, and paid triple what he was charging. I spelled it out to him, asked him to keep an ear out, and moved down the street. The flimsy paper cup of soystew went to a bum, and I told him the same thing and let him know there'd be some synthahol in it if he found anything good to tell me. I flirted with a whore to draw out her pimp, slipped him some scrip, and left him my contact number. A block away, I flashed the credstick to buy a round of soynoodles for everyone huddled under an awning against the rain, expertly scooped up my own bowl with a pair of chopsticks, made nice with the owner and a couple of hungry folks who asked me—warily, at first—what my angle was. Then I did it all over again at a local watering hole, a strip joint full of bored-looking dames with obvious scars and chips slotted mid-dance, a corner store where the local gangers lounged out front in exchange for protection money. I checked with the maintenance crew of the housing project proper, brought them a pair of cheap bottles full of sour liquor to break the ice, drank with them and asked them to spread the word.

Everywhere I went, I showed a little generosity. I dropped my name, I told them I wasn't a cop, and I asked about the shooting and the girl.

No one knew anything, of course. Not at first. Not face to face. Not in public. Bleary eyes turned hooded, people

glanced away, mouths tightened with suspicion, shoulders knotted up. For most, it was pure reflex. They didn't know a damned thing about it, but they knew Puyallup's cardinal rule; if you rat someone to the cops, you die. For some there was a little head tilt before they clammed up, a nervous glance around to see who was listening, a narrowing of the eyes that told me they'd heard about the shooting in question. Some of them, I could tell, thought they knew something, or thought they knew someone who might. The same routine followed every tiny bribe, every little prod for info; I left a contact number from one of the half-dozen Trace had set up for me, thanked them for their time, and left before they got spooked.

Everyone's got a commlink these days. Hell, the bum I'd talked to hours earlier had been dictating into his, about to post a rambling blog post about dragon weddings and mana spikes and alien conspiracies, judging by what I'd overheard as I'd approached. Folks might not've wanted to look a mug like me in the eye and talk in public, but when I told them it might save a girl's life—and more importantly, promised a payday for the info—I knew maybe one in ten would call me back.

I took my time, talking with the streets. I strolled from corner to corner, shop to gin-joint, noodle bar to gambling den, pimp to dealer, then looped back around when enough time had passed that I could expect a different crew of locals. I wiled away the whole evening, and half the night, spending money, drinking with regulars, lighting smokes for people, flirting with hookers and waitresses, ignoring BTL deals right under my nose. Always, always, I reminded them that I wasn't a cop, that I had nuyen if they had info, and that I was Kincaid, the guy they'd heard of before. I was from here, same as them.

"I was born right over there," I said a dozen times, or a hundred, nodding to one side. Then the other way, "and I live right down there."

Exhausted, throat sore from cheap whiskey and talking for hours, I lit up a Target to sooth the scratch with mellow smoke. Outside, feeling a Seattle drizzle roll off my

fedora and longcoat, watching it turn the Puyallup ash into slippery scum, I leaned against a gang-tagged wall to check my Transys for new messages.

Several of them said I needed a bigger dick, that they wanted to help me find a hot girl tonight, or that they were exiled Tir Tairngire nobility that needed my SIN so they could transfer me a couple million nuyen for safekeeping. I was impressed. Trace had assigned me this number ten whole hours ago, and only a handful of spam got through. Another six or eight were bullshit, people repeating what I'd let slip about the shooting, telling me what they thought I wanted to hear, desperately trying to earn a payday when they didn't know anything.

Then one mentioned the Sleeping Tiger bunraku parlor. One mentioned the Blue Dragons, a little wannabe go-gang. Another Tiger mention. More Dragons. Kenran-kai, an anonymous e-mail said, the Yakuza family. A new girl was at the Tiger. I completed a few credit transfers and paid my debts. I had what I needed.

I flicked my smoldering Target into the gutter, nodded to a couple middle-shift hookers as I started walking, and headed to my Ford. I'd heard of the Blue Dragons before. I'd heard of the Sleeping Tiger. It started to maybe make sense. I knew where I had to go for confirmation. I shot Trace a quick message with an address and a note to hurry up, then drove across town.

SIX

Sunny Salvo's was the bastard child of a pizzeria and an amusement park, a reality-augmented nightmare of flashing lights, garish cartoon characters that burst out at you in 3D, loud arcade games with a lightshow and catchy jangle apiece, and slabs of grease, cheese, and bread that smelled like pizza, but cost like caviar.

Every kid in the neighborhood loved Sunny Salvo's twenty, twenty-five years ago—back when it'd just been flashing lights and an animatronics display, before this fancy, wireless crap came along—but one kid liked it so much he'd set up shop there. Between the annoying AR with their subroutines and protocols that bypass spam filters, the clanking, whirring, animatronics nightmare that continued to chatter away on the main stage, and all the background noise, it was probably a nightmare to stake out. It proved he didn't give two tugs about any kids that might be in here when the shit hit his personal fan, mind you, but it was still probably a nightmare for the Knights to try and keep tabs on.

Skip and Trace were waiting out front, trading glares from across the street with the pair of thugs flanking the doors. Ariana hovered astrally behind me and Trace and Skip followed as I strolled up. Backlit by the garish lights of Sunny Salvo's, the pair loomed even larger in their ill-fitting, dark suits. One was a human trying to get as big as an ork, the other an ork working hard to earn troll status. They both had linebacker's shoulders that flowed neatly into fat heads, not bothering with anything like a neck, looking like a pair of steroid-abusing bobblehead dolls.

"Where you think you're going, pal?" The human

sneered as I jawed a piece of WhiteBrite.

"What, nobody told you? We're tonight's band. Jimmy Kink and the Kinkettes." I thumbed over my shoulder to the girls and gave it a second before I cracked a grin. I reached up and tilted my fedora back a little so they could get a better look at my face. "It's me, ya mook. Kincaid. I want to talk to Enzo."

"Yeah? Well Mr. Gianelli don't want to talk to you. He's eatin'."

That made my smile turn sharp. "Enzo might be eatin' in there, but Mr. Gianelli sure as hell isn't. Mr. Giannelli is Enzo's uncle Joseph. The fuckin' Don. Mr. Gianelli's across town in Tacoma right now, having big discussions with big men, making big decisions that might, someday, trickle down to Enzo. And really? Mr. Gianelli wouldn't be caught dead running a criminal syndicate out of Sunny Fuckin' Salvo's."

I spat my WhiteBrite at the ork's patent leather shoes and gave the human a brilliant smile. "Now go tell Enzo that Jimmy Kincaid wants to talk to him about some business, okay?"

Enzo and I hadn't quite been friends these last several years, but we hadn't quite shot at each other, either. He and I had history, and I hadn't quite burned down those bridges. We'd grown up in the neighborhood, on and off, him and his ma living here when his dad was inside McMillin, watched over by mine. Back in the day, the neighborhood had been all families of convicts or families of corrections officers. We played stickball in the street instead of killing each other. McMillin wasn't some ultramax high security gig, it was soft time. There was no malice to it. Enzo and me, we grew up together.

But in the years since then, he'd gotten more and more tangled up in the family business. He'd also gotten erratic, started hitting novacoke pretty hard. Just last year I'd tangled with a couple of his boys as part of a missing persons gig, but they were doing dirty deeds on the side and not giving Enzo his cut, so it seemed like he hadn't minded too much when they'd both wound up dead. On

paper, he was a Mafia soldato and I was something close to a cop; oil and water. In practice, we'd grown up three houses from each other until his old man had finished doing five-to-ten, when my old man had shown him the door and let him out. I hoped that still carried some weight.

The human thug leaned back to poke his head inside. A moment later, the pair of them shared an incredulous look and then hauled the doors open for me. Skip and Trace stayed outside, no doubt doomed to spend the next several minutes shooting down propositions from the pair of mafia torpedoes.

"Hiya, Junior," I nodded to Salvo's son, who ran the place now, on my way in. He looked up from wiping down a table and gave me a smile. Enzo saw me, too, but he didn't smile.

"Jimmy. Good to see ya." Enzo didn't really mean it. He also didn't stand up, instead finally giving me a brittle plastic smile as I got close. His thinning hair was slicked back, and a designer shirt hung open to show off his gold chains and chest hair. His hands were on the stained table, ugly rings flashing on his pinkies. The place was empty except for him and a scrawny, blond kid sitting at his big table next to him.

"Enzo," I nodded as I took my hat off and tossed it on the table.

"Why you gotta be bustin' my guys' balls like that, Jimmy?"

"They were disrespectin' your uncle, Enzo. They should know better." I reached for a slab of grease and flour pretending to be pizza.

"You know I'll make capo soon, Jimmy. Callin' me Mr. Gianelli is no insult to my Uncle Joe." He smiled again, this one as slick as his hair.

"Sure, Enzo. Sure. Who's your friend?" I nodded at the pimply kid. I recognized the symbols on a medallion he wore. I knew what he was, but not exactly who.

"I serve the Order of Merlyn. You may call me Uranus," the kid said, tilting his chin up a bit to look down his prominent nose at me.

I quirked an eyebrow. Enzo looked a little embarrassed, a little sullen.

"You shittin' me, Enzo?" I turned my incredulous gaze towards his boss. I knew that particular wiz-gang-turned-Mafia-initiatory-circle used names from mythology and the zodiac, but wow. "Talk about scrapin' the bottom of the barrel, huh? The Finnigans finally send you an Order of Meryn advisor, an' they give you one named asshole?"

"Uranus was the primal Greek lord of all the skies!" His voice cracking, the kid rose from his chair to slap the table, his face turning red. I was worried about his blood pressure. After a bite of pizza, I was a little worried about mine, too.

"He was consort and husband to Gaia, father of the elder gods, the titans!"

"Yeah. I've read the books. He also got castrated. You will, too, if you don't get 'your anus' outta here. Enzo, me an' you gotta talk. Privately."

Ignoring his continued bluster, I took another bite of cold pizza before giving the kid a flat look, watching as he blinked rapidly at me; a sure sign he was trying to push his sight over to the astral.

I gave it a tick, then watched the blood drain from his face. Don't get me wrong; most of my astral form was a black hole that vampire had left in my aura, and a good deal of my magic had been taken along with it. But I didn't forget the things I knew, and one of the first tricks I'd learned was how to manipulate my aura to change my apparent power level. When I worked at it—and I'd been working at it as soon as I saw the punk's Order of Meryn medallion—I could look almost as powerful as I'd been at my peak, glowing with Talent like I had at my prime. And, more importantly, hovering just behind me was the radiant astral form of Ariana, shining and inhuman and blazing with more than enough power to destroy Uranus quite easily all by her lonesome.

Enzo nodded for the kid to leave, Uranus skittered out of there like his ass was on fire. In private, Enzo and I could talk ways we couldn't around ears. Any ears.

"The Sleepin' Tiger," I said without preamble, lighting up and kicking my heels onto an empty chair. "Know about it?"

"Sure. Yakuza fuck pad. One of their puppet parlors, a real earner. They keep a small army on-hand, way I hear it."

He eyed me warily. Enzo wasn't the brightest bulb around, but he still had good instincts. Even he could tell I was up to something stupid, which should've been a warning sign to me.

"I want to hit the place, Enzo. Hit it hard. Get the girls out, send a message." I couldn't tell him which girl, couldn't tell him what message. "I thought you might want a piece. Word is the Yaks have some extra muscle on the streets lately, and I figured maybe working together might be a good idea on this one."

"You come in here, you spook my associate, you break bread with me without my invitation, and after all, that you want a favor?"

"You really think there's bread in this?" I cracked a grin as I stubbed out my Target on my—or rather, his—half-eaten slice of pizza.

"Figure of speech," he said, still half-glaring.

"I'm not askin' a favor from you, Enzo. I'm offering you one."

My headware worked its magic, and I paid close attention. It read his posture, expression, pupil dilation, body temperature. Between the chrome in my head and the gut-full of experience I had at this sort of thing, all I had to do was play my cards right and he was mine.

"Hear me out. I don't want all the girls for myself, just one for a case. The rest, if they want, can turn. Work for you outta that joint in Loveland, or wherever. We tell your Uncle Joe the whole thing was your idea, and you called me in to help, right? The Kenran-kai take a hit, the Gianellis get some new working girls, you look like a good earner. You want to make capo? You gotta show some initiative."

I'd caught him between hits of novacoke. He licked his lips like he was thirsty, and I knew he was thinking about his next hit as much as he was listening to me. Good. It made

him pliable, and when he did take a hit, he'd convince himself this was all the best idea ever.

"Easy deal," I said, shrugging and looking casual as could be. "I go in, hit their wards, the rest of you storm in and we hit 'em from all sides at once. We clean 'em out, drive off with the girls, torch the place. Any of the skirts that want out of the life get out of the life—on my dime, not yours—and the rest go to work for you instead of the Yaks."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

I had the hook in, now I just had to reel a little. I put my feet under me, stood up, and made like I was ready to leave, like I was just going to stroll across town and go do it all by myself, instead, and leave him here eating pizza and getting fatter.

"Hold on now, Jimmy. Let's work out the details." He reached across the table to shake my hand instead, pulling me back into the conversation. I talked shop with him while he tugged a popper, a one-shot inhaler, from his pocket. The higher he got, the faster he nodded.

SEVEN

We weren't hitting the bunraku parlor until four in the morning. They were supposed to close around then, and the smaller the crowd the better. I'd parked in an alley down the street, killed the engine, leaned the seat back, and drank myself into a nap while Ariana sat on overwatch. She liked to look out for me. I wasn't getting a whole lot of sleep lately. I just dozed off when I could, and hoped the dream-memories weren't too bright or sharp.

"I'm glad he's not here because I don't like him!"

Ari's sulking voice woke me up.

"Whozzawhat?" I hauled my hat up off my face and tried to figure out what the heck she was talking about.

"Uranus." She didn't giggle when she said his name. She didn't get the joke, which was probably for the best. "That jerk Enzo just drove by and I flew into his stupid van to see if Uranus was with him and he's not and I'm glad he's not because I don't like him."

"Enzo's here?" That sat me upright.

"He just drove by and they stopped down the street and Uranus isn't with him and I'm glad." Her tone was terribly matter-of-fact. "Because I don't like him."

"What've you got against the guy?" I smiled at her after getting my seat fixed, then slid out of the car. She flew through the hood and windshield to follow me. Skip and Trace were at the other end of the alley, talking and loading fresh magazines for tonight's raid. I wasn't crazy about the Uranus punk, either, of course, but Ari'd really taken a disliking to him.

"He likes air spirits." She mustered up the words with the disgust a human girl her age might reserve for a

detested boy-band. I'd shaped Ariana from earth, not air. Ally spirits or not, certain elemental animosities remained even after being summoned and fully formed.

"Yeah, I thought he seemed the type." I fought a smile as I reached into my coat pocket for a Target.

"He has a bunch of them bound. I could see them." She stuck out her ruby-red bottom lip to pout, stark against the grayscale city. Spirits didn't like being bound, but some mages didn't care much. It wasn't a trick I pulled real often. I was different from most folks in my Tradition that way.

"Yeah." Lighting up, I crossed the street towards Enzo's big black SUV, which was about as subtle as it was fuel-efficient. "I thought he seemed that type, too."

"I'm glad you don't bind spirits." Ariana gave me her bright, childish, smile. It's the one she gives me that shows just how much she adores and respects me. It makes me feel guilty every time. "Even just air spirits!"

"Not real often, kiddo. Not if I can help it."

Enzo and his boys were climbing out of his Suburban, and I gave a little laugh around my Target. The Italians were all suited up and ready to play. Tactical vests, kneepads, assault rifles, gas masks against the Puyallup ash as much as anything else. They reminded me of the old Lone Star FRT guys, playing dress-up before an op. Enzo had promised six guys, and that he'd stay home. Instead I counted three, plus Enzo himself.

"What's that stuff in your trunk?" He ran a hand over his slick hair when he saw Skiptrace across the street from us, checked his reflection in the tinted windows of his SUV. The razorgirl and hacker were both hauling grocery bags stuffed full of something bulky and light blue out of my Ford, and Enzo was too high to focus long enough to figure it out.

"Blankets for the dames," I said, turning up my collar against the rain and blowing some smoke downwind.

He turned and gave the bounty hunters a long look. Both of them just wore sports bras and cargo pants under heavy armored jackets, not yet zipping them up against incoming fire. They both had little circuitry-stylized tattoos ringing their navels, Skip's dark against her skin, Trace's

faintly glowing and animated.

"Yeah," Enzo leered. "If I was dressed like them, I'd want a blanket, too."

His men snickered. I didn't.

"Not those dames, Enzo. And if you talk like that in front of them, what happens to you ain't no one's fault but yours."

I flicked my smoke away and headed back across the street to check in with Skiptrace. The Ford's trunk was slammed shut, both of them content with the bottled water, the cheap blankets, and the sliver of kindness I'd prepared for the girls we were about to free. My plan wasn't very elegant, but it was simple. That didn't mean everyone liked it, though.

"Are you sure we gotta do this your way?" Skip glowered, checking the magazine in her pink AK. Trace looked grim, but stayed quiet and focused on loading her smaller Smartgun. Ari manifested between them and tried her best to look dour and businesslike and professional, like a shadowrunner from a trid show.

"Yeah. It's the only way to make it work." I tried to give them a reassuring smile, but couldn't quite muster it up. I didn't have all the pieces of my plan—not this little assault, but a real plan—in place just yet, but I knew this part was important.

I gave it a tick to let either of the girls respond, and when they didn't, I sauntered down the street and into the 'massage parlor.' I paused at the door, making a big deal about shaking the rain and ash off my coat, when in reality I was taking my time, merging my aura with the wards that wrapped around the place, and carefully pushing my way through them.

The inside of the place was dazzlingly gaudy. The well-dressed killer inside the door tried to tell me they were closed, but I flashed my credstick and he grudgingly let me in. The AR assault was almost overwhelming, the layer upon layer of sex ads just pissing me off instead of firing me up. I eventually picked one of the popup menus at random and ordered a naughty librarian, hoping that would

at least get me a girl of legal age. Dirty schoolgirls had two of their own submenus, and through the AR overlays I saw a couple of lounging, half-naked girls that looked far too young to do anything but turn my stomach. The despair and soul-grinding degradation of the place had soaked into the building like a stain, and I felt my already tenuous grasp on magic slip a little farther from me.

I followed the AR directions to get to my room, paying attention to how many Kenran-kai family thugs I spotted along the way upstairs. I was an impeccable gentleman with the working girl that met me in my assigned room. She was sprawled lazily on the bed, which made me feel not quite so bad when I chanted in Enochian and poured mana into her until she was unconscious; at least I didn't have to worry about her falling over. Somewhere between the chanting and the background count my throat was raw already, and I knew my work was just getting started.

One hand rested on the wall of the Sleeping Tiger, the other clung to the wand at my hip, and I started chanting again. Ariana and I hammered at the wards at the same time, from both sides, and in a few heartbeats that felt like hours, they shattered. Alone, she could have done the same thing. Alone, I couldn't have.

When a look out the window showed me Enzo's assault team closing in and his big revolver blasting the outside guard off his feet, I swung out into the hallway. My Colt bucked twice in my hand, and the suit-clad guard stationed at the top of the stairs dropped like he'd been poleaxed.

I held my burner in my right hand, and used a modified tactical-flashlight stance from my Lone Star days; I kept my wand in my left hand, wrists crossed, thumb capping the back-end and the front-end pointing towards trouble. I waited and covered the hallway. Girls started screaming, and two more Yakuza toughs—easily marked by their full body tattoos, and tattoos easily marked by the fact they were butt-naked—scrambled away from their fun and into the hall, guns at the ready. Half a magazine later and my Colt had both of them down. I reloaded while I had the

chance.

There was plenty more shooting from the ground level, so I slid down the hallway, clearing each room as I went and hollering for every girl I found to stay put, until I stood at the top of the stairwell. Another pair of shots dropped a Yakuza man halfway up the staircase, and I moved down. A nine-tailed fox *kami* fought a Mafia soldier in the main lobby, but even as I watched Ariana swept in to help him out. I double-timed it down the stairs to look for the Shinto magician who'd summoned it. In my haste, I missed something on my TacSoft overlay map.

My right shoulder exploded in a spray of blood and the overpressure of a rifle firing at me, point blank, sent my head spinning as I sprawled out in a heap. Behind me, half under the stairwell, a suit-clad Yakuza thug laughed. Endorphins coursed through me to blunt the pain to a dull throb, and instead of being hurt, I was just mad. The downside to the gorgeous rosewood grips on my Colt Government Model 2061—the fancy 150th anniversary model—though? They didn't stay put like the ugly, black, rubber ones did, and my Colt tumbled from my hand as I fell. The Yakuza killer lowered his Nitama bullpup at me, grinning as he reached down and got ready to use the underbarrel shotgun to finish me off.

I focused everything I had through my wand, spat an Enochian word of power, and a spear of blue-white energy flashed up to smash into him. At my prime, that spell would have dropped him like a Thor shot. As it was, it was enough to make him stumble, knocking his shot high and wide. My flare compensation and dampening systems fought to overcome the muzzle flash and the roar of his gun so close to my head, and my hand dove for my pocket. Just as he got his balance back, I thumbed open my Cougar lockblade and slammed it down on his foot. The weapon focus slid effortlessly through shoe, meat, and bone to handily pin him to the ground. He yowled in pain. I wasn't sure if I had enough juice in me for another combat spell, but hell if I wasn't gonna try.

But before I had to kill myself overcasting, a half-dozen

rounds from Skip's chattering AK tore into his chest and knocked him backwards. His left foot tore messily from my too-sharp knife, leaving the Cougar standing there, the Puyallup version of the sword in the stone.

My mouth was full of blood as I sat up. I knew it was from the violent overcasting, but I muttered something to Skip about my falling down. She knew enough about magicians to know what had really done it, but she knew enough about pride to just nod brusquely instead of kicking me when I was down. My right shoulder was a train wreck, and it was all I could do to haul myself to my feet and lean heavily against the bloody foyer wall.

Ari, meanwhile, felt what kind of shape I was in and finished playing around with the fox-*kami*. Impossibly sharp claw-hands simply rent the lesser spirit asunder, and she swooped to my side in a flash of color and concern. She held me still while Trace trotted over and Skip covered us, and before long my shoulder was good as new. My *Corpsman* stopped chiming in my ear, and I nodded at the girls. There was still fighting to do, and I resented how they doted on me sometimes.

I heard Enzo shout over sporadic gunfire from another room, high as a kite, his laugh crackling into my headware over our shared channel. He was cursing about how they couldn't find the damned mage, but had just taken out another spirit. The rest of the joint was clear, which only left the basement. The girls and I found him, and the real fight began.

The Yakuza magician was a half-naked bundle of tattoos and power. Live-looking dragon tattoos glowed as they crawled up and down his arms, his chest was dominated by a faintly glowing tsunami scene, and he threw storms and lightning bolts and gouts of flame and angry spirits at us one after another. He knew his stuff. It was dazzling and over quickly, like it always was when both sides knew what they were doing and one side cheated.

Trace and Skip poured on fire to make him shore up his physical defenses, and Ari and I kept him busy magically. She slung spells at him and did her best to

withstand his return onslaught, but the disrupted astral plane of this place weakened her, and the Yak seemed used to it. I was there to pick up the slack, though. I don't have the raw power I used to, not by a long shot, but I can still catch incoming spells with the best of them. The very, very, best. This asshole wanted to blast my ally spirit? Not a chance.

Skip blasted round after round as he threw Barrier after Barrier into place, I knocked away or snuffed out every combat spell he tossed at us, and Ari just kept pounding at him with her own—my own, technically—offensive magic to keep him off-balance. Eventually it ended when Trace just waded in instead of reloading, surprised him, and smacked him square in the head with the stock of her stubby Ingram. Skip and I gawked at her for a second, then both just laughed. It's some fucking hacker we had, so demure and bookish. Ari started laughing a few seconds after we did, just to fit in. All the laughing died away after we caught our breath, when we got a better look at the basement.

We were in a med-clinic. A horrible one, judging from the astral taste of the place, but there was no other name for the tables we saw, the hardware and machinery lining the walls. Trace stood protectively next to her as Skip started inspecting a machine that was still turned on, chatting to it like she always did with new pieces of electronics, talking to it soothingly, introducing herself before plunging in entirely, trusting us to watch over her while she worked. It looked like a data terminal to my inexperienced eye, not a piece of surgical electronics. Ari snatched up the unconscious magician with one hand and waited while Trace and I watched Skip. Ariana didn't quite get computers, but it was hard to blame her. A cursory inspection of the dataterm prompted Skip to take a break from her VR manipulations and flash me a thumbs-up.

>I found the files from Kyoko's headware, she texted me from deep into her electronic reality. >Data transfer, seven hours ago.

Ariana and I went upstairs, leaving Trace to her work

and Skip to her hovering. She dumped the Yak spellslinger onto the ground and hurried over—having forgotten for a bit—to heal the bleeding Mafia thug she'd helped. She decided to save him twice, and she was the only one that could; her healing magic was as good as mine had ever been, and in moments she had the bleeding stopped and his wounds closed up. He looked at her like she was the Virgin Mary, and I laughed and lit a smoke.

Enzo found us as the other two of his guys herded about a dozen working girls down the stairs. He'd taken a hit of novacoke to take the edge off his first firefight in who-knows-how-long, and he was riding the high by griping about how the Yakuza had too many guys. I got my first good look at the girls, and didn't like what I saw. Under the makeup, under the cosmetic surgeries, ignoring their silly little costumes or the lack thereof, I recognized a few of them. In the background, impossible for me to ignore, Enzo yammered on about his offended sensibilities.

"I can't get a six-pack of fellas to do a hit for me, but these Jappos, they've got twelve fuckin' guys guarding a warehouse! You believe this shit, Jimmy? Ha! A dozen fucking guys, here! Plus I know they've been doin' freelance work lately to boot! What's this neighborhood comin' to?"

I grabbed onto his adrenaline and novacoke and enthusiasm and used all that energy of his to push him out the door and leave the place to me. He had too much initiative and not enough work to do, so it was easy to just steer him away. The conversation was as one-sided as if he'd been on a telephone. I chattered at him quick enough for him to keep up, but too fast for him to interrupt, and had him halfway across the street before he realized we were walking anywhere. It's what I do. Me, and the anger in my gut, and the head full of supercomputer that tells me just what buttons to push? Talking rings around a mook like Enzo was easy as breathin'. I just hoped it wouldn't catch up to me too soon, once he realized how I was playing him.

"Leave the gas cans, I'll take care torching the place. Nah, don't worry about the Yak thugs, I'll handle it, me an' Skiptrace got plenty of zip ties and all that. We'll talk about

the hardware after Trace is done looking at it. Same with the working dames, don't worry, we'll handle the detail work. Skip and Trace will take them to Khayyim's to get their simrigs pulled, then we'll talk to them. Half those gals are locals, and I'll be damned if that blonde one ain't Ray-Ray's kid sister. Yeah, I'm calling Ray-Ray to let him know. No, he probably doesn't want her to keep working for you. I'll give them a couple square meals and a three-day bus pass myself, if any of them have somewhere else to go, but I swear to God, Enzo, like half of these girls are kids we've seen around the neighborhood. You put them to work before a doc helps them out and we give them the chance to retire, I'll tell your Uncle Joe myself."

And on and on and on, I chattered at him like an autogun until we were standing next to his Suburban. He was too coked up to want to interrupt me, riding his high and malleable and feeling like he'd just won something. He'd still get maybe a half-dozen new girls out of it, and the prestige of taking out a dozen Yakuza hitters with just his three guys. We both walked away happy, and hell if I felt bad for fast-talking him like I did.

It was only when I went back into the Sleeping Tiger to check on the girls that I realized Nishimura Kyoko hadn't been upstairs. She wasn't milling around in the lobby. She wasn't there at all. We'd missed her. Again.

Trace, Skip, and Ari took care of the rest while I made the call on my Transys. I didn't want to tell Ms. Johnson I'd lost her company property again, but her credstick was heavy in my pocket, and I'd promised her an update. The Kenran-kai still had Kyoko, and she deserved to know.

EIGHT

Puzzle pieces fell into place while I stole another nap back in the office, but then my headware chirped me awake. It let me know a guest was in the hall, and Ms. Johnson rushed into my office and threw the whole puzzle all apart again.

She was dressed more conservatively this visit, black, middle-executive, corporate approved wear, but her face was a mess and so was the rest of her. Blood ran freely from her busted nose and one eye was already swelling shut, her makeup all runny from tears. I reacted instead of thinking—Hell, I was still half asleep—and I was on my feet before she was halfway into the room. The damaged goddess threw herself into my arms, sobbing and in pain.

I should've had Ariana do it—but she was so close, so warm and soft, smelling sweetly of vanilla and with her beauty marred by the ugliness someone had inflicted on her—that I did my best to fix her myself. She winced and clung to me, nails biting into my neck as her nose straightened and closed, and in a few heartbeats her eyes were a matched set again. She grabbed me to keep crying and the strain of even such a minor spell almost knocked me over, but I half-sat on my desk instead and tried to coo supportive nonsense at her. Healing magic has never been my strong suit, and neither has crying dames, but I can get by when I have to.

I gave her a minute to calm down, leaving her in my office while I checked the street. Whoever had done it was long gone, and I couldn't really say if it was lucky for me or lucky for them. I crawled around her car, checking it for bombs or bugs or anything else nasty, trying to see if she'd

been targeted specifically, if the attack had just been a distraction to let them rig her wheels, or for anything else I could find that might keep her safer than if I didn't find it. All I spotted was some blood on one car door, right near the edge. It was a weird spatter pattern, and a little smeared, but I figured maybe it happened when she got knocked around.

"It was those Yakuza thugs, it had to be! Those... those...Kenran-kai! Or their dirty little Blue Tiger gang you told me about!"

I was back in my desk chair and she was pacing restlessly in front of it. Sunlight peered at us through my half-tinted windows, and a glance at my headware chronometer told me it was getting close to noon. I'd called her very early in the morning, on my way back to the office, and she'd been less than warm in response to my update.

"You said it was the Yakuza that had Kyo-chan, and that you fought with them already, so it only makes sense they'd be outside your office!"

It wasn't impossible, I guess. But it wasn't much like them to just rough up a dame for going to the wrong office, and then let her live. If they were here for me, they would have come for me. There had to be more to it. Mitsuhamma Computer Technologies, a major rival of Arboritech—or rather Arboritech's parent company, Shiawase—had strong Yakuza ties. Did they know who she was? Did they know who she worked for? Had it been her they were after, and not me by way of her?

"They laughed and shoved me, Mr. Kincaid, and then one of them wouldn't let go of my arm. Do you think he bruised me?"

I was a good boy, and didn't tell her how much I'd love to check.

"Then one of them just...just punched me!"

She wasn't used to Puyallup, I could tell that much just by how worked up she was over a shiner and a bloody

nose. Corp executives didn't make it to my neighborhood real often, in fairness. Whether her job had her working for Arboritech security or not, she wasn't used to the physicality of the job. The more I saw of her, the more I was betting she was Matrix security. If not, Arboritech had pretty low standards.

Now that she was cleaned up again, and my initial outrage at her being hurt was gone, I was almost amused by it. Her back was so stiff, her posture so tense, that I just couldn't bring myself to tell her how lucky she was, especially if things had gone down like she told me. A half-dozen punks in gang colors, and her all alone, driving a car like that? Even in broad daylight, she'd gotten off easy.

My shaded windows softened the harsh light that wouldn't have done her headache any good, and her platinum hair spun as she whirled and looked at me, hands on hips.

"And what's being done about finding Kyoko now, Mr. Kincaid?" She was composing herself, and had some of her corporate snootiness back. It was my turn to wince.

"We'd tracked her to a...not very nice place." I kicked my feet off my desk and sat upright, showing my client I was taking the conversation more seriously now that it had turned directly to business.

"Run by the Yakuza, you said. That Kenran-kai group?"

"Yes. We rescued a bunch of other young ladies from there, but none of them were Ms. Nishimura, though a few thought they'd seen her there. It's hard to tell sometimes with these sorts of establishments, though. The Yakuza have certain hardware they use, it plays tricks on their memories. We know she was there, though."

I didn't mention that Trace was sifting through that hardware even as we spoke.

"So what now, Mr. Kincaid? That's twice you've let my corporate property slip through your fingers. It's vitally important that Kyoko and her headware memory are retrieved, I've made that abundantly clear."

"I'm aware, Ms. Johnson. Trust me. My assistant and I

will be re-enacting the seeking ritual again later tonight, to locate where they've stowed her now." Actually I had tried a shortcut, and technically I was working the case even while I'd been napping. I'd whistled up a spirit of Man and sent it off to search around for her, just after wrapping up our call that morning. It took less work than a proper ritual seeking, and who knows? Maybe it'd get lucky. "She won't get away from us again. And if she does, we'll just find her again. It's what we do, Ms. Johnson. We're very good at it."

"That remains to be seen."

She stalked over to the window and glared at the street outside, features glowing in the soft light, but back and shoulders still tense and tight as a strung bow. She fished in her small purse for a cigarette then fumbled with a lighter, hands still shaking a little from her recent adrenaline dump.

I stood up just next to her. I should have just thumbed my own lighter open, but a part of me couldn't help but show off in front of a pretty dame like her. And she was more than pretty, even with her makeup mostly wiped off. I squinted, focused, and cast; the tip of her cigarette flared to cherry-red.

She turned and gave me a little smile. It was so gorgeous I almost didn't notice them coming.

Roaring engines in Puyallup means one of three things. It might be gangers. Chulos roaring past in their low-riders, Ancients or Princes of the Blood on their sleek street bikes, angry Spikes chasing them on their oversized Harleys. But in those cases you tend to hear a bunch of the same type, and there's often a palpable hush that falls over the block as they get closer, as the regular denizens of the place scurry to get out of the way.

It might be racers. Mostly they come out at night, though, and, again, you'll hear several that are of the same general chassis. A swarm of buzzing Rapier or Aurora street bikes, an assortment of tricked-out racing coupes all bursting with nitrous and nuyen to burn, that sort of thing.

Lastly, and most rarely, you'll hear an actual chase. It might be either of the above groups, or some wild-ass

shadowrunners in an armored van or something, and then you hear the sirens of some overzealous cop who's in a hurry to get himself and his partner killed. Whether it was Knight Errant, Lone Star, or one of a dozen other individual security forces that work in the city, sometimes you'll get some cherry-ass rookie behind the wheel, fresh from his training period, who thinks he's going to clean up the streets and chase the bad guys no matter where they go. In that instance, you can hear different engines, but you'll always, always, have the probie running the sirens as he tries to play hero.

This time, I just heard a pair of high-pitched street bikes accelerating wildly, and a single racing coupe. Then, I heard them slamming on the brakes right outside my joint. Coprocessors built into my skull picked up the discrepancy, my gut did the rest. I tackled Ms. Johnson to the ground just as automatic weapons started hosing the place down. Lead tore through the air as the world around us exploded into splintering polymers, falling sheets of glass, and my client's screams.

The hail of gunfire tore through the front wall of my third-story office, plucking at my blinds and I felt one tug at my scalp in a graze. My cyberaudio suite categorized the weapons dispassionately while I pinned Ms. Johnson down to keep her from—and this happens sometimes, believe me—just sitting, shocked, upright into the line of fire. There were four shooters. Small caliber rounds, all spraying on full auto; suppressed weapons, but firing so much it didn't help mask the sound much. One of them reloaded, then another, then another, then the last. The coughing autofire continued as I held my client down, tried to hold myself between her and the street, and mentally shouted for Ariana. As each of them emptied their second magazines their engines spun up again, tires peeled out, and they started racing away.

I leaped to my feet and clawed my Colt from my holster. Lots of punks and crooks these days are chipped and wired up so they're faster than even Skip or Hard Exit, but my gun is quick when it has to be. I lined up my smartlink's targeting pip and my front sight and dumped a

whole magazine at the first target I saw, a crowing punk with blue hair that matched his racing bike. His excited wheelie got cut short as he crumpled to the street, rear tire kicking his bike wildly around the street even as my gun stopped bucking in my mitt.

"Make sure she's okay!" I shouted to empty air, pointing at Ms. Johnson. Then I ejected my empty magazine, slapped in a fresh one, and jumped out my third story window.

Ariana appeared on the physical plane just in time for me to fall through her phantasmal form, stealing my momentum from me before I hit the pavement, turning my fall into something my legs could more than manage. I darted for my car, blasting off a second magazine that pock-marked the back of their Hyundai coupe and spiderwebbed the rear windshield just before it rounded the corner. As my ally spirit swooped upstairs to check on my employer—she'd been bleeding, I recalled—I shook glass and blood out of my hair and dove into my Ford, firing it up after swiping my thumb onto the security pad.

Hard Exit was right. Turbo Bunny and I had been bad for each other. We'd kept each other tangled up in chips, and it had almost killed both of us, but this car was a beauty.

Someone had dropped half a Phaeton stretch limo into Black's Junk Yard, down on Buckley and 234th, right about the time Bunny and I met. It had been an assassination job that had taken the limo apart at the rear passenger compartment, and Bunny and I snatched up the front end because she, giggling and chipped out of her gourd, had had a funny idea. We worked on that car for the whole time we were together, altering the body and transmission and a hundred other things. We took breaks to jack chips or fool around with each other, but in the end the work paid off. We did it all to drop that powerful Rolls Royce engine into a Lone Star surplus Americar that weighed about half as much as the Phaeton.

The end result was a wondrous chasing machine. It was just a beast covered in flat-grey primer, with

mismatched panels, on several panels, graffiti decorating the body elsewhere, and a big, mean, police push bumper snarling at folks from the front end. It had too much engine to take turns gracefully if you were generous with the gas, and the reinforced frame and armored body didn't do it any favors, but in Puyallup ash and Seattle rain, no one took the corners real well anyways. For raw power, though, it couldn't be beat. Yeah, me and Bunny hadn't been a great relationship at all, but at least I got a cool car out of it.

Right now? I used it for all it was worth. I was mad as hell and floored it, rocketing after the remaining bike and car like vengeance itself. The punk on the bike doubled back and came at me with a katana of all things. I decided to ignore him until he slashed at me on his way past and sparks flew as a gash opened in my car's armored plating. I saw a triumphant grin on his face as he rocketed past, blue hair waving. Whatever he had, it was sharp as hell and he knew both how to use it and how to ride well enough to keep up.

He took another swipe at me as he pulled up alongside, and I could see he was driving by PAN as much as manually, because the right hand that should've been working the throttle was hacking away at the side of my car with a fucking katana, instead. One slash took my driver's side mirror clean off, and I cussed up a storm.

I let the autopilot keep my Ford going straight ahead, and shot a look over at the punk; or, rather, at his handlebars. I clenched my fist angrily and spat Enochian at him. Magic Fingers clenched tight on his right handlebar lever, and his front brake went from wide open to completely engaged. His tire locked up and his bike spun ass-over-elbows, and as I raced away down the street from the tangled mass of Suzuki Aurora and Yakuza thug, I prayed through gritted teeth that he'd fallen on his fancy fucking pigsticker.

The Hyundai tried its best to rabbit away from me, but my snarling Ford kept hot on its heels. I rang up the Knights' precinct house and got a buddy at the dispatch desk.

"Tillman, this ain't a social call," I said, hauling my

American around a corner.

"So what else is new?" He yawned and glanced off-screen, ignoring or oblivious to the howling of my engine. "I told you, I'll pay up over the Screamers game soon as I get my next check."

"Dammit, Till, this ain't about that." Truth be told, I'd forgotten the fifty nuyen he owed me. I was busy on another straightaway, another feral grin as my Ford surged forward, getting closer. Closer.

"Some punks just shot up my joint, and—"

"Again?"

"—and I plugged one—"

"Again?"

"—and left him in the street out front. Another one wrecked back on 101st, and I'm still after the last car full of 'em. You got anyone available?"

"Available? Sure." He snorted. "Interested? Prob'ly not. You know the captain's orders about district chases."

"Fine, fine." I angrily engaged secondary features of my Transsys, dragging the navigation info from my American's dashboard over to the screen-in-screen image I had of the vaguely bemused Knight Errant officer. "There's the GPS for it, at least, all right? Don't go saying I didn't call it in."

"Sure, Jimmy." He tapped a finger just below the screen, either opening the attachments I'd sent him or deleting them. It was hard to tell with some of these skills. "Sure."

I hung up and worried about the road. At least the call log would show I'd tried to jump through the hoops, keep my license, all that happy crap. I was being a good little PI, at least in theory, and following all their silly rules. Ariana caught up and flew along behind me, hovering just above and behind my ugly Ford like she was an AR banner I'd attached, an advertisement for power. With every corner the Shin-Hyung bought a little distance, but with every straightaway I closed the gap. I reached into the glovebox and tugged out an old mouthguard, just like I'd worn in my football days.

"Ari, get ready," I said around the wedge of plastic, and she did. First, she strengthened my aura some, reinforcing me with protective wards and focused incantations of durability and armor. I felt good. Healthy. Protected. I had to be.

"Hit it." Then she did her real trick.

We were redlining it down 196th Street when she stole their speed from them, halving it, then halving it again, all in an eyeblink. Crushing the pedal down to the floor mat, I rammed my push-plate square into their trunk while they were a sitting target, and then she slowed and stopped my car before I could fly through them and into the next building. Their sporty little coupe buckled and flew off the road, and she bled more speed from it just as the engine folded around a utility pole no one had utilized for much at all lately. My seatbelt tightened across my chest, and I got battered around in my driver's seat, but my car was fine. With the reinforced chassis, armor plating, and ram bar, I lost one of my four headlights and scarred my paintjob. Their heap was totaled, too light to be durable. I called it a win as I spat my mouthguard onto the passenger seat, then clambered out of my Ford with my gun in my hand.

I advanced on them hungry for blood, cussing up a storm and looking to break heads. When I got close enough to see into their car, I just got madder. There were four battered bodies in their little Hyundai, but only two of them were punks with guns.

"I can't believe... You motherfuckers brought your girlfriends on a fucking drive by?!"

I kicked out what was left of the driver's side window to make myself feel better. Then I reached inside and pulled out a gun-thug by his stupid blue hair. A Sandler TMP submachinegun came out with him, clattering onto the pavement right after he did. The shooter in the back tried to climb out, gun muzzle leading the way, so I put my weight into it and kicked the door shut on his arm. Twice. His gun hit the pavement, and I kicked it away. He kept trying to clamber out of the back, so I let him, then punched him into the gutter.

Both of them were battered and bleeding, confused and with at least a couple busted bones. That was the good news. The bad news was that their girls were, too. It was ugly. Real ugly. Ariana hurriedly patched up the better halves with gentle adjustments to their auras, then picked up on my angry mood. With a mischievous grin she reached out to one of the girls and spun her aura like a top, rippling the colors madly and implanting a suggestion.

As I stooped to pick up their machine pistols, she did it to the other gal. Soon, both girls were—now hale and healthy—shouting in Japanese at their half-conscious boyfriends, kicking them, slapping them, insulting their families. I dumped the magazines from each of their stubby little Slanders, worked the slide to eject the last round, then flung 'em halfway down the street in either direction.

I leaned against their heap while I lit a Target and tried to think about what to do next, when an ugly thought hit me. Maybe it was the last puzzle piece, the last thing I was missing, the last little bit I needed to fit it all together.

My mind hummed along with the Sideways that had attached itself to my genes, finding patterns, putting pieces together, mulling over the clues until they made sense. Last but not least, I accessed my headware MapSofts, charted the course the fleeing thugs had been taking. I recalled the minor spirit I'd called up earlier that day. I released it from future services once it told me the general district it had narrowed down the search to. I started pacing as I called up some of the files Trace had been sending me, scoured through the bio of Kyoko, the information she'd secured from the Yakuza data terminal, the information she'd uncovered on my Ms. Johnson, on the Kenran-kai, on the Blue Tigers.

I almost had it all put together. I only needed one more piece, one sliver of information to confirm what my gut was telling me.

I spat my Target into the Puyallup ash and reached down to grab the driver by the shirt. His girlfriend backed off and then went to double-team his buddy. I picked him up half out of the gutter, leaned in close, and looked him in the

eye until he focused on me.

“Who sent you?”

I gave him that chance. I don't know if he was too stubborn to take it, if he was too rattled from the crash, or if he didn't even speak English. I didn't know, and I didn't care. I gave him two heartbeats to answer me, then I hurt myself tearing straight into his mind to rip the answer free through sheer force of will. I'm not a fan of using that kind of magic, but when I'm good and pissed I'll do it, and I'm damned good at it. I pulled the mental picture from his head, the hard and ugly and mean way. It hit me like a gut punch, but I knew. I knew who'd sent them, who'd told them where to find me, and exactly when to shoot. The last puzzle piece fell into place.

At first, it made me even angrier. I threw the punk down and left him to his girlfriend's anger and mockery, stalking back to my car right through a mystified, half-manifested, Ariana again. I told her not to bother patching up my little cuts or cleaning away the glass and the ash and the blood; I wanted him to see how worn out I was by all this bullshit when I talked to him.

I called Trace from the car and told her where to meet me and why. I told her to set up standard insurance protocols; she got the bundle of files ready and had them set to send out if I didn't cancel the transaction in a few hours. She was a pro. She handled the data for me first, then let me know what she thought of the actual plan.

“Jimmy, you can't do this.” Her eyes wide since she'd heard where I was going and why. “It's crazy.”

“I wouldn't put it past vain.” I hung up on her after a grin and kept driving. I knew I'd see her and Skip there. They wouldn't want to miss the show.

Roaring down the Puyallup streets in my ugly Ford, I made one more call. I spat out just a handful of words, but the answer I got would make all the difference in the world.

“Her headware's empty. The data's gone.”

I let it sink in for a second, while I heard my old man's voice. *Tell the truth when you can*, he said.

“Do you still want her?”

NINE

I loved the Spirit Focus, if I loved any single club in Puyallup, more than I loved Puyallup itself. The joint had seen its share of trouble, being nominally Yakuza turf, being frequented by wizkids with Puyallup's taste for combat drugs, being crowded full of Fort Lewis soldiers on leave crammed in next to syndicate toughs with chips on their shoulder. But for all its rough edges, it had soul. Soul like Puyallup, if you looked hard enough, soul that made it feel like home. I'd heard Barry Mana sing here, live. Pure soul. Life. The very stuff of magic.

I'd never been angrier or more tired as I entered the Focus than I was that night. Skip and Trace stalked in next to me, and only the fact I was a regular patron—so regular the doorman didn't even try to stop me—kept there from being ugliness out front.

Jesus, I was so sick of this case and so tired of lies and so bone-weary of these criminal shits talking like they actually owned one sliver of this neighborhood. Over against the wall, the bartenders glanced up at me. It was the Frankies, and I suspected they'd back me up if things got ugly. Big Frankie was a dwarf, Little Frankie was a fomori. The pair of them had met while fighting in the Desert Wars together, and rumor was they kept some serious surplus hardware under the bar. They hadn't used it when some Tempo-head flipped out a couple years back, or at least I hadn't seen them, but at the time I'd been busy counterspelling, so I might've missed it. Guns or not, not many people would be in a hurry to fuck with either of them. I nodded at Little Frankie as I stalked through their joint and glared around looking for a target. Throwing my hat on the

bar, I rapped my knuckles on the wood.

"Whiskey. Neat." Frankie, the fomori, made it a double because the old veteran recognized the look on my face. While he poured, I saw the man I was looking for. I downed the drink in one big gulp, then off I went.

I stomped right up to the VIP lounge and the private table of one *Oyabun* Kosuke Tomizawa, head of the Kenran-kai association, the Gianelli equivalents from the local Yakuza. Lord knows how many killers he had hidden in that crowd, but I was spitting mad and didn't much care any more.

Two of them waited at the top of the stairs, moving to stop me. Both were familiar. One was clad in designer Vashon Island suit pants and a crisp, clean, tank-top, with dragons crawling across his arms and a glowing tattoo beneath his shirt. The other was a punk with blue hair, one arm in a gelcast, a monokatana slung at his belt, and a case of road-rash so nasty that it hurt just to look at him. Huh. Small world. Neither one were in my fan club after these last couple days. I stopped just in front of them, then looked over their shoulders to the only occupied table up here.

"Tomizawa-sama," I awkwardly bowed to him and mustered up the honorific, even though it left a bad taste in my mouth. "Tell your boys to let me past. You and I gotta talk."

He lifted one manicured eyebrow curiously, but gave me a slight nod to continue. They parted and let me pass. Tomizawa was impeccably dressed in a custom-fitted suit that had subtle stylistic alterations to make it a throwback to the golden days of jazz clubs. His hair was neat, his face clean-shaven save for a pencil-thin mustache, his manner confident but distant. He looked like a really swell guy, and as far as I could tell he hadn't, personally, done a damned thing to me these last few days, but I hated his guts anyways.

"You've got someone I've been paid to retrieve, and I've got some items of yours you want back, and some favors to call in that you don't know I did for you, and some

favors to offer you, all in exchange. I don't know you, and you might not even know me. I'm Jimmy fucking Kincaid and you and I have been swapping bullets and chasing each others' footprints for the last couple of days, and I'm sick and tired of it, so here I am."

He didn't nod for someone to kill me. I took that for a good sign, but when I sucked in a breath to keep going his yappy dog of a right-hand-man, Bluehair McSwordpants, started hollering in Japanese, too fast for my linguasoft to get all the details. I caught that it was mostly threats, partly it was scolding me for disrespect, occasionally it was pretty mean stuff about my mom, which to be honest I didn't really appreciate.

Then he switched to English, which was a real mistake.

"This cowardly dog hides behind the skirts of women!" Skip and Trace flanked him, sure enough, but he wasn't smart enough to let that stop him. His voice was half-angry, half-pleading with his boss. "Tomizawa-*sama*, he counts on tusker whores and mongrel half-breeds to protect him, even as he demands audience!"

Trace reached out and punched him square in his broken arm for that. She's got spirit, that gal. He let out an angry yelp, but when his good arm reached for the grip of his katana, a cold glare from his *oyabun* froze him in place and kept Skip from killing him. I butted in while I could.

"If you ever open your mouth and disrespect my friends like that again, and I'll snuff you out like a candle, so *ka?*"

I looked him in the eyes long enough for him to see I meant it. Their magician was older, more level headed, and he shifted sideways to keep an eye on us. Tomizawa's cold glare shut the kid up, and he arched an eyebrow at me to continue. As I spoke, he began to tap a finger on the table, like he was keeping time to my improv session.

"You've got the girl. I know why the two-bit shadowrunner posse snatched her. It was an extraction, not a carjacking. I get that now. I don't know why you sent your

boy and his pack over there in the first place, but I also don't care. Maybe debt collection, more likely a smuggling chip deal, whatever, but it came down to a fight."

"It was probably something that ork said that pissed your boy off, as calm and level headed as he seems right now," I grinned around a Target as I lit up. I was hitting my stride, and relaxed into laying out all the pieces for him. "My guess is they were arguing over a beetle deal, and Blue here went for his blade. Then the rest of his boys lit 'em up with their little autoguns, and it all just happened to go down about half an hour before me and my crew showed up for the girl."

"Now, genius that he is, your boy didn't know who she was—just like I didn't know why she was there, until recently—so he just snatched her up as nuyen on the hoof. She got taken to your bunraku parlor for basic in-processing work, dragged down to the basement to get her existing hardware wiped clean, and her simrig and sex-slave hardware installed."

"But that's when your magician spotted her aura." I nodded towards the wiry spellcaster, standing just behind his boss. Trace had busted him up pretty good, but I didn't let the grin distract me. "She's what, sixteen? No particular athleticism listed on her corporate records, but I'll bet you my car she's the one who smashed in half an ork razorboy's face, back before Mr. Slicey-Dicey here killed the guy, right? They had to fight her tooth and nail to get her tied up, and there's no way a girl her size, with no martial training, did what she did, and has the aura she does, without some spark of Talent. She's an adept, and your magician saw that. I did, too, but I didn't recognize it at first."

He didn't stop me, just kept looking at me, absorbing what I said, tapping his finger in time to my chatter. I took another drag on my cigarette and kept going, since he was letting me.

"Which is why she's in your house, right now. You weren't sure what else to do with her, so you dosed her with Bliss, kept her zip-tied, and just parked her in a guest

bedroom or something, waiting to hear back from your bosses about brainwashing, rehabilitation, or whatever you want to call it. The Kenran-kai are working hard to recruit magic and metahuman muscle, but she's better than meta; a cute little Japanese girl with some real Talent who you'd rather mold into a bodyguard or hitman than rent out in a bunraku parlor."

Here came the tricky bit.

"But I won't let you do that, because I got paid to get her back and I gave my word. Now, right now you probably just think I'm some rude guy who's wrecking your night out, or some angry *gajjin* who's mad at a few of your men, but there's more to it. I know who hit that parlor of yours, because I was there. Ask your mage, if you have to."

I still wasn't dead, so I kept talking.

"I know that what happened hurt your business, and I'm sorry about that, but it could have gone much worse for you and yours. What men of yours lived, lived because of me." We went out of our way about that. Skip had been grumbling at me about having to use gel rounds, before it had started. Enzo was pissed at me afterwards, for not letting him and his men take any prisoners away with them. Ariana had been busy, after healing the Mafia shooter, keeping as many Yaks alive as she could.

"Your building is still standing because of me. Your man, here, is still alive because of me. Your girls are gone, but I know where all their simrig hardware is. And let's be honest, it's not really the horses you invest in, it's the saddles, right?"

Tap, tap, tap, went his fingertip.

"So things went poorly for you last night, but they could have gone worse. You can fill that place back up, I'll get you back their headware, and you've already got your men back by now, even if you cut off their pinkies or something." I was getting sidetracked. Fucking Sideways, always distracting me.

"My point is, that was a gift. I don't expect you to give me the girl just for that, but I wanted you to know that it was me, James Kincaid, that did you that favor by way of

introduction. But I need that girl back, Tomizawa, and I'm about to tell you why you'll say yes."

He inclined his head again, ever so slightly. Not a big talker, our Tomizawa. He seemed content to just let me go until I ran out of steam, and I was happy to oblige him. I only really had two cards to play. It was time to lay 'em out.

"First and foremost, everyone with a brain knows the Kenran-kai are working to make Puyallup their home. Whatever. It's my home, too, and it always has been. Your organization is recruiting muscle from locals, and whether I'd want the job or not, I appreciate that you're putting forth the effort. I've driven through your neighborhoods, and I know your men keep order well. Some people feel safer there, and that's good."

"But I've also seen to those girls we rescued. Thirteen girls got taken out of your bunraku parlor, Tomizawa, and five of them were locals. Six, if you count Kyoko, who got snatched just a couple clicks away, even if she fell into your parlor thanks to that idiot instead of your design."

His finger tapped quicker.

"Think about what it'll do to your little 'hearts and minds' program if word gets out about that. Your regular pump-and-dump clients won't care, but their wives will. Their girlfriends will. The geek on the street will. The guy you're out to recruit as a soldier, and his mother, and the guys who might otherwise sign up to work the door there? They all will. Enough of them will care that eventually District Hall will have to care, and I'll speed that right along if I have to, and soon enough the councilmen that are in your pockets won't be sitting on the government any more, because no one can take money from the guy who makes local girls into sex slaves. You'll have to start all over, push new candidates through, bribe or bully 'em all over again, invest all that money from scratch. You'll lose recruits, you'll lose momentum, you'll lose money, and you'll lose clout, if enough people hear how many of your sex toys are local girls pushed into the business against their will. All it takes is word of that reaching enough people."

I leaned forward a bit.

“And I know a lot of fucking people, pal.”

His finger stopped tapping. He shifted in his seat, leaning forward in return, focused like a laser. My emotion recognition software just couldn't read him. My gut wasn't doing much better. Glad I wasn't playing poker with him, I pressed on.

“But second? I know who that girl is, even if you don't. Your doc had her headware wiped instead of readin' it, and your boys never listen to what the cattle says, right? According to Trace, no one had checked the external drive you have down there in your butcher-shop, the one that you dump all that headware onto, the one you use to upload new personalities later in the process. I know who she is, and it's not who I first thought.”

“She's *Mitsuham*a, pal. And her skull was carrying around the last copy of some confidential MCT research. They lost her in that extraction, you lucked into finding her, and then you took the only part of her they cared about—her data—and you let it slip right through your fingers. But I've got someone who wants her more than they want that data. Someone outside MCT.”

His hand vanished below the table, either to retreat from my latest statements or to reach for a gun. I didn't care which. I was almost out of steam, here. If I was gonna die tonight, I'd die finishing my argument.

“So here's what I suggest. You give me the girl. I give you back the data, I give you back the headware we plucked out of your girls, and I stay quiet about where you recruited 'em from. I just leave the Gianellis to keep sitting on their thumbs, eating pizza, and letting you take their turf if that's what you want to do. I don't care what your organizations do, as long as it's to each other. They used to live here, now you do. If that means the neighborhood likes you better, so fucking be it.”

“As far as *Mitsuham*a has to know, she got snatched and shot up by some shadowrunners, you killed them, you recovered the data before she died, and now you're a corporate hero for recovering their research. No one has to know it all happened by accident. She gets tagged as KIA,

Mitsuhamama stops looking for her, my client's happy, your bosses are happy, and we all win."

I leaned in, letting him see the blood and ash on my suit and face, the sparkling glass in my hair, the determination in my eyes. I wanted him to see the shit I'd waded through to be able to talk to him, face to face, when I said this next sentence. I might be killing myself by saying it, but he had to hear it if he was staying in Puyallup.

"But you know, and I know, that you won't ever steal a Puyallup girl from her family and make her into a fuckin' cyborg sex toy ever again. Or it's all off the table."

I leaned back, shoulder slumping, drained. I snatched up a glass of who-the-hell-cares from his table and downed it in one gulp. I'd said my piece. The solution made sense to me. If it didn't make sense to him, maybe we'd all die right here and the Yakuza would have to send someone else and this whole mess could just start all over again.

TEN

Thirty minutes later, my Americar rolled to a stop outside my office. Exhausted and bloody, I hauled myself up and out of it, stretched the stiffness out of my back, and looked up at the woman I knew was still waiting there. I gave her a minute to handle the stairs, and when she came out front, I gave her a long look.

"I know your name isn't Johnson. I also know it hasn't always been Tanaka, like your Shiawase records say. I know it was Nishimura, back when you worked for MCT."

She nodded, trying to look through the tinted windows to see who sat in my car.

"I know Kyoko's not an Arboritech employee, or a Shiawase employee at all. I know she's MCT. I know she didn't make it out in the extraction that got you out ten years ago. I know her father, your ex-husband, died in another extraction last week, at the same time the secondary team was grabbing her from that car."

I know that's why you wore black, I wanted to say. You wore the Western, not the Eastern, color for grief because Shiawase wouldn't let you officially mourn someone who died working for Mitsuhama.

"I know she's your daughter."

I know you love her, I could have said. I know you love her enough to bash in your own face with a car door to fake being attacked, just to get my blood up. I know you love her enough to hire men to kill you when you light a cigarette against a tinted window, just to force me to chase them and speed up a confrontation that will get her back. I know you love her enough that when I lied and told you

the research was lost, you were still willing to pay to get your little girl back.

"I'm sorry I lied to you—" she started to say, but I spat a wad of WhiteBrite on the ground to shut her up. Ariana opened my car door and—carefully, like a child holding a baby—lifted Kyoko's unconscious form from where she lay in my passenger seat.

"Save it. I know you're not sorry. I know you'd do it again. That's the only reason I'm giving her to you."

I held out my hand with a small datachip in it.

"Take this. It's the datadump from the Yakuza clinic. Your husband's research is on it, and so is a whole bunch of other stuff. Give it to Shiawase security, they'll figure out a way to use it. I made a deal with the Kenran-kai, not MCT."

She took it from me, then threw herself at me again in a hug while Ariana carried her baby girl to Ms. Nishimura's little coupe. She smelled like vanilla, still. She was soft and warm, still. She was crying again. This time it was all for real, though. The actual emotions threw me off-balance. I wasn't good with real gratitude. I stiff-armed her away as gently as I could.

"Get outta here. Go take care of her," I said, trying to muster up the energy for a smile.

She left. A mother and her daughter, reunited after almost ten years of murder and lies and corporate bullshit and syndicate pride, finally left together in their car. I reached into my coat for my flask and took a celebratory drink as I started up my stairs.

Fuck you, world. I beat the Downtowners who act like no one decent or worth trying to make decent comes from my neighborhood. I beat the Mafia toughs and Yakuza punks who act like they're natives when they're really just parasites, sucking this place dry. I beat the megacorporations that play puppets on both sides, monsters that tear families apart to stop research or to snuff out a project or just to make a couple bucks. I beat Knight Errant, the so-called cops, who turn their back on Puyallup outside of the couple blocks closest to District

Hall, and I solved their case for them. I beat the whole damned system. I won this one. Me, not you.

I toasted myself as I drained my flask, taking my wins where I could find them. I didn't worry about the debts that would eat up what was left of my payment, the enemies I'd juggled in the last couple days to make it all work, the times I'd nearly died. I didn't worry about the extra favors I owed Khayyim the doc, or Skip and Trace, I didn't dwell on how pissed Enzo'd be when he saw the Sleeping Tiger back up and running, I didn't think about how I'd snubbed a Yakuza boss right there, in public. A win was a win, and I had to enjoy it while it lasted.

I know I had a heck of a mess waiting upstairs. The way my head had been bleeding earlier, that meant popping the chips out of my datajacks, too, for a proper cleaning. Not just the chips I'd told Hard Exit about, either, but my third one. My lucky one. My secret one. The one that had given me the power—the almost magical power—to turn loss and cynicism and tragedy into strength and armor and something like nobility. I knew the chip had burned out years ago, 'cause these cheap personafix jobs just weren't designed to run for very long. I knew on a rational level that the old chip wasn't doing anything for me any more, but somewhere in my belly I just liked keeping the thing around. It reminded me of who I was, who I'd chosen to be, who I'd put together from the broken pieces of my life. It reminded me of what it said on my office door.

JAMES KINCAID. PARANORMAL INVESTIGATOR.

That was it.

And that was enough.

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Published by Catalyst Game Labs,
an imprint of InMediaRes Productions, LLC
PMB 202 • 303 91st Ave NE • E502 • Lake Stevens,
WA 98258

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