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DocWagon 19

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DocWagon 19

By Jennifer Brozek

A DocWagon Ares Citymaster ambulance, lights flashing and sirens blaring, screams down a city street as a man narrates in a dramatic tone. “Next on *Stories with Hart*, we go behind the scenes with Seattle’s finest as they rescue its citizens from dire circumstances.” The Citymaster screeches to a halt and a High-Threat Response Team in DocWagon uniforms tumbles out of the ambulance, weapons blazing.

The scene switches to a woman’s hands grabbing and loading an Ares Light Fire 75 pistol as the narrator continues. “Join Simone Hart as she goes into danger to get her story.” The scene shifts to a first-person perspective of someone running in a firefight. “And almost pays with her life!” The scene cuts to a huge explosion with the point of view of a person falling and hitting the ground.

“This is *Stories with Hart: DocWagon Edition!*”

“Hello and welcome to a very special live edition of *Stories with Hart*. I’m Simone Hart, your host, and I’m coming to you live from Studio 15 in Seattle.”

Simone, a classically beautiful Italian woman, mugged for the camera from behind her studio desk. Her million-nuyen smile lit up the studio but didn’t hide the scrapes or bruises on her face and neck, revealed by her low-cut white blouse and tailored cobalt blue jacket. “Tonight, we present our special DocWagon edition. Last week I rode along with DocWagon 19. The night I spent with this High-Threat Response Team was like no other I’ve ever had, and I’ll remember it for the rest of my life. We have footage from the evening, followed by a very important *live* interview at the end of the show.”

As Simone turned to the second camera, her bruised cheek prominent, her tone turned serious. “Tonight’s live episode is sponsored by Ares Macrotechnology, DocWagon, Gaeatronics, the Gates Casino, and the Bellevue Pour House Tavern. We dedicate this special episode to all of those brave men and women who risk their lives each and every day, rescuing one and all. They know each shift could be their last...as was proven during the night I rode along with this DocWagon team.”

Simone turned back to the main camera and once again lit up the studio with the smile that had launched her career. “But, first, let me introduce you to DocWagon 19.”

Fading from studio to a garage setting, the screen shows what Simone sees from her cybernetic implants and smart goggles. The view seamlessly switches from one to the other in pan-and-scan, then close ups. It’s clear that she’s also watching AR as icons float in and out of the shot as she moves. “We’re here in DocWagon 19’s garage with Takeshi, the team lead.” Her voice is smooth, professional, and clear. The view shifts from looking around the busy but clean garage to regard the man in front of her.

Takeshi, a small Japanese man with spiky black hair, nods politely. He is clean cut, wearing a standard looking gray jumpsuit with the DocWagon symbol on his arm and chest. “Good evening, Miss Hart.”

“Please, call me Simone.”

He nods again. “Simone.”

The view shifts from Takeshi to the ambulance on one side of the garage with the DocWagon symbol

on its side. The large truck has eight wheels, two rooftop turreted machine guns, and a communications array also sitting on the roof. “As your team gets ready for their shift, could you tell me about your emergency vehicle? Is that the standard vehicle that all DocWagon teams use?”

“No, it’s an Ares Citymaster. Most DocWagon teams use the Ford SRT, or Standard Response Team ambulances.” Takeshi gives her a half smile. “Perhaps our rigger would be a better person to answer that.” He turns, revealing a large DocWagon symbol on his back. “Gunther!” He turns back to Simone. “Gunther Two-Keys is one of the best riggers I know. He’s saved our lives plenty.”

Simone turns her attention from Takeshi to a clean-shaven, bald, male dwarf. He sports cybernetic eyes, a datajack, a cybernetic arm, and an easy smile. “What’s up, Tash?” Gunther grins at Simone as Takeshi gestures to her. Gunther tips an imaginary cap to Simone, his grin growing wider. “What can I do for you, beautiful lady?”

“I was wondering if you could tell my viewers about your vehicle.”

“Of course, but ... just the basics. Can’t give away all my secrets.” He winks. “At least not on camera. I’ve made a few modifications of my own.”

Simone’s laugh is rich and inviting. “I’ll take what I can get.”

The view turns to the big vehicle as Gunther walks to it. “She’s not quite the normal Citymaster. She’s got more comms and armor for when we go in hot. Matilda—that’s what I named her—seats six, plus me, plus three patients. We usually don’t have that many at one time, but it happens. Also, I’ve added a small bay for a couple of my drones on top. You never know when you’ll need extra machines.” He pats the side of the truck. “And this here’s a modded gull-wing door to let us get in and out quick. It also protects from overhead assaults.”

The scene faded from the DocWagon garage and back into the studio, Simone smiled briefly for the audience. “For those who are unfamiliar with DocWagon, DocWagon contracts, and their High-Threat Response Teams, it’s very simple. Some of the best medical care in the city comes from private establishments like DocWagon and CrashCart. This can be anything from walk-in facilities to the contracts that allow the doctors to come to you. These are called ‘rescues’ by the DocWagon teams.”

Simone turned to the secondary camera. “DocWagon contracts come in different price points. The more expensive the contract, the more responsive the team. Though, all DocWagon clients can expect excellent service.” Simone held up her left forearm, exposing her smooth skin. She tapped her wrist. “I have my DocWagon RFID tag right here. That way I can’t lose it and they can’t lose me. They always know how I’m doing.”

Simone turned back to the main camera and continued her explanation. “Upon receiving a call, DocWagon guarantees arrival of an armed trauma team within ten minutes or medical services are free. The higher level contract, the more responsive the team. The more dangerous the situation, the more expensive the bills after the client is...” Simone searched for the right word. She settled on, “...rescued.”

Simone’s voice dropped into a serious tone. “Make no mistake, ladies and gentlemen, the DocWagon teams face danger every single time they answer a call. Ten percent of them lose their lives, and another five percent of DocWagon’s employees retire due to injury every year. High-Threat Response Teams must walk into every situation assuming everyone, except their client, is an enemy out to stop or kill them. When you see a DocWagon team drive up, I urge you to stay out of their way.”

The camera held Simone’s sober expression until she relaxed back into her normal reporting tone. “Now let’s introduce you to the rest of DocWagon 19.”

Fading from the studio setting to the interior of a moving vehicle; it's clear Simone is now sitting in the back of the Citymaster. All around her are medical supplies, weapons, and several gurneys. Everything looks to be in tiptop shape, with all equipment properly stowed and secured. Also in the back of the truck are Takeshi, a skinny black teen holding a cyberdeck, and a beautiful, blond elven woman with blue eyes.

Takeshi sits across from Simone. "This is Odder, our combat mage." He nods at the woman by his side, who wears the same basic jumpsuit as him. She also has visible tattoos and telesma.

"Hello, Otter."

Odder shakes her head, not looking at Simone. Instead she seems to be watching something just to the side of Simone. "Odder ... with two Ds. You might say I'm a bit of an odd duck."

"Odder. My apologies. A pleasure. May I ask what are you looking at?"

"One of the water spirits I summoned to assist me tonight." Odder smiles, glancing at Simone. "It seems to like you."

"Me?"

Odder shrugs. "It's snuggled up to you."

"That's good ... right?"

The mage nods and tilts her head in a quizzical, interested way. "Probably."

Takeshi breaks in. "Sitting up front with Gunther is Hey Jude." He points to his right.

Simone turns to look up the aisle into the front of the Citymaster and sees a female ork with pale green skin and a shock of short, crimson red hair. "Hey Jude? As in ... ?"

Hey Jude turns her massive head revealing a broken tusk. "The one and only. Seattle Screammers from 2064 to 2066. Outrider."

"It's an honor! I had no idea that—"

Hey Jude nods, cutting Simone off. "We all had interesting lives before we hooked up with DocWagon. I'm pretty sure that's true of every team out there."

"Don't forget me!" A humanoid creature made of blue flame appears in AR next to the unmoving teen and floats until it's in-between Simone and Takeshi.

"SIMaeon. We have guests." Takeshi's voice is mild in its rebuke.

SIMaeon's body is securely strapped in his seatbelt restraints. His eyes are closed behind smart glasses. He is connected to his deck through a data jack just below his left ear. He holds the deck close to him as he interact with the team in AR.

"Sorry." The fire creature morphs into a smaller floating version of the teen in the corner of the ambulance—complete with the addition of blue flamed hair. He grins and waves. "I'm SIMaeon." The name flashes in AR briefly. "I do all the hacking."

Takeshi coughs lightly and the boy shrugs a little, looking abashed. "I manage all of the communication, get corporate permission to fulfill contracts, track down schematics. Stuff like that."

"Corporate permissions?"

SIMaeon lounges in mid-air. "Yeah. DocWagon doesn't respond to calls on corporate property without permission. But we have blanket permission for some places on file while others I have to call. It's a thing."

"If you don't get your foot out of my head, I'm going to curse your nodes and set your hair on fire for real."

SIMaeon tucks himself into a floating cross-legged position at Odder's irritated voice. "Sorry."

"We're a team." Takeshi shakes his head with a rueful smile. The gesture makes him seem older than he appears. "And a family, with all its benefits and drawbacks."

"What does that make you? The father of the team?"

“More like nursemaid.” Gunther’s voice comes from the speakers of the Citymaster. “He fusses like one. I—”

SIMaeon cuts him off. “Incoming. Platinum client. Chrome Holly. Looks like she overdosed on something.”

Takeshi’s voice takes on a tone of command. “On the clock everyone. SIMaeon, details.”

The screen faded to black and Simone reappeared in the studio. “This rescue of Chrome Holly was my first taste of the daily work life of a professional lifesaver—and it was an eye-opener. I captured it all with both my smart glasses and my ocular implant. But first, a word from one of our sponsors.”

The camera pans over a GMC B150 “Workhorse” truck from the point of view of the person getting into the truck. You see the beautiful but rugged interior as it drives from the city into the woods. There, it parks by a GMC FQX all-terrain vehicle, which rockets forward, speeding up a hill through the trees, dirt flying everywhere. The view shifts to a hand picking up the Ares Light Fire 75, firing three shots—all of which hits the target—followed by a hand picking up the Ares Predator V, firing three shots, and destroying the target. The view shifts to running across a tarmac and getting into an Ares Penetrator fighter-bomber. The jet takes off into the air and shoots away into the distance.

“ARES MACROTECHNOLOGY—LIVE IT LARGE EVERYDAY” fades in on the screen and then fades out again.

The commercial returned to Simone in the studio. “Welcome back to *Stories with Hart: DocWagon Edition*. I’m Simone Hart, your host. In this special edition, we were privileged to go behind the scenes and ride along with High-Threat Response Team, DocWagon 19. Later in the program we’ll have a live interview with a special guest with some explosive information about the night I rode along with DocWagon 19. If you’re just joining us, DocWagon 19 was responding to VIP contract client, Chrome Holly.” The scene faded to black.

The scene opens in back in the Citymaster, Simone is looking at Takeshi. The team leader’s face is impassive. “On the clock everyone. SIMaeon, details.” Simone follows the conversation as everyone speaks.

“Chrome Holly. Trid star of the recently dropped *Holly’s Follies*. She’s at the Gates Casino, in one of the private rooms.” SIMaeon’s avatar is gone, his body limp in his seatbelt restraints, but his voice is heard over the commlink.

Takeshi glances towards Gunther. “Time to the casino?”

“Two minutes.”

He nods to Odder. “Status of the client?”

“Elevated BP, increased perspiration, rapid heartbeat, constricted blood vessels. Possible stimulant overdose.”

“Permission to access?”

“Casino has a blanket agreement.”

Takeshi frowns. “Who’s got control of the casino these days?”

Hey Jude’s voice floats over her shoulder. “Officially? Gates the Third. Unofficially? Finnigan

territory.”

“We gonna get resistance from them?” Gunther asks.

“Better not. I got friends.” Hey Jude stops talking, glances at Simone, and then shrugs. “We won’t, or if we do, I’ll deal with them.” She taps her Ares Alpha assault rifle.

Takeshi looks at Simone. “Miss Hart. Simone. We agreed to let you ride along, but we must insist that you hang back. You may come with us. The patch we gave you will show the DocWagon symbol in AR, and people should get out of your way. But—” he glances at Odder, “this is a dangerous job.”

“I understand. I promise. I’m here to observe, not get involved.”

“*Arigato*.” He gives her a small, seated bow.

“Do you think there will be a problem at the casino?”

Takeshi shrugs. “We must treat every stop as dangerous. If this isn’t a simple overdose and someone is trying to murder our client at the casino, they may try to stop us on the way in.”

“Murder?” Simone sounds surprised, shocked even. “In such a public place?”

He nods. “Not so public. One of the backrooms.”

“We’re here!” Gunther brings the Citymaster to a smooth stop and the gull-wing door flies open. The DocWagon team tumbles out of the ambulance and onto the sidewalk, bystanders immediately getting out of their way. Hey Jude takes point as they fall into a wedge formation. Gunther and SIMaeon stay behind with the vehicle, but two small flying drones follow about a meter above the group.

Simone takes her place behind the wedge, watching everything she can as she speaks quietly to the show’s audience. “‘Chrome Holly’ Heller just turned twenty-seven. *Holly’s Follies* was dropped from the network as ‘too old’ for their target audience. Rumor has it that she didn’t take it well. She’s had a good run as a reality star, but recently has been dealing with the backlash of being famous for being famous as a dilettante of the Heller family.”

While Simone speaks, she follows the DocWagon team into and through the Gates Casino. Inside is a myriad of blinking lights, ringing bells, and laughing people. Casino girls in high heels and short skirts, holding trays of drinks, stop to watch the commotion. Men in uniform remain around the tables and slot machines while patrons slowly quiet in a mass herd instinct telling them that Something Is Not Right.

No one tries to stop them as they stride across the casino floor. Not workers, security personnel, or gamblers. Casino patrons stand up from behind slot machines, watching the DocWagon team pass by. Over the comm, SIMaeon’s voice gives the team directions. Casino security trails on the left and right flanks of the DocWagon team but does nothing to hinder them.

As they turn down a hallway, one of two large trolls steps in front of Hey Jude. “You can’t—”

Hey Jude doesn’t hesitate. She gives him an uppercut with the butt of her rifle, then slams him hard with a shoulder. As he stumbles backwards with a cry of pain and surprise, the second troll grabs him. “What the hell you doing, you stupid trog? That’s DocWagon!”

Hey Jude busts through the private room door as the offender shakes his head. “Didn’t know ... Didn’t see.”

Simone pauses, waiting for Takeshi, Odder, and Hey Jude to secure the room. One drone remains in the hallway, the other enters behind the rest of the DocWagon team. It’s a plush room decorated in burgundy, gold, and black. A couch and two overstuffed chairs sit around a low table holding the remains of a partly eaten meal. A spilled drink speaks of a sudden reaction to whatever drug Chrome Holly ingested. Hey Jude takes up a position in the corner, clearing and watching the room. Takeshi and Odder move to the only two people there: a woman on the floor in a short, emerald green dress and a man in a suit leaning over her.

As Simone watches, Takeshi pulls the male human off Chrome Holly in a controlled manner and escorts him to the side with a soft apology. Odder takes the man’s place. As he turns, his handsome face is clear. With a small inhale of surprise, Simone murmurs, “It’s Brian W. Gates the Third, owner of the

Gates Casino.”

As soon as Takeshi turns his attention back to Chrome Holly, Simone moves up. “Mr. Gates, could you tell us what happened here?”

He blinks at her, his surprise and confusion evident. “You’re Simone Hart.”

“Yes, sir. What happened to Chrome Holly?”

Mr. Gates shakes his head, running his fingers through his hair, “I don’t know. We ordered dinner and drinks. We were talking ... business. Chrome Holly might do a show here ... then she collapsed. I was informed when her RFID tag went off. We knew DocWagon was coming.”

“Could you tell us why one of the bodyguards outside the door tried to stop the DocWagon team?”

His concern for Chrome Holly morphs into a quiet rage. The confusion clears from his eyes, leaving an angry glint and hard lines around his mouth. “Did he now? Which one?”

“The one missing some teeth. Hey Jude dealt with it.”

Mr. Gates gives Hey Jude a double take of sudden recognition. “Well, there won’t be any charges filed. All guests at the Gates Casino have full access to DocWagon services at all times.” He straightens his jacket. “Please excuse me. I have to deal with this now.” Without waiting for an answer, he strides out of the room.

Simone steps closer to Chrome Holly and Odder, who’s kneeling next to the star’s supine body. Chrome Holly is beautiful, with metallic silver hair and chromed cybernetic eyes that flutter as Odder speaks softly to her.

Then Takeshi is there, putting his body between Simone and Chrome Holly. “She’ll be just fine. We’ve called for her personal doctor.” His voice takes on an apologetic tone. “But, I’m afraid you won’t be able to speak with her. She overdosed on an unknown drug, and she may not realize what’s she saying. Normally, we’d just take her to Overlake, but she’s requested that we wait with her until her doctor arrives. As her vitals are unstable, this is the best course of action.”

The scene faded to black and then returned to the studio with an image of the stunningly beautiful Chrome Holly next to Simone. “We’re happy to state that Chrome Holly made a full recovery. She asked us to express her gratitude to DocWagon 19 for their care and sensitivity with her rescue. Also, Chrome Holly is, indeed, going to star in a live trid show out of the Gates Casino called *After Hours with Chrome Holly*, where she’ll ask the audience for cues, and then improv an adult fictional story about herself.” Simone winked at the camera. “Two guesses on what those stories will be about, and the first guess doesn’t count.”

The image of Chrome Holly is replaced with an image of Hey Jude. “Before the next rescue call, I talked with Hey Jude to find out how she went from urban brawl player to an EMT for DocWagon. As she said, all of the members of DocWagon 19 had interesting lives before working for DocWagon. But first, a word from one of our sponsors of this special edition of *Stories with Hart*.”

An old woman putters in her garden. She suddenly gives a gasp of pain and falls over. A handsome man in a DocWagon uniform reads his smart glasses that have words appearing on them. “Mrs. Stetson is in trouble! It’s her heart!” he declares, and the SRT ambulance he is in flashes its emergency lights, tearing down the street.

A man in a suit slides on a wet floor and falls down a flight of stairs. As he moans in pain, a beautiful woman in a DocWagon uniform looks up and calls out. “Mr. Aoki is injured! He’s broken his leg!” Another DocWagon ambulance flashes its emergency lights and tears down the street.

A beautiful starlet is struck as she’s taken hostage. A dangerous-looking man holds a gun on her

while another tears her jewelry off. A fierce-looking man in a DocWagon HTR uniform touches his commlink. "Rosa Rose has been hurt ... It's a hostage situation!" An Ares Citymaster squeals around a corner with its lights flashing.

The first DocWagon med-tech stands over Mrs. Stetson on a gurney, holding her hand. He looks at the camera. "DocWagon. We're there when you need us."

The second DocWagon med-tech kneels next to Mr. Aoki on the floor as another DocWagon med-tech magically repairs his leg. She looks at the camera. "No matter where you need us."

The third DocWagon med-tech stands next to a door with an Ares Predator at the ready. "No matter how dire your situation is, we're there." He busts down the door, shoots and kills the two bad guys, then pulls off his helmet and goes to comfort the sobbing Rosa Rose.

Mrs. Stetson appears and smiles at the camera, "Get your DocWagon contract today. I'm glad I did!"

The brightly lit TV studio reappeared. "Welcome back to *Stories with Hart*. As we continue our behind the scenes look at the day-to-day operation of a DocWagon High-Threat Response team, we learn more about one of the members of DocWagon 19."

An image of Hey Jude floated next to Simone's smiling face. "Lucy 'Hey Jude' Judet was born in Seattle in 2050. An orphan left on the sidewalk outside Harborview Hospital, her young life was difficult. She was in and out of trouble until she befriended Anthony Wu, a member of the Seattle Screammers. Within a year, she auditioned for the Screammers and became one of the youngest players on the team. As an outrider, Hey Jude's job was feint and defend. And she did her job well until 2066, when she suffered a catastrophic injury that left her in a coma for three months. After that, Hey Jude faded from sight. Now, we find her braving dangerous situations to save lives. What an amazing change. We can't help but admire her for it."

The image shifts to Simone sitting across from Hey Jude in the Citymaster. The ork checks over her weapon, making sure everything is in shape. As she does so, her smartlink is visible, as is metal covering the right part of her skull. "So, whatcha wanna know?"

"Well, how you went from being an urban brawl sports star to an EMT for DocWagon. Was it an immediate jump or ...?"

Hey Jude gives a bitter half-smile but doesn't look at Simone. "Or did I completely lose it after I lost my ability to play?"

"I wouldn't put it like that."

"I would. Why sugarcoat it?" Hey Jude glances at Simone, then nods at her. "What do you call that eye of yours?"

"My eyes?"

"The camera in your head." Hey Jude pats the Ares Alpha assault rifle. "I call her Athena. Most people name their most valuable tools. Gunther calls the ambulance Matilda. So what do you call your eye?"

Simone hesitates for a moment. Her voice is soft with embarrassment. "HAL. I call him HAL."

"Why?" From the grin on the ork's face, she gets the old pop culture reference.

"Because ... he doesn't always do what I want him to do, but he sees more than I do. I always discover this when I look at the recordings later."

Hey Jude smiles; a wide, genuine smile that lights up her face and makes her beautiful. "A good name. Just get worried when he closes the pod bay doors." She tilts her head, her broken tusk gives her a

rakish look. “And to answer your other question, yeah. I did go a bit crazy. Drugs, drinking, fights. And then a certain person kicked my ass and told me that my life hadn’t been saved just for me to throw it away.” Hey Jude glances at Takeshi.

Simone also glances at Takeshi. The small man’s eyes are closed as he breathes in slow, deep breaths. She turns back to Hey Jude. “So, what happened then?”

The ork shrugs. “I had to take a good long look at my life and find a new purpose. That purpose turned out to be DocWagon. It was hard going. I’m not much for book learning, but I can slap a patch with the best of them while keeping the enemy at bay.”

“You’ve found a new purpose and a new home.”

“Let’s not go that far, Simone. I like these guys, but I don’t live with them. You should see Gunther’s place. It’s a sty. And people say orks are messy. That guy’s place is one spill away from a biohazard warning.”

“Hey now!” Gunther’s voice comes over the vehicle speakers. “It’s not that bad.”

“Yes is it!” SIMaeon smirks at Hey Jude from his usual corner, egging her on. “I’ve been there.”

“Bad enough, short stuff.” Hey Jude looks towards the front of the Citymaster with a wicked grin.

“Don’t you two start!”

Takeshi coughs lightly, and what seemed about to become a familiar bickering session quiets down.

Hey Jude shrugs. “What else you wanna know?”

“What do you do when you’re not working? Got any hobbies?”

The ork mumbles something.

“I’m sorry?”

“I like bonsai trees. The little ones.” She looks away, embarrassed.

“‘Like’ isn’t the correct word.” Odder gives Hey Jude a grin. “She’s got an amazing green thumb. Seriously. She sells her little trees under the name *Verd*—”

The AR miniature version of SIMaeon appears in the middle of the ambulance. “Incoming. Gold level, it’s only a block away. Looks like one Daisuke Nagano has a broken leg. Normal *sarariman* working for Ares. Accounting, from his file.”

Simone glances between SIMaeon’s now slack body and the AR image she sees for a moment. Then she focuses on the active miniature SIMaeon for her question. “Why do you tell the team what your client does for a living?”

SIMaeon shrugs then shrinks into a small blue fireball. “What they do tells us something about them, their possible situation, and why someone might want to target them for an illegal attack. Or if they’re just accident-prone.”

Odder laughs as she looks at the client data on her smart glasses. “He’s at the bottom of the stairs of Powerline.”

Hey Jude looks at Simone. “We don’t have to tell you what that is ... do we?”

“No. Of course not. I’m aware of the entertainment establishments in the area. Even the adult ones. *Especially* Powerline. I’ve got a show about them coming up soon.”

“I’m surprised any of them would let you record their faces.”

“Some didn’t. That’s all right. I’ve got the best masking software there is.”

The ambulance stops on the sidewalk, and just as before, everyone tumbles out of the vehicle, with Simone following. The team shows a bit less intensity than during the last rescue.

This time, Takeshi hangs back next to Simone while Hey Jude escorts Odder to an older Japanese man sitting on the sidewalk at the bottom of a long flight of stairs leading to a nondescript building. His leg is bent at a painful angle. Above the double doors is a simple “*Powerline*” logo in neon with its double in AR. Pistol at the ready, Gunther is out of the ambulance and keeping an eye on the situation.

“SIMaeon?” Takeshi’s voice is soft as he surveys the area, not appearing to pay any attention to the

man with the broken leg.

“All clear. No bogies. No paparazzi. Just some looky-loos.” SIMaeon’s voice is just as soft. “17’ll be here in three.”

Simone also looks around the street. Several people are watching, all of them keeping a respectful distance. A couple, probably tourists, takes photos of the minor event. “Are we expecting trouble?”

“Yes. No.” Takeshi walks toward Daisuke Nagano, whose face is contorted in pain and anger.

“We’re always prepared for trouble. We treat every stop as a potential firefight, because even a simple stop could be a trap. Usually, we don’t stop for Gold or Basic clients. That’s not what we normally do.” He stops in front of Odder and the older gentleman. “But no, I don’t expect any trouble right this moment.”

“—I was pushed! Someone tried to kill me.” Daisuke hits the ground with the palms of his hands, clearly frustrated with Odder. “I’m not drunk.”

“Odder?” Takeshi keeps his voice low.

“Something’s wrong with his blood tox. Can’t figure it out. I need more blood.”

Takeshi gives Daisuke a bow. “Nagano-san, please understand we’re fulfilling our mission. We need another blood sample.”

Daisuke shakes his head. “I’m not drunk. I just came to watch my boys dance. Is that a crime? I never drink. Just watch. I come here every Wednesday. I never miss them.”

Takeshi bowed again. “Be that as it may, if you don’t allow my med-tech to have the blood sample, your contract with DocWagon may be voided.”

Crossing his arms, Daisuke pouts like a child as he considers this. Finally, he holds out a wrist. “Fine. But *someone* hit me from behind. I was just standing there, minding my own business, thinking about my boys. I wasn’t blocking anything ... and then *BAM*, I got hit in the back.”

Takeshi nods, his voice full of understanding. “I’m sure you were. We’ll inform Knight Errant for you.”

“On it, Boss.” SIMaeon says through the commlink. “But something else already has Knight Errant’s attention. Looks like an apartment shoot out. May take them a bit to get on this.”

“In the meantime, DocWagon 17 will take you to Overlake for a full examination.” As Takeshi speaks soothingly, he looks up at another DocWagon vehicle that stops next to the Citymaster.

Simone follows his gaze and sees a standard DocWagon Ford SRT ambulance park. It’s emblazoned with the word “*AMBULANCE*” and “*17*” on its sides and back. A black woman hops out from behind the wheel while a troll clammers out of the back, both are wearing DocWagon uniforms. The troll carries a medkit.

The woman waves at Takeshi. “We got this now, Tash. Just upload whatever.”

“Medea? On patrol routes?” The pleasure at seeing her is evident in his face and his voice.

“Just until I’m fully healed.” Medea shrugs, glancing at the pink burn scars on her upper body.

He nods to the troll. “Hyperion. Good to see you.”

Hyperion nods back, but doesn’t say anything. Instead, he walks to Daisuke and Odder and goes down on one knee next to them. As Daisuke explains, again, that he was pushed, Hyperion listens and nods, giving the client his full attention. This seems to calm the man down.

“How long have you been in the area?” Medea asks. “This isn’t your usual patrol route.”

Takeshi looks around. It’s the survey of a man used to trouble. “Not long now, but it’s needed.”

Medea glances at her partner and the client. “We all know how it goes. SRT patrols are boring, though. Anything I need to know?”

“Odder thinks his blood work needs a closer look. We’ve contacted Knight Errant about this. He says he was pushed.”

“Good to go.” Medea stops, looking at Simone. “Is that ... ?”

Takeshi nods. “It is.”

“That explains why you’re out here now.”

He shrugs. “Yes.” Takeshi nods to her and the troll, then signals the rest of the team to mount up. The scene fades to black.

This time when everything comes back into focus, Simone is riding shotgun with Gunther in the front of the Citymaster. The dashboard, only partially visible until now, shows bleeding-edge technology features in both AR and physical displays. While everything is top-of-the-line, it still has the cobbled-together feel of a vehicle personalized by its mechanically-minded driver.

“So, this is the heart of Matilda.”

Gunther nods, patting the dashboard twice. “She’s a good girl, aren’t you, dear?”

“The driver of DocWagon 17, Medea, she looked like she’d been hurt pretty bad. Was ... is she part of a High-Threat Response Team?”

“Yeah. She’s a mage. Excellent at illusions and blocking all kinds of incoming. But she’s on standard patrols until she’s fully healed. Corporate policy.”

“What happened?” Simone looks around the front of the Citymaster and then out the front windows. Most people on the street stop and watch as the huge vehicle rumbles by.

“There was one hell of a fight for a Super-Platinum. A fire spirit got her something fierce. She was in the hospital for a while. She wasn’t the only one, either.”

“I’d imagine that HTR teams get hurt on a regular basis. Who pays for those medical bills?”

Gunther rubs the side of one of his ocular implants. “Well, the company does. Sorta. I mean, if you get hurt in the line of duty, you don’t have to pay for your medical. Either DocWagon pays for it, or the client pays for it through their fees or additional bills. I don’t really know. The company took care of me when I was hurt.”

“What about when you’re not on duty?”

He grins at her. “I got my own DocWagon contract. Momma didn’t raise a fool.”

“Sounds like she raised a smart man. What’s your story? How’d you become a rigger for DocWagon?”

“You might say it’s in my blood. A family trade, even. Both my parents worked for DocWagon. I didn’t really think about doing anything else.”

“Nothing? No rebellion against the parents?”

He glances at her with a sly grin. “Oh, I didn’t come out of the womb with a datajack in my head, no. But I like machines and they like me.” He shrugs. “I had my moments of youthful indiscretion.”

“Don’t we all?”

“Now that’s something I’d like to hear about.”

“You and all my fans. Maybe someday I’ll write a tell-all book about it.”

Gunther laughs. “I’ll buy a dozen copies.”

“So, you grew up with DocWagon, trained for it, and that’s that?”

“Pretty much.” His glance at her is sly, but he doesn’t give her any details.

“Gunther Two-Keys... why ‘two-keys’?”

Now he looks at her with a grin. “‘Cause I got two keys, and they open every lock I know.” He waggles his eyebrows at her, his grin turning lascivious.

“Gunther.”

Takeshi’s quiet voice wipes the grin off the dwarf’s face, and he looks abashed. “Sorry, Miss Hart. Don’t mean nothing by it.” He gives her a half-shrug. “My friends gave me the nickname. One of my sayings is ‘If one key don’t work, the other will.’ Meaning if brains don’t fix a problem, brawn will.”

“It’s a sound saying.” Simone’s voice is filled with amusement. The scene fades to black.

The interior of a dive bar is full of blue-collar workers drinking, laughing, and having a good time. The camera scans the crowd and pauses on a group of people cheering around something. It zooms between two leather-jacketed patrons to reveal two lovely ladies wrestling in something that could be mud.

As one pins the other, the formally dressed referee yells, “And the winner is ... YOU!” He points at the screen. “Every night at the Bellevue Pour House Tavern is a winner. Tuesday night sloppy soy wrestling, Wednesday night wet t-shirt contests, Friday night Freestyle Fights! Never a dull moment at the Pour House!”

One of the soy-covered ladies hands the referee a beer and toasts him with her own mug. The referee grins. “So come down to the Pour House and let us pour one for you!” They both take a big gulp of beer and smile as the words “Bellevue Pour House Tavern” appear on the screen over them.

The show returned to Simone in the studio, with Gunther’s image floating next to her serene face. “We continue our in-depth look at DocWagon’s High-Threat Response Teams and the dangers they face every day. I’m Simone Hart, and this is a special edition of *Stories with Hart*. Later in this program, I’ll interview a very special guest, live, to answer all of our questions.”

She gestured to the image floating next to her. “Gunther Two-Keys, born Gunther Holloway. His flirtatious demeanor hides a highly decorated and dedicated DocWagon employee. The twenty-year veteran has been a part of DocWagon’s High-Threat Response Team for twelve years. In that time, he’s saved the lives of more than thirty DocWagon med-techs and hundreds of DocWagon clients. He’s also died three times in the line of duty, needing to be resuscitated by the very DocWagon crews he worked with.”

Simone smiled at the image of the dwarf rigger. “Gunther Two-Keys is exactly the kind of DocWagon employee others look up to.”

The screen returns to Simone riding alongside Gunther. She watches his hands work as she speaks. “While Takeshi was talking to Medea, I got the feeling that an HTR team driving around is unusual. Could you tell me about that?”

Gunther nods. “In truth, it is. Sorta. Some HTR teams stay in the garage. Some patrol. Usually, in the current schedule, we’re back at the garage waiting for an HTR call to come in from one of the other DocWagons or from dispatch. We don’t want to be on a Basic rescue when a hot call comes in. The HTR teams rotate who’s on patrol and who isn’t. We weren’t scheduled for patrol this week.”

“And yet, here we are.”

“Yeah. HQ decided you’d be safer with one of the HTR teams and have a better show if we did the patrolling, too. An extra patrol in our grid.”

“Why?”

“It allows us to spend time talking instead of answering the calls. There are a couple other HTR teams out there right now. Also, what’s more interesting? Riding in the field or sitting in a garage waiting for the shit to hit the fan?” Gunther glances at her. “Me? I think it’s riding around. But then, I like to drive.”

“You’re right. The field work is much more interesting. So, why do you think DocWagon is allowing me to do this set of interviews?”

Gunther shifts uncomfortably and looks away. “PR, I guess.”

“Because of CrashCart?”

“Yeah. CrashCart. What a bunch of vultures. You don’t just wait to see if someone’s going to fail a rescue, and then dive in. If you’re a medical team, your first job is to save lives, period.” The disgust is clear in Gunther’s voice and the scene fades to black.

An image of Evo’s white-and-silver logo appeared next to Simone in the studio. “CrashCart, a subsidiary of the biotech company Evo, is the new kid on the block when it comes to saving people’s lives. However, they’ve entered the arena with an aggressive flair. Frequently seen at firefights involving DocWagon saving their clients’ lives, if the resistance is too heavy or the DocWagon team sustains too much damage to complete their mission, they’ve been known to come into the situation and finish what DocWagon started.”

Simone nodded to her audience. “Of course, this is always accompanied by accusations of corporate setups, but nothing has been proven. It’s caused a number of DocWagon clients to shift their loyalty—and their nuyen—to CrashCart. Still, many claim CrashCart doesn’t have the staying power or the experience DocWagon has. The outcome of this competition remains to be seen.”

The studio fades to black and Gunther reappears. “Clients may choose whomever they wish, but my own contract is with DocWagon and will remain so. I can’t trust a corporation like that.”

SIMaeon suddenly comes into AR view in his human avatar form. Sitting between Gunther and Simone, he bounces up and down like an excited child. “You wanna know what’s interesting?”

“What’s that, kiddo?” Gunther tilts his head.

“I think someone—maybe even CrashCart—is trying to hack our comms.”

Gunther takes his hands off of the Citymaster’s wheel and turns to SIMaeon. “What do you mean?”

“Well, just before the last two rescues we got called for, I noticed a weird little jog in the Matrix. Kinda like something’s there, but not. A ghost in the machine, so to speak. So I set a trap for it. It’s a good one, too. If it’s there, I got its number.”

Takeshi’s voice is heard. “Have you alerted DocWagon’s main dispatch?”

“Yes, sir. I have. Just thought ya’ll would want to know. Because there’s more.” SIMaeon gives her an expectant look.

“I’d like to know more, SIMaeon. I know my viewers would like to know, too.”

SIMaeon pauses. “I’m not formally accusing anyone of anything yet. I’ve just noticed a thing. Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action. So, if it happens again ... I’ll know.”

SIMaeon’s AR image flickers. “Wait ... there it is ... and ... oh. Oh, damn. Incoming. Platinum. It’s Miyuzaki. He’s at the Pour House. And there’s a lot of activity. Looks like the Hellhounds are mixing it up with the bar patrons.” SIMaeon trails off. “Lots of shooting.”

Gunther is no longer paying attention to the conversation. His body is limp in its harness as he pilots the Citymaster at suicidal speeds around corners, barely missing oncoming cars. Simone is rocked back and forth as the huge vehicle swerves through Bellevue’s traffic.

Takeshi’s command voice is clear. “Time to the Pour House?”

“Four minutes,” comes over the truck’s speakers.

“Status of the client?”

Odder answers in the same professional tone. “Irregular heartbeat, minimal brainwave function with bursts of activity.”

SIMaeon's avatar flickers again. "I think he got hit by black IC and then dumped. God, I hope he got dumped."

Takeshi ignores SIMaeon's concern. "Permission to access?" When SIMaeon doesn't immediately answer, Takeshi's voice cracks like a whip. "SIMaeon! Permission to access?"

"Sorry. Got activity here. Uh ... yes. The Pour House has a blanket agreement."

"What kind of activity?"

"Two kinds. Something's called Knight Errant to the other side of Bellevue and my trap worked. I've captured an agent, and it's screaming bloody murder."

The scene faded to black and Simone's unusually serious face appeared. "It was at this point that we all realized that something unusual was going on. Something was targeting DocWagon 19 in specific. To what end, we didn't know. It's only in retrospect that the plot became clear."

An image of a horrifying dog with glowing eyes and slavering jaws appeared next to Simone. "Named after *canis tartari*, a canine creature that hunts in packs, can breathe fire, and is immune to flame, the go-gang known as the Hellhounds is an all human biker gang that wears primarily red and orange and claims the I-405 corridor as its territory. Usually, they reserve their hatred for rival go-gangs, the Leather Devils or Blood Mountain Boys. That night, they decided to pick a fight with the patrons of the Bellevue Pour House Tavern—a known rough-and-tumble bar on the edge of Bellevue and Redmond that specializes in local beers."

The Hellhound image digitized into a streaming video of people fighting in and around the Pour House Tavern. The video, from Simone's smart glasses, captured through the Citymaster's front windshield, revealed the violence of the scene. "When DocWagon 19 arrived, it looked like the Redmond Barrens had somehow spilled over into the usually serene Bellevue borders. And while a fight was going on outside, another fight was being fought within the Matrix between SIMaeon and unknown assailants."

"Are you under attack?" Takeshi's impossibly calm voice clashes against the chaos and violence outside the vehicle. Simone looks at Gunther's limp body, then glances at SIMaeon, whose AR persona has moved to the back of the truck and hovers near his unresponsive body. She watches the two of them speaking.

"Yes. I think I am. The agent appeared to be just a snoop and spoof, but I think it's hiding something nastier. It's not trying to get away like a normal agent."

The truck reverberates with the sound of something hitting it. "Gunther, get them away from Matilda." The rigger doesn't answer in words. Instead, the crack of gel rounds firing from the turret guns tells one and all he heard the request.

"Tash. The client just flat-lined."

Takeshi nods. "Miss Hart. Simone. You *will* stay in the DocWagon until someone escorts you in. SIMaeon, you do what you need to do. Ping the comms if you believe you can assist us."

"Will do." At this point, SIMaeon's human persona shrinks into a small ball of fire.

"Ready!" Hey Jude is at the gull wing door, waiting.

"Let's go."

Hey Jude is out the door as soon as it opens, with Takeshi and Odder following. Simone remains in her seat, watching the DocWagon team exit. Through the open door, Hey Jude hits one man hard with Athena and head butts another. Takeshi's out the door, his skin glowing with magical armor. He clears a

path for Odder, who lets fly with a mana bolt, dropping another Hellhound. Then the Citymaster's gull-wing door closes.

"Don't worry, Simone." Gunther's voice comes over the speakers. "You're safe in here."

"Thank you." Her gaze focuses on the flickering ball of AR fire then to the teen's mortal body. SIMaeon's nose is bleeding. "Is SIMaeon all right?"

"Yes. Yes." The hacker's voice comes over the commlink in a burst of static. "One agent down. I hope that hacker's deck is burned."

"What happened?"

"Someone's trying to get into our personal comms."

"DocWagon 19's comms?"

The ball of fire nods at her. "Yes. And they aren't done. Running silent." The ball of fire disappears. Simone looks around the truck and then moves back to the front seat with Gunther's limp body. She reaches out a hand to touch him.

"Don't do that, please," Gunther's voice is sharp over the vehicle speakers. "I'm still here. Just busy. I'll narrate what I can. Watch the action out the window."

"Sorry."

"Null persp."

The scene faded to black, then returned to Simone in the studio. "The next five minutes were long ones. While listening to the sparse comm chatter and Gunther telling me what his drones were seeing and doing, I realized—deep down inside—just how unsafe everything had become. It was more dangerous than any other ride along I'd been on."

An image of SIMaeon in both his fireball form and his human form appeared next to Simone. "SIMaeon was fighting for control of the communications array that assigned DocWagon 19 their private channel to talk and to work effectively as a team. The battle was fought in the Matrix—the digital representation of information. When a hacker is jacked in, they generally leave their body behind, leaving it vulnerable to physical attack. It's why many hackers work remotely, protecting their identities and locations with their strongest security measures.

"However, hacking from a distance has its own problems in the Matrix due to line noise. You want to have some distance but not too much. This is why SIMaeon does his work for DocWagon 19 from within the Citymaster. His physical closeness, while personally dangerous, adds to the communications security of DocWagon 19's comm systems. And it's good thing, too."

Simone leaned forward. "What was happening, at the speed of the Matrix, was the equivalent of a video game with very real deadly consequences and no saved games. SIMaeon fought another hacker with his skills and agent programs. He won, but he told me later that it was a close thing. However, as he is a corporate hacker, or a white hat, as they are sometimes called, he had extra equipment on hand to fix his damaged deck."

The image of SIMaeon disappeared and was replaced with more video of the fight outside the Pour House. "Meanwhile, the Hellhounds kept attacking the Pour House patrons and the DocWagon's Ares Citymaster—which held up to its sterling reputation. While I knew I was safe inside its armor, I'll admit, I was frightened."

Simone smiled at the camera. "And then I got to see some action. Over the comms, Takeshi called for "Little Dog," one of the heavy-duty resuscitation machines. More on that after a word from our sponsors."

The scene is of nature, traveling over green hills, through lush forests, up burnt dunes, down to the

ocean with crashing waves. A voiceover speaks as the scene travels through each lovely natural scene. "Imagine a world filled with the plants and animals nature intended. Imagine a world where power plants live in harmony with their ecosystems. Imagine a world where natural energy fulfills all your needs."

The camera travels through more nature scenes, repeating the images but this time with each, you can see a different kind of natural energy being harnessed. Over the green hills, high-tech camouflaged windmills stand. In the forest, a camouflaged building with a geothermal symbol looks like a tree house. On the burning dunes, oval solar collectors soak up the sun. On the oceans, energy generating motion buoys float.

The scene shifts to a busy central square with people walking across it. The camera pans down to their feet, then to the energy generating motion platform to the machines harnessing the natural energy created by the walking citizens. "Imagine being part of the energy system that powers your life every day. Imagine Gaeatronics."

The word GAEATRONICS appears on the screen until the commercial goes black.

The show returned to Simone in the studio. "Welcome back to *Stories with Hart: The DocWagon Edition*. I'm Simone Hart, and when we last left you, I was in the middle of danger while trying to get my story. For those who aren't aware, when I did a story on Knight Errant, Officer Gabriella showed me how to fire various pistols before my ride along with her. Afterward, I continued practicing my firearm skills. As part of my agreement with DocWagon to do a ride along with an HTR team, Studio 15 bought me a pistols skillsoft package. Despite what the forthcoming footage looks like, I was never in any real danger."

Simone held up a pistol. "This is the Ares Light Fire 75, the pistol I chose from the weapons available. It was filled with gel rounds—which, while not lethal, still pack a punch. No one died by my hand at the Pour House. Also, the Amina Collection armored clothing I wore, by the always wonderful Amina Vardeman, was as stylish as it was protective.

"Now we return to my ride along with DocWagon 19. SIMaeon was silent, still fighting an enemy hacker. Gunther was keeping the Hellhounds from the Citymaster, and Takeshi, the team lead, had called for their resuscitation drone."

The scene fades from the studio back to the interior of the Citymaster. Takeshi's voice comes over the comms while Simone looks at the weapons on one of the ambulance walls. There are three pistols, two rifles, several grenades, and a dozen magazines of different kinds of ammunition. "Gunther. Send Little Dog out."

"Little Dog?" Simone turns her head towards the front of the ambulance.

Gunther's answer comes over the speaker nearest her. "One of my medical drones."

"Takeshi, is it safe for me to come out, too?"

There is a pause. "Do you know how to use a pistol, Simone?"

"I can use the Ares pistol you have on the wall."

"Whiz." Gunther's voice is bright with admiration. "I'll unlock it for you."

"Very good, Miss Hart. Load it with gel rounds and don't be afraid to shoot anyone who comes at you. I'm sending Hey Jude to meet you at the door."

Simone's hand reaches for the Ares Light Fire 75 pistol and a magazine of gel rounds. She wastes no time in checking and loading the pistol. She selects a second magazine of gel rounds, pauses, and takes a third magazine of regular ammunition, tucking both into pockets on her khaki jumpsuit.

“I see what you did there.” Gunther’s voice is full with mirth.

“You never know when you’ll need regular ammo.”

“Smart thinking. You ready?”

“Yes.”

“Follow Little Dog. Hey Jude’s already coming out to meet you.” He pauses and then adds.

“Seriously, shoot anyone—who isn’t us—that gets too close.”

The gull-wing door of the Citymaster swings open and Simone clambers out. Before her is a squat drone that comes up to her knees. Around her are fallen people, some in red and orange, some not. Some bleeding and still, some prone and moaning. Simone scans back and forth across the area as she follows the trundling drone. One corner of the Pour House is smoldering but looks solid.

As she approaches the front door, a man in torn orange and red clothing—a Hellhound—stumbles out of it. “Stay back!” Simone’s voice is loud and firm, with only a slight tremble. The human, blond-hair and blue-eyed, leers at her with a bloody mouth and doesn’t move. Simone raises her pistol and shoots the go-ganger in the forehead. His leer freezes and he collapses to a heap on the ground.

“Good shootin’!” Gunther’s voice is gleeful.

“Not bad for a reporter.” Hey Jude appears in the Pour House doorway. “C’mon, we got work for Little Dog.”

Simone follows Hey Jude and the drone inside, where there is no doubt that a brawl-turned-riot happened here. From her scan of the room, not a single piece of moveable furniture is unbroken. Behind the bar stands two people, a troll and an ork. They both hold weapons and watch the DocWagon team with wary respect, but do nothing more than watch.

When Simone hesitates, turning toward the bar, Gunther whispers quietly over the comms. “Not a good idea, Simone. Really.” As she’s the only one who reacts, it appears the rigger privately messaged her. She nods and continues to the back hallway, which ends in a back room that barely holds the three people inside. Odder stands over a small, gray ork who’s slumped over a deck hugged to his chest.

Takeshi, still glowing with magical armor, moves out of the doorway and lets the drone in. “We’re going to give Little Dog a go before we call this one done.”

“Will he live?”

He looks back at the drone and the unmoving ork. “That remains to be seen.”

Odder looks tired. Her hands glow with soft light as the drone attaches itself to the ork at vital places—the chest, the back of the neck, the groin. “Clear,” she murmurs just before the ork’s body gives a huge spasm and the light from Odder’s hands flashes.

Simone glances at Hey Jude, and then does a double take. She’s bleeding from what looks suspiciously like a bullet wound in her the chest, and from the arm that looks like a machete slashed it. Noticing her glance, Hey Jude shrugs. “It’s a flesh wound. Once we get the client elsewhere, we’ll take care of us.”

Looking closer at Takeshi, Simone notices that the reserved man’s clothing is ripped and several bruises mar his face and hands. “Are you all right?”

Takeshi nods. “Hazards of the trade. This is minor.”

“We’ve got a pulse.” Odder is exalted and smiling. She stands, wobbling a little. “He’s alive.”

“Good work team. Wrap it up.” He pauses. “Gunther?”

“All clear here. Everyone’s disappeared, and I’m even hearing Knight Errant sirens.”

Takeshi nods. “Good. SIMaeon?”

“Here. Alive. Been better.”

“We’ll debrief on the way to the hospital.”

Hey Jude nudges Simone’s shoulder. “Go with Takeshi. I gotta take the client.”

Simone nods as Hey Jude slings her rifle behind her and then gathers up the small ork, carrying him

like a child. He still hugs his deck tight. As Simone turns to follow Takeshi, she hears Hey Jude murmur in a low, sing-song voice, “You just hold on tight, Miyuzaki. You keep your deck close. It’s yours, and you’ll come back to it. We got ya. You’re good. We got ya.”

The scene faded from the destroyed Pour House Tavern to the brightly lit studio. Simone nodded to the main camera. “I wish we could say that Miyuzaki recovered and was doing just fine, but at the time of this show, he is still in the hospital in a coma, suffering from what is known as dumpshock. He has regained consciousness only once, long enough to reach for his deck, but was unable to speak. Our prayers and well-wishes go out to Miyuzaki and his loved ones.”

Simone turned to the side camera. “At this point. We returned to the DocWagon garage to allow Gunther time to inspect the Citymaster for damage, to allow SIMaeon to fix his deck, and for Odder to rest. I took the time to talk with Takeshi, the enigmatic leader of DocWagon 19, about himself, the evening, and the hacking attempt on the team’s communications array.”

The scene shifts to the DocWagon garage again. Simone watches Takeshi pace back and forth with smooth steps. His face has the faraway look of someone lost in thought. “Is everything all right?”

Takeshi nods. “Thinking. Considering what we know. It’s not unusual for people to attempt to hack into DocWagon. It’s mostly benign, if sensitive, hacking—records of clients and such. Patrol routes. Though they don’t usually come after HTR teams. And it’s even rarer that they set out to geek the DocWagon hacker. I’m considering this in conjunction to your presence this evening.”

“You don’t think someone’s trying to hurt me, do you?”

He tilts his head and contemplates her for a moment. “You specifically? No. But, if someone wanted to damage DocWagon’s reputation, hurting a well-known trid personality like yourself while on a ride along would go a long way.”

“No one knew I would be here today.”

“No one?” His smile is gentle. “Not your studio, the interns, the producers ...?”

“Oh. I ... you don’t actually ...”

“Don’t worry. I don’t truly think that’s what happening. It’s merely one of the options I must consider.” Takeshi sits down on a folding chair. In the distance behind him, Hey Jude is being patched up by another uniformed DocWagon employee. Simone watches as the med-tech pulls a slug from Hey Jude’s breastbone, just under her clavicle. The ork grimaces with a grunt of pain. Simone turns from her and looks back at Takeshi, who is patiently waiting.

Simone sits down across from him. “For a medical professional, you have a very tactical mind.”

“I wasn’t always an EMT.”

“What were you before this life?”

“A soldier.” He pauses, looking chagrined, and rubs a bandage on his arm. “A mercenary. I’ve seen a lot of action. Fought in more skirmishes than I care to think about. I was very good at what I did. Which is mostly the same thing I do now. Command a team. Save lives.”

“You don’t look that old.”

“I am older than I look. My mind and body connection allows me my youthful demeanor.”

“I don’t understand.”

He offers her his open palms for a moment, looking down at them, before placing his hands on his thighs. “I am an adept. I harness the magical energy around me to power my body, to push it beyond

normal human limits.”

“That explains your glowing skin, the magical armor.”

Takeshi nods. “Yes.”

“What made you change from being a soldier to becoming an EMT?”

Takeshi looks away as he speaks. “A need to feed the soul as well as the body. My sensei suggested that a man of my abilities would do well in DocWagon. I agreed. Here I am.”

The scene shifted back to the studio with an image of Takeshi next to Simone. “John “Tash” Takeshi is an eight-year veteran of the mercenary unit known as the Nephilim Network. Leaving the Network in 2061, Takeshi turned from a life of killing for a life of healing. He quickly moved from the Standard Response Team to a High-Threat Response Team after proving his skills in the Tacoma food riots of 2063. His prior military service gave him the skills and confidence to run his own team by 2066. Takeshi has been in charge of DocWagon 19 for the past five years.”

Simone paused as the image next to her morphed into a picture of Takeshi with his glowing mystic armor. “One of the most valuable skills this DocWagon adept has is his magic. As you can see, the channeled magic gives him certain beneficial side effects like slower aging. It also allows Takeshi to enhance his martial prowess, making his strikes do more damage while providing him with the ability to absorb more damage. These arcane skills can be taxing, and he can suffer some detrimental physical effects after the mystical boost to the body has run its course.”

Turning to the secondary camera, Simone smiled. “DocWagon, as a company, is good to their employees and while we were in the garage, the DocWagon shift lead, Benjamin Novakowski, noted here of the Seattle legislature hostage situation of 2069, debriefed DocWagon 19 about the earlier part of the evening. But first, a word from our sponsors.”

The screen shows a muscular chest and a hand zipping up a black Knight Errant uniform jacket. The Knight Errant badge shines bright on the anonymous officer’s chest. The camera pans in from the left of the officer, showing the Knight Errant uniform signature shoulder armor with the Knight Errant symbol on it. The officer grabs, checks, and holsters a pistol.

The screen shifts to a feminine form in the same Knight Errant uniform. She puts on a tactical belt as the camera pans over her body, highlighting her officer’s rank before it shows her picking up, checking, and holstering a pistol.

As the two officers come together, standing in heroic poses, words appear over top of them. “KNIGHT ERRANT NEEDS ONLY THE BEST. KNIGHT ERRANT WANTS THOSE WHO WILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE.” The camera slowly moves up their forms to show two attractive, brown-haired humans who look at the camera with confidence.

The woman lifts her chin. “Knight Errant needs you. Because if you won’t make a difference, who will?”

The man nods. “If you have the talent and the drive, Knight Errant has a place for you. Contact your nearest Knight Errant office to learn more about the training programs available in your area.”

Gold words on a black background appear. “KNIGHT ERRANT. MORE THAN A JOB. IT’S A PROFESSION.” The screen goes black.

“Welcome back to this special edition of *Stories with Hart*. My ride along with DocWagon 19 had quieted down for a few moments, allowing time to assess the situation. DocWagon shift lead, Benjamin Novakowski, joined team lead, Takeshi, and team hacker, SIMaeon, after the cyber attack on DocWagon

19's communications array." Simone nodded to the camera and the scene faded to black.

When the scene returns, Benjamin Novakowski, a handsome Arabic man, sits next to Takeshi on a folding chair. Ben wears the same DocWagon uniform as everyone else. SIMaeon, in the flesh, sits on a third folding chair with them. Simone is near enough to the trio to watch the conversation, but not close enough to be part of it.

Ben nods at SIMaeon. "We've got our security team on it. Right now, we're not seeing what you saw. It's going to take more digging."

"But it was there. The jog in the comms. It happened on both the Chrome Holly rescue and the Nagano rescue. Someone's targeting us." SIMaeon is making an effort stay still in his chair.

"It may seem like that, yes. We've got a lot more logs to go through to find out what happened on those two rescues. The only rescue we've got data on is the Miyuzaki rescue."

SIMaeon bites his lip and practically vibrates in place. "You don't believe me."

Takeshi clears his throat and gives SIMaeon a warning look.

SIMaeon stills. Only his mouth moves as he speaks. He grips the sides of the chair with both hands. "It's tonight. Every rescue. The agent was snooping and spoofing. Then, when I caught it, it didn't try to get away. It tried to hurt me. And to open a door to let its hacker in ... which succeeded, I might add." In SIMaeon's stillness, it is clear from the bruised look around his tired eyes that he's not one hundred percent yet.

Ben nods. "I know. Do we need to pull you off duty?"

"NO!" SIMaeon jumps to his feet.

"I don't think that'll be necessary." Takeshi's calm, quiet voice brings sanity back to SIMaeon and he sits again, grabbing hold of the chair's sides once more.

"Please, Mr. Novakowski, don't. I know what I'm looking for now. Another hacker won't see what I'm seeing."

Ben and Takeshi exchange a conversation in a glance and Ben nods. "All right. But I'll spin up another one to be around. Just in case."

Takeshi's voice cuts through SIMaeon's growing ire. "SIMaeon—what aren't you telling us?"

The hacker looks at the ground, not meeting his boss in the eye. "What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I said. What aren't you telling us?"

SIMaeon gives Ben a guilty glance, then turns his full attention to Takeshi. "Miyuzaki ... I know him. He's a pal." Takeshi says nothing. "And I ... kinda asked him for a favor."

Ben's voice takes on an edge. "What kind of favor?"

Takeshi gestures for calm to them both and then looks at SIMaeon again.

SIMaeon shrinks into himself. "After the Chrome Holly bit ... I asked him to look into things for me. I couldn't ... and he's got ... had ... a better deck and better agents."

Ben stands so fast his chair falls over, outrage and disbelief all over his face. "You hired an outside party on a rescue?"

"No. Not hired."

Takeshi puts a hand on Ben's arm and glances at Simone. Ben doesn't look at her, but he stiffens. "This is a breach of operational security, and I won't have it."

SIMaeon shakes his head back and forth. "I didn't hire him. We're buds. I told him what I saw. I gave him data. But nothing that was in the DocWagon network. It's always on the borders that we see breaches."

Takeshi repeats, "You asked him to do you a favor and look into an anomaly outside the DocWagon

node.” SIMaeon nods. “And that’s why you’re certain that DocWagon 19 is being targeted?”

“Because Miyuzaki was looking into something for and about DocWagon 19. And then he was attacked.”

Ben slowly picks up and resettles his chair. He sits and shakes his head. “I’m going to have to investigate this. To make sure that ... what you say is true.”

“It is! It’s like you chatting with someone on IM and commenting, “*Oh, hey, I thought I saw a weird article about Evo buying DocWagon stock.*” and your friend saying, “*Really? Lemme see. That doesn’t sound right.*” That’s it. That’s all it was.” SIMaeon lets go of the chair and raises empty hands to Ben. “I swear.”

Again, Takeshi and Ben have a conversation in a glance. Finally Ben nods. “All right. I’m pretty sure everything’s on the up and up. But I have to cover all bases. Send me ... No. Send Polly everything you sent Miyuzaki, and I mean *everything*. She’ll lead the investigation and get back to me.”

Ben stands again and gestures for Takeshi to come with him. The two men walk a few paces away. SIMaeon moves next to Simone, watching his bosses speak. “I think I’m in for it.”

“Why’s that?”

“The boss doesn’t like it when I skirt the line.” SIMaeon crosses his arms and hugs his slender frame. He looks very young.

“Which one?”

“The big boss. I mean, Takeshi doesn’t like it much, either. But at least he understands it.”

Simone looks from the men to SIMaeon. She puts an understanding hand on his shoulder. “Sounds like you’ve been in trouble before.”

“Boy howdy.”

“Do tell.”

SIMaeon half-smiles. “I wish I could. But the records are sealed. Let’s just say that I used to be a black hat, and now I’m a white one. Mostly thanks to Takeshi. I’d walk through hell for that man.”

Simone looks back at Takeshi and Ben. “You’re loyal.”

“We’re all loyal. He’s worth it. He works us hard, but he also works hard for us, and he’s loyal to us and to DocWagon. You might say we all saved each other.”

“There’s a story there.” Simone watches Ben leave and Takeshi approach.

“How much trouble am I in?”

“Enough.” Takeshi tilts his head. “Is there anything else I should know?”

SIMaeon shakes his head. “You could see he was hot-simmed.”

Takeshi nods.

“You have interesting friends.” Simone tilts her head, mimicking Takashi, as she looks at SIMaeon. “You know that’s illegal.”

“Yes. Which is why I’m cold-simmed.”

“Hey!” Odder’s voice rings out from across the garage. “Are we gonna stand around lollygagging, or are we going back on patrol?”

Hey Jude calls out, “Says the one we’re all waiting on ...”

Odder grins and walks over to the ambulance. “Petty, insignificant details.”

“Let’s go.” Takeshi’s command spurs them all into movement and the gull-wing door of the Citymaster swings open as the scene fades to black.

Simone’s bruised but smiling face reappeared, and an image of SIMaeon’s human avatar face floated nearby. “For those of you interested, Mr. Novakowski followed through on his investigation of SIMaeon’s

actions during that night, and found that his actions were well within security parameters for DocWagon. SIMaeon's employee record with DocWagon remains clear to this day.

“As an interesting side note, while SIMaeon's juvenile court records are sealed, I was able to discover that part of his rehabilitation from ‘black hat’ to ‘white hat’ included serving time as a member of DocWagon's IT department. It was during this time that he met Takeshi and turned his life around to become the productive member of society he is today. It makes me proud to know SIMaeon and to call him my friend.”

Simone nodded at the camera, and SIMaeon's youthful face is replaced with an image of Odder's beautiful, elven features. “We come to the last member of DocWagon 19, Harah ‘Odder’ Vonvara. A member of Tir Tairngire's nobility, Odder gave up wealth and a life of luxury for something more meaningful.

“Blessed with the rare magical talent, Odder decided at a young age that she needed to see the world, and to see it as she had not seen it before. As you will find out, Odder has a dark past. One that won't leave her alone. She was once known as an illegal rebel of society—a shadowrunner. This isn't something she willingly admitted, but when the past comes knocking, sometimes it's hard to turn your back. The rest of the evening proved this to all involved. We'll talk more about that during my special live studio interview later in the show.”

Simone gestured to her bruised and scratched face. “We come to the part of this special edition of *Stories with Hart* wherein not only do I assist the DocWagon team, I become part of the story ... and discover what's really going on with the cyber attacks on DocWagon 19.”

Her face grew melancholy, haggard almost. “Unfortunately, because of what happened, it is my sad duty to let you know that not all of the DocWagon team survived that night.” Her face brightened again. “But first, a word from our sponsors.”

An image of Chrome Holly in a sleek short silver dress lounging on a chair in the dark appears. She gives the camera bedroom eyes and blows it a kiss. Chrome Holly's voiceover starts up as the screen goes black. “Do you want to know what happened my first time? What about my first time in AR?”

Chrome Holly reappears, looking scandalized, and then smiles brightly. “What about what I did just last night? I'm sure you want to know about that, don't you?” She tilts her head to the side and gives a long sigh.

The screen goes black as Chrome Holly whispers. “Do you want to tell me what to do? What to say? What to talk about?”

As she reappears, it's clear she's on a stage and now she's talking to an appreciative audience. “This is After Hours with Chrome Holly, where you get to tell me what story I'll tell tonight. You give me the details, and we'll see where they appear in the story. A story just for you.” Chrome Holly glances at the camera. “Live. At the Gates Casino. Three nights a week.”

The screen goes black as the words “FOR ADULTS ONLY” appears and Chrome Holly's voice whispers, “Let me tell you a story ...”

A man's voice speaks quickly and professionally as a still image of Chrome Holly's face with bedroom eyes appears. “Tickets available on the Gates Casino website and at the door. No one under eighteen allowed.”

“Welcome back to *Stories with Hart: DocWagon Edition*. I've been riding along with DocWagon 19, a High-Threat Response team. Already, we'd assisted three DocWagon clients—Chrome Holly, Daisuke Nagano, and Miyuzaki—and we're about to head to our last, and most lethal call of the evening. A Super-Platinum VIP client, known only as Portex, comes under attack, and DocWagon 19 must save

him. Portex is no stranger to some of the members of the team.” Simone nodded knowingly to the camera as a blurred image of what looks to be a redheaded elven man floats at her side.

“However, as he has requested that his real name and all identifying features be masked, we will only refer to him as Portex, and his image will be blurred. *Stories with Hart* respects all those who wish not to be identified, even if they become part of the story we are telling.”

Simone tilted her head. “For those who cry ‘transparency,’ we respectfully remind one and all that Portex has a right to his privacy, and those who attempt to pierce it will be met with legal repercussions.”

The blurred image of Portex disappeared, and Simone’s smile returned. “And now for the most exciting and most dangerous part of the evening.”

Simone’s image disappears. Inside the DocWagon Citymaster, Simone watches SIMaeon, Takeshi, and Odder. Hey Jude is sitting upfront with Gunther. SIMaeon’s fireball form floats around the interior of the Citymaster.

“What’s the most interesting rescue you’ve been on?” Simone glances around the vehicle as the team members look at one another.

Odder finally speaks. “I’m not sure you’d call it interesting. But it might be what you’re looking for. You guys remember the BAM rescue?”

Takeshi’s answer is to cover his face with a hand. Hey Jude barks a laugh while SIMaeon flickers in and out of existence. Even SIMaeon’s physical body smiles.

Simone watches everyone’s reaction. “The Bellevue Art Museum?”

Odder nods, chuckling. “Yeah, we had a call to the museum. A Gold client. We were the only ones nearby. She’d been shot by someone at the museum. We go screaming in there and see a troll with a gun standing over this girl on the ground. She’s our client and he’s not backing off. So we do our thing.”

“You shot him?”

Odder nods. “I hit him with a stunning spell. I mean, we *were* in Bellevue. The troll’s dressed nice. The girl is too, for that matter. But ...” She laughs so hard she can’t speak.

“The troll’s a Platinum client!” Hey Jude finishes for her.

Takeshi smiles. “And SIMaeon goes off on his ‘Incoming ... Platinum client ... stunned ...’, and we all realize we just attacked one of our own clients.”

“Because they hindered your rescue of another client.”

“Yes!” Odder is still laughing. “We had to separate the two of them. Turns out she was a thief, and he was the owner of the piece she stole.”

Simone chuckles. “Did you get in trouble?”

Takeshi shakes his head. “No. Line of duty. It happens sometimes that we have clients on opposite sides of a fight.”

“What do you do then?”

He shrugs. “It depends on their contract and who is shooting at whom. If no one attacks us, we do our thing and leave. Even if we have enemies in the same ambulance. If someone attacks... Well, then it gets messy.”

“Are there ever any legal—”

SIMaeon cuts her off, his voice urgent. “Takeshi—if the pattern holds, we’re about to get a call.”

Takeshi’s body shifts from its relaxed posture into readiness. “Explain.”

“There’s an explosion at the Overlake Golf Club. Knight Errant is being mobilized. Every time something like that’s happened tonight, I’ve gotten the Matrix jog, and then we’ve gotten a new rescue.” SIMaeon pauses. “There it is. Super-platinum ... oh, hell. It’s Portex.”

Odder's head snaps up, her expression shifting from happy to pain to neutral in the blink of an eye. Takeshi's jaw tightens. "Where?"

"He's at Gaeatronics, South Medina. And now I'm getting reports of activity on the Mountain.

Gunfire. Alarms. Small explosion."

Everyone holds on as Gunther swings the Citymaster around at high speed.

"Where are 21 and 33?" Takeshi's voice remains calm.

"One's at Overlake Golf Club and the other's in Vasa Park, dealing with multiple clients shot at a party that seems to have included a murder-suicide."

"We're the closest." Takeshi nods and glances towards Gunther. "Time to the Gaeatronics site?"

"Six minutes."

Takeshi grimaces then looks at Odder. "Status of the client?"

"Shattered leg—tibia. Rapid heartbeat." Odder's voice is calm and professional. "Stable for the moment."

"Permission to access?" When SIMaeon doesn't immediately answer, Takeshi repeats himself.

"SIMaeon, permission to access?"

"Working on it. The Salish-Shidhe are working through their chain of command."

Takeshi and Odder exchange an entire conversation in a glance and a nod. He seems to be telling her it will be all right.

"Pardon, what happens if Gaeatronics doesn't give permission?" Simone looks from Odder to Takeshi.

Odder is the one that answers. "With a Super-Platinum, we go in anyway, and we expect resistance from both whomever is attacking the client *and* Gaeatronics' security force."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that." Takeshi takes several slow breaths. "It won't come to that. Portex is an important man."

Simone focuses on Odder. "How do you know Portex? Is that his real name?"

The mage looks distinctly uncomfortable as she monitors the client's vitals. She does not look at Simone. "No. It's not. But ..." she shakes her head, "I'm not going to say his name on camera. Sorry."

"Portex is an acceptable moniker. How do you know him?"

Gunther speaks up through the vehicle speakers. "We all know him. He's a friend."

Odder smiles briefly at this. "Everyone knows him through me. He and I ran together a long time ago."

"You mean after you left your family in the Tír?"

Odder nods.

"But before you joined DocWagon six years ago?"

Odder nods again.

"Time to Gaeatronics?" Takeshi's voice is a little harder than it usually is, drawing Simone's focus to him. When he sees he has her attention, his voice calms. "Perhaps we should have this discussion after our client is safe and sound. Right now, everyone needs to prepare for the rescue." This last bit is spoken as an order.

Simone looks around the interior of the vehicle, and everyone studiously does not look at her. Odder switches between looking at the client's vital statistics and sorting through her talismans. Hey Jude noisily checks and loads her weapons. SIMaeon is frozen in the air. Takeshi continues to watch her.

"Were you comfortable with the Light Fire, Miss Hart?"

"Yes."

Takeshi reaches back and retrieves the pistol, offering it to her. "Be prepared. You won't be leaving the truck, but it doesn't hurt to have someone who can lay down cover fire if necessary."

"Thank you."

He turns his attention to SIMaeon. “Status?”

“Knight Errant’s engaged in some sort of firefight at the Club. It’s pulled most of their people up there. The ones heading our way have a hell of a traffic snarl to get through.” He pauses. “And Gaeatronics has just given their permission for us to come on corporate land.”

Odder sighs in relief. Takeshi nods, relaxing. “Good. See if they’ll give us intel on what we’ll be facing.”

“Uh. Wait a sec—” SIMaeon’s voice bursts with static, and then his avatar disappears.

“SIMaeon?” Takeshi looks around the ambulance, then at the teen’s twitching body, and waits for the count of ten. “Dammit.” His voice is calm. “Gunther, get intel on what we’re facing. Time to arrival?”

“On it. And three minutes.”

Simone gazes at SIMaeon’s physical form but directs her question to Takeshi. “Is SIMaeon all right?”

“We won’t know until we get him back.” Takeshi looks at Odder. “Client?”

“Same as before, with additional blood loss. Still stable.” Odder’s voice is strained and she looks pale, even for her.

Takeshi reaches out a hand. “He’s tough. You know that.”

Odder nods. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it.” She glances at Simone. “Yes, I care about him. Yes, we know each other. Yes, I’ll tell you about it afterwards.”

Takeshi nods. “But right now, we’re on the clock.”

Odder nods. “Excuse me for a minute. Need to get my head in the game.” She turns her back to everyone in the vehicle and begins focusing her arcane will as the scene fades to black.

Simone reappeared with an image of the Gaeatronics logo next to her. “Gaeatronics. Headquartered in Olympia, Washington, and owned by the Salish Amerindian tribe, it is known for its eco-friendly power generation. With everything from a fusion reactor to geothermal power to wind power to solar energy, Gaeatronics doesn’t quite have a monopoly on providing power to the Pacific Northwest, but it’s close.”

The Gaeatronics logo is replaced with the image of a large hill with several buildings poking out of it. The building rooftops are covered in soil and foliage, giving it the appearance of natural terrain. “The company’s Seattle headquarters is located in the Medina area of Bellevue, and is affectionately known as ‘the Mountain’ or ‘Gaeatronics Mountain’ because of its beautiful, camouflaged buildings and eco-friendly corporate campus. Most of the campus is underground, using the earth’s natural ambient temperature to keep it warm in winter and cool in summer.”

Simone glanced down at her hands as if marshaling her thoughts, then looked back up at the camera. “By the time we reached the site, SIMaeon was back online—he had been hurt and stunned by another cyber attack—but had resumed communications with Gaeatronics. We’ll get to that right after this word from our sponsors.”

The screen flashes with images of people dancing to thumping music under a state-of-the-art laser light show as a voiceover says, “Powerline. Bellevue’s premiere nightclub catering to those who like it on the wild side. Powerline. Upstairs is a heart-racing, pulse-pounding, sweat-pouring dance floor filled with only the most gorgeous dancers Bellevue has to offer.”

The screen continues to flash with images of people dancing, but now the images are intermixed with fetish wear dancers. “And for those who like it even wilder, we’ve got you covered, too. Powerline features playrooms for those who like to play down and dirty. All players and dancers welcome at Powerline. Where you can get your dance and your power on.”

As the screen goes dark, the voiceover takes on a profession tone and speaks quickly. "Powerline is a twenty-one and up club only. All dungeon players must sign a consent form. No looky-loos. You come, you dance, you play. Powerline is a sex-positive club for adults only. Please drink, dance, and play responsibly."

"Welcome back to *Stories with Hart*. DocWagon 19 and I were pulling into the Gaeatronics Bellevue campus to rescue a Super-Platinum client known as Portex. A personal friend of several members of the team, especially the combat mage Odder, the team was determined to get him out at all costs. SIMaeon had been under attack, but was functional once more. We resume with team leader, Takeshi, ordering SIMaeon to call in an airlift for their client."

Simone gestured to the camera. "I must warn my viewers. Some of the images you are about to witness are not appropriate for children and may be disturbing to those with a sensitive constitution. It was a very difficult and dangerous situation to be in."

The screen fades to black, superimposed with large, blinking red letters: THE FOLLOWING CONTENT MAY BE DISTURBING TO YOUNG VIEWERS UNDER THE AGE OF 15. PARENTAL DISCRETION ADVISED.

When the scene returns, it is to the interior of the Citymaster. SIMaeon is back in his fireball form and is flickering in and out of existence as he floats in front of Takeshi. Odder has her eyes closed. "Call for backup. Stallions for a possible airlift and cover fire. This is most likely an extraction, but with the Gaeatronics data, it might be an assassination if extraction isn't possible."

"Roger that." SIMaeon's voice is mechanical, devoid of his usual personality. His physical body twitches within his seatbelt restraints and there are smears of blood on his face and hands as if he has wiped at a bloody nose.

"Time to location?"

"Sixty seconds and counting." Gunther's voice is smooth in contrast to the Citymaster's jerky turns and swerves and obvious uphill tilt.

Takeshi pulls up a schematic that appears on Simone's smart glasses and highlights two locations. "We'll come in here. Last known location of the client is here." He marks the interior of three low, foliage-covered buildings. "We'll stop here. Odder, Matilda, and Hey Jude will lay down cover fire while I retrieve Portex through the top of this building. Clear with Gaeatronics on moving him up there. Simone will cover from the ambulance."

"Client's vitals showing signs of extreme distress." Hey Jude is calm, watching out the front of the Citymaster.

"Got Gaeatronics security and employees as friendlies on the IFF. Everyone else is the enemy." SIMaeon's voice, still mechanical-sounding, is menacing as it adds, "I've found their hacker. Going silent."

"Lock him down." Takeshi stares at the wireframe schematics. "Enemy on Building One. Focus cover fire there. Gaeatronics has Building One locked down from the other side. The only way they can move is towards us. Make sure that doesn't happen. Try to minimize the collateral damage if you can, but do what you need to do to get the job done."

Matilda slows to a stop and the gull-wing door opens. Like the experienced team they are, Takeshi and Odder hold back long enough to let Hey Jude get out before them. The sounds of Athena and Matilda's guns firing fills the air as Takeshi and Odder, both encased in glowing, arcane armor, follow suit.

As Simone takes a covered firing position in the Citymaster, she glances down at her shaking hands to

see them glowing with arcane armor as well. She looks up and takes stock of what's happening ahead of her. She holds her weapon, the Ares Light Fire 75, in the approved two-handed Weaver grip, but pointed at the ground.

Simone sees three foliage-covered buildings. The two in the rear are about two stories high, while the one between them is only one story. However, all of them are covered in vines, trees, and flowers, camouflaging the buildings and making them look like small hills on top of a larger one. Building One, on the left side, has three people—a troll and two humans—on it. All of them are firing at both the DocWagon team and Building Two, on the right side. Building Two also has three people on it—two Gaeatronics security people in full gear and helmets masking race and gender. They are flanking a third person lying on the rooftop.

Hey Jude and Odder stop about ten meters away from Matilda. Hey Jude lays down cover fire as Odder pulls up an arcane five by five meter glowing wall of protection. Hey Jude fires, then ducks behind the wall's protection, then leans out to fire again. At the same time, Takeshi sprints at a supernatural speed towards Building Two. He makes an incredible leap from the ground to almost the top of the building, grabbing vines and climbing the rest of the way up.

A flying drone that looks like a modified MCT Nissan Roto-Drone comes in from the left, firing at Hey Jude. Even before the ork can turn and shoot at it, another drone, an MX-3 Killer Bee, zooms in from over Matilda and engages. "I got this," Gunther says over the comms.

The squat Nissan charges the faster Killer Bee, firing a small caliber projectile to no avail as the Killer Bee all but dances around the enemy drone. Hovering above and to the left of the Nissan, the Killer Bee lets off a three-round burst from its mini-gun into the Nissan's side.

As the Nissan wobbles, recovers, and then takes off, the Killer Bee gives chase and drops down from above, using all six articulated limbs to tangle the Nissan's roto-blades. Three of the Killer Bee's legs are ripped off in the carnage of metal, but the Nissan is no longer able to fly. It drops down out of site behind a building, with the Killer Bee diving after it.

"Bringing him in," Takeshi's voice says over the comm. Simone turns to see what the DocWagon team lead is doing. Focusing and zooming in on Takeshi reveals he has Portex over his shoulders in a modified fireman's carry. A moment later, Takeshi rappels down the side of the building as the two Gaeatronics security personnel give him cover fire. He lands lightly on his feet and disengages the rappelling rope. By the way his arms and blurred head dangle and bob, it's clear that Portex is unconscious.

"Smoke." It's the only word Odder speaks, and Simone glances at her. Hey Jude responds with two grenades—one is tossed about three meters in front of them, one is lobbed at the enemy rooftop. The first grenade explodes with nothing but smoke. The second is a flash-bang that makes Simone's glasses go dark for a moment. When her vision clears, thermographic smoke fills the air, masking heat signatures. She turns to look for Takeshi.

She finds him, running towards Hey Jude and Odder ... and then she sees a figure closing in behind Takeshi. He's human, with tattoos and glowing skin. "Tash! Behind you." Simone's voice is loud and panicked, but it does the job.

Takeshi throws Portex's limp body toward his teammates with a hard command, "Heal!" He whirls just in time to dodge the enemy adept's first strike. The two men square off, sizing each other up. Takeshi is the first to attack with a series of flashing fists and low kicks. The enemy fends them off and then presses his own assault, striking Takeshi with powerful blows that push him back. Takeshi leaps over his opponent, kicking him while in mid-air and pulling the enemy away from his team and the downed client. The two adepts continue circling, feinting, and striking each other.

Portex lands hard, his body contorted into hard angles like that of a discarded doll, and Odder gestures to him. A creature that looks like falling rain in humanoid form manifests, floats to Portex, hovers

over him a moment, then sinks into him. Portex's body starts to glow with a blue light that is reminiscent of sunlight on water. Portex's twisted body straightens and bruises heal. There is no way to tell who he is through the blurring that masks his features, but the way the elf's body relaxes, the healing from the water spirit worked.

All the while, the arcane barrier is peppered with projectiles. Some get through, diminished, and the holes they leave behind close up as Odder sustains the barrier spell.

The enemy adept harries Takeshi, moving in and out of range. Takeshi conserves his energy, not falling for the enemy's feints, but attacking when the tattooed man is within range. He's clearly luring the enemy away from the unmoving Portex with careful backward steps and offered openings that he shuts down as he is attacked. Both adepts strike and defend with glowing fists and superhuman speed.

Hey Jude keeps firing short bursts to keep the enemy pinned down. Suddenly she yelps, "Incoming!" and dives behind Odder's arcane barrier. A fragmentation missile explodes on the other side of the glowing wall. The force of it knocks Odder back a couple of steps, but she sustains her magic. Hey Jude launches two more grenades toward the enemy on the roof.

Simone looks back at Takeshi and the enemy adept. They are still dead even; both bruised and bloody with torn clothing. Neither one is glowing anymore. Takeshi takes two steps forward, glances up, and then backs off.

As both Simone and the tattooed enemy look up, a short round burst of fire comes from a Gaeatronics security person on the roof. The adept dances the dead man's dance and collapses. Takeshi turns, sprinting towards Portex. "Round it up!"

An explosion to the left draws Simone's attention. Gunther's drone hangs above the smoke and flame, beside another drone too damaged to identify. Next to the downed machine is an armed troll. "Incoming, 3 o'clock!" Gunther's voice is calm but ragged, like he's been running. The troll raises his pistol and fires. Odder's cry of pain reveals his target. Simone glances at her. The arcane barrier is down. Hey Jude steps in front of the mage, using her body as a shield. Odder looks at Takeshi. "Save him," she says as she holds her chest where the bullet passed through.

Simone is suddenly moving, running toward Odder, but is pointing her pistol at the troll. Her focus is high and tight on the troll's face as he aims his pistol. Simone shoots just as the troll shoots. Her shot strikes him in the eye, and the troll gasps with his mouth open in a small "o" of surprise. Simone fires again, hitting him in the mouth. The back of the troll's head splatters open, and he falls over.

She's still running toward Odder, heedless of the incoming weapons fire from the rooftop with the trapped enemy. Takeshi stands over Portex for a moment, looking between Odder and the client. He picks up the client and sprints past Simone, shouting, "Odder's down! Round. It. Up!" Simone tucks the pistol in a pocket as she reaches Odder. Grabbing the wounded mage under the arms, she starts dragging her back towards the ambulance. Her view is blurred through her tears. The elf lies limp, her head lolling, leaking blood from her back, chest, and the unmistakable bullet hole to the forehead.

Hey Jude stays between Simone and Odder and the enemy on the rooftop. She has to switch from her Ares Alpha assault rifle to an Ares Predator II pistol. She shoots once for every step she takes, measured strides that always keep her within a meter of Odder's feet.

Gunther shouts over the comms, "Grenade!" There is light and sound, and then nothing but blackness for a moment as Simone's smart glasses react to the blinding flash.

The scene reappears, and is now from the point of view of Simone's knocked-off smart glasses. The screen flickers between the image of Simone sprawled on the ground, eyes closed, bleeding from the face and neck—to Odder's open but unseeing eyes, the headshot visible in gory detail—to Hey Jude on the ground but getting up. With Hey Jude the only moving thing, the smart glasses remain focused on her feet as they stomp towards the camera.

Then there is darkness.

“I’m hungry,” an ork teenager complains.

“You’re always hungry, Jase,” his Japanese buddy says.

The ork counts his nuyen. “I’m hungry and I don’t have a lot of money. What’m I gonna do, Tsun?” He looks distraught at the thought of no food.

The Stuffer Shack logo appears over their heads, bouncing in time to the Stuffer Shack jingle.

Stuffer Shack! Stuffer Shack!

Buy what you need. Eat it all. And come right back!

Stuffer Shack! Stuffer Shack! Stuff yourself at Stuffer Shack!

It’s your go-to stop for a snack attack!

The two teenagers look up at the logo, then at each other for a moment, then grin and shout, “Stuffer Shack!” They leap off the couch and race for the door.

A voiceover begins as the two teens arrive at the local Stuffer Shack in short order. “Whenever you have a need, Stuffer Shack is there. Hungry? We have food.” The boys walk by aisles and aisles of snacks, filling a cart. “Thirsty? We have drinks.” The boys fill huge cups from available fountains. “Need the latest NERPS? We’ve got that, too.” The boys slowly walk by a couple of giggling teenage girls as they look at hair clips. They shyly wave at each other.

All four teenagers leave the Stuffer Shack together, eating, drinking, and having a great time. “Stuffer Shack. We always have what you need!”

The studio returned with Simone’s solemn face centered in the frame. The studio lights highlighted her healing wounds for a moment before she spoke. “Harah “Odder” Vonvara lost her life in the line of duty, rescuing DocWagon VIP client Portex. We send our heartfelt condolences from myself and the entire team at *Stories with Hart* to her family and loved ones.” Simone paused a moment before she continued. “I had been knocked unconscious and injured by the grenade that had just gone off nearby, but what happened next was not lost to the armed Hughes WK-2 Stallion that arrived to provide cover fire and to extract the client if needed.”

The scene returns, now an aerial view of the fight. The footage is completely silent. Smoke and fire obscures some of the landscape, and the video of the fighting is from afar, speaking of the distance between the Stallion and the Gaeatronics campus. Tiny figures run around the screen. The enemy adept is gunned down by the Gaeatronics security man as the enemy troll runs forward and shoots Odder in the back. The arcane barrier falls as Odder goes to one knee.

The camera image shifts as the tiny figures grow larger and Simone bolts out of the Citymaster toward Odder, who has turned around and is holding her chest. As Simone fires her first shot, the troll fires his second, and Odder rocks backwards, then collapses. Simone fires her second shot as she passes Takeshi, who has thrown Portex over his shoulder. The troll collapses into a lifeless heap.

The Stallion closes in on the firefight, the draft from its rotors blows the smoke away. Simone drags Odder off the field, with Hey Jude covering her. An explosion lights up the night, and the three women go down. The Stallion fires at the enemy, who fall or flee. Hey Jude climbs shakily back to her feet and runs at Odder and Simone. Scooping them up, one under each arm, she runs back and dives into the Citymaster.

The gull-wing door closes and the DocWagon ambulance takes off, with Gunther’s damaged Killer Bee drone following.

The scene shifts to Simone looking up at the ceiling of the ambulance and Hey Jude, who's administering to her. The video stream is clearly from HAL, her ocular implant. Simone looks around and sees Takeshi's back. He's working on the client, whose face is blurred, but the red hair is readily identifiable.

"You're one of the stupidest people I've ever met." Hey Jude's harsh words clash with her care as she wipes gore from Simone's neck. "What the hell made you get out of the ambulance? In the middle of a firefight no less? Don't you have any brains?"

"Odder?" Simone's voice is soft, weak.

Hey Jude shakes her head. "Dead. Even before you got to her." She pauses, looking down at Simone. "But you got the bastard that murdered her. Thank you for that."

"Why?" Simone looks at Takeshi's back before looking back up at Hey Jude.

"Why what? Why did Takeshi save the client over her? He was doing his damn job. Why did she use everything she had to save Portex? Why didn't she save even one fraggin' spirit to heal herself if she got hurt? Because she loves him. Loved him. They meant everything to each other once upon a time. And that's not the kind of bond you forget." Hey Jude rubs her face, her eyes shining wetly. "He was hurt real bad."

Simone tries to sit up, but Hey Jude's large hands gently push her back down. "None of that. You stay put. If you gotta talk, talk to me."

"Or me." SIMaeon fireball appears, floating above her.

Gunther's voice comes over the comms. "Or me."

Simone looks at Takeshi's back. Hey Jude shakes her head. "Not him. Not now. He's got to focus on the client. And his grief. He and Odder were close."

"Did she join Doc Wagon because of him?"

"No." SIMaeon bobs above her. "Me. I asked her to look into doing something here. To get out of her more dangerous job."

Simone looks between SIMaeon and Hey Jude. "*More* dangerous? What is more dangerous than this? She wasn't Knight Errant, was she?"

For a long moment no one speaks. Then Takeshi's voice, hard and raw with emotion, is heard. "Tell her. You might as well tell her. And tell her about Reel2Real."

Simone looks at his back. He doesn't turn around. It is clear that, despite their hushed voices, he's heard everything they've said.

"Shadowrunner," Hey Jude says. "She and Portex were shadowrunners a long time ago."

SIMaeon bobs back and forth. "I knew them, too. They were young and needed the nuyen. They both wanted to make it on their own, away from their nice, neat, safe lives."

Hey Jude shrugs. "Teenagers are ten meters high, immortal, and bulletproof. At least, that's how they ran the shadows."

"I resemble that remark." SIMaeon's voice is so cheerful it's brittle.

"Young and stupid, but talented. They got out and went their separate ways. Obviously. Both are ..."

Hey Jude pauses, struggling for the right words. "They became good citizens." She pauses again. "They tried to make up for their past. He went into business and she into medicine."

"And it was less dangerous." SIMaeon adds. "But the shadows have a long memory."

"Reel2Real?" Simone's gaze moves between Hey Jude and SIMaeon.

It is Gunther who answers. "Yes. Reel2Real. He was the troll you killed. He's—he was a rigger who ran with them. Never forgave them for leaving the shadows and leaving him behind. For a rigger, he liked the killing a little too much. Wanted to do wetwork, assassinations instead of smash-and-grabs. Neither

Odder nor Portex were into the violence or the killing. They never wanted to hurt anyone.”

“She saw him?”

“No. I did. I warned everyone on the private comms.”

Simone looks at Hey Jude, who shrugs. “Your show doesn’t need to know all our secrets.”

“I guess not.”

Gunther continues. “I saw him when I went after that second drone. I knew if we didn’t get the client to safety, Reel2Real was going to kill him. And he did what he thought would make sure that happened—he geeked the mage with all the healing spells first.”

“But no one counted on a crazy-ass reporter coming outta nowhere and shooting like a marksman.”

Hey Jude smiles at Simone. “Crazy, but brave.”

Simone looks between SIMaeon and Hey Jude. “Wait. You think Reel2Real took on this job to take out Portex?”

“I know so,” SIMaeon says.

“Why?”

“He loved Odder, too.”

“Do you think he knew Odder would be in the HTR DocWagon team that would be called to rescue him?”

“I think he counted on it. Why else was all the hacking and such going on? Why else make sure Knight Errant was distracted and the other two HTR teams were busy? He wanted her to see Portex die. And maybe to know that he did it.”

Gunther’s voice comes over the Citymaster’s speakers, cutting off the conversation. “Overlake in thirty seconds.”

Hey Jude steps away from her and sits down. Simone can see Portex, still unmoving. Takeshi is watching him. She shifts and looks around the Citymaster until she sees and recognizes a full body bag. The scene grows hazy with Simone’s renewed tears before it fades to black.

The scene returned to the studio, where Simone blinked shimmering eyes at the camera. “The next few hours were taken up by hospital procedures that gave me a lot of time to think. By the time I was released, DocWagon 19 was unavailable, as they were in a postmortem session with their shift lead, Benjamin Novakowski, as required by the corporation. I was told I would be allowed to perform follow-up interviews after a full investigation into everything that happened that night.”

Simone’s expression turned hard. “I thought that was an excellent idea. *Stories with Hart* isn’t just about finding the interesting story. It’s about finding the *truth* of the interesting story. Based on everything I knew, I decided to do my own investigation into that night with DocWagon 19. Starting with the very first rescue we did together.”

Still images of the Chrome Holly rescue popped up and floated around Simone. An image of glamorous young woman moved forward, smiling as she blew a kiss to the camera. “Chrome Holly. Dilettante and trid reality star. She was poisoned while in a private meeting with Brian Gates the Third. Mr. Gates spoke to us after that evening about what he believed happened.”

An image of the troll who attempted to stop Hey Jude replaced the image of Chrome Holly. “Mr. Trent, one of the security men, took the food order from the casino girl who brought it. While they spoke, Mr. Trent admitted that the lovely lady, named Corsica, flirted with him, getting close. Later, when Mr. Gates investigated, he found that Mr. Trent had had a small AR jammer in his pocket. As for Corsica ...” Simone shook her head. “She doesn’t work for the Gates Casino. It’s clear she planted the jammer and delivered the drugged drink. Who is Corsica? It’s just the first of many linked mysteries from that evening

leading up to a plot that left a valued DocWagon medic dead.”

Simone raised her chin. “Also, while reviewing the recording of DocWagon 19 traversing the Gates Casino, two faces stood out.” Two images—one troll, one human—appeared next to Simone. “We saw both of these people later in the evening. The unidentified human was at Powerline, near the steps.” The image of the human morphed into a video capture of him standing off to the side, coat collar pulled up, but clearly the same person.

“We saw both of them again at the Bellevue Pour House.” The image changed into several security footage stills. All of them showed the same unidentified people involved in the brawl between the Pour House patrons and the Hellhounds. “According to sources there, it was these two men, going by the obviously fake names of ‘Bob’ and ‘Steve,’ who started the brawl with the Hellhounds. Not the Hellhounds going after the bar patrons. Of course, once the fight started, it became a free-for-all.”

The next image, an overhead shot of the Gaeatronics corporate campus, filled the screen, and then zoomed in on the building with the enemy on the rooftop. Two of the three people are highlighted. “Here we have ‘Bob’ and ‘Steve’ again. It was as SIMaeon said: DocWagon 19 was specifically targeted. Both of them died on the rooftop after DocWagon 19 retrieved their VIP client.”

The scene focused on a close up image of the third person on the rooftop, a human. “The last member of the assassination squad, a SINless man identified as Tristan Aesir, is in Knight Errant’s custody. He will be brought to trial, and made to pay for his crimes.”

Simone’s unsmiling face nodded to the camera. “Though, at this time, Mr. Aesir doesn’t appear to have been involved in the crimes committed at the Gates Casino, the Powerline, or the Bellevue Pour House Tavern. Studio 15 and *Stories with Hart* have given law enforcement officials copies of all the video captured that night to aid in their ongoing investigation.”

Simone’s face suddenly lit up in a smile. “We’re left with a number of mysteries with no answers. But fear not. On this special edition of *Stories with Hart*, we have a very special guest here in the studio to answer all our questions. When we return, Corsica, the ‘casino girl’ from Gates Casino, is here live with some startling revelations about who hired her, what Reel2Real’s involvement was, and who was behind the whole plot to kidnap or assassinate Portex to begin with. But first, a word from our sponsors.”

Soothing Japanese music plays as pale green ork hands delicately clip and bind the branches of an exquisite bonsai tree. The scene watches the expert hands, so rough and brutal-looking, administer gentle pruning for a few more moments.

The camera pulls back as a Japanese woman appears, walking among rows of carefully tended bonsai trees of all sizes—tiny to large. “Are you looking for that perfect gift for someone special in your life? Or perhaps, a present for your new in-laws? Or a thank you gift for your boss? Verdant Blue Bonsai is the answer.”

The screen shifts back to the close up on a small bonsai tree with the pale green ork hands gently bending and binding tree branches as the Japanese woman’s voice is heard in voiceover. “Grown and tended in the Seattle metropolitan area, Verdant Blue Bonsai trees are a treat unto themselves. Bred for a blue-green color only found in the Pacific Northwest, a Verdant Blue Bonsai tree tells that special someone that you care to give them only the very best.”

The screen fades into a scene of three completed bonsai trees in specific shapes: a “V,” a “W,” and a heart. The Japanese woman walks back on screen. “We can even grow and shape the Verdant Blue Bonsai trees into custom shapes, though there are limits. Inquire at the time of ordering, and we’ll create the custom bonsai you desire.

“And for the next week, if you mention Odder during your purchase, you’ll receive a small memorial token for the DocWagon employee who recently lost her life in the line of duty.” The woman smiles at the camera. “You can never go wrong with a Verdant Blue Bonsai tree.”

When *Stories with Hart* returns, Studio 15 is set up with two overstuffed chairs sitting at a sixty-degree angle from each other around a round table. Two logo'd mugs rest on the table. Simone sits in the right hand chair while the left-hand chair remains in darkness, though it's clear someone is sitting across from the newscaster.

Looking splendid in her cobalt dress suit, Simone smoothes her skirt, crosses her ankles, and smiles at the camera. "Welcome back to the live studio interview portion of our special edition of *Stories with Hart*. If you've been following tonight's show, you know that High-Threat Response Team DocWagon 19 suffered the crushing blow of losing a dedicated member of their team at the hands of criminal Reel2Real, a shadowrunner. Throughout the show, we discussed the fact that DocWagon 19 had specifically been under siege by persons unknown. Four members of the enemy shadowrunner team are dead. The fifth is in Knight Errant's custody."

Shaking her head, Simone continues, "However, the one person still unaccounted for is the mastermind behind the attacks on DocWagon 19 and the attempted kidnapping and assassination of Portex." She nods to the darkened chair opposite her. "Now we'll have the answers you've been waiting for. With me, to answer your questions, is Corsica, the woman involved in the Chrome Holly poisoning."

As the second chair and the woman in it become visible, Simone adds, "Corsica has agreed to speak with us tonight after agreeing to assist Knight Errant with their investigation. Good evening, Corsica."

Corsica is a stunning latina woman in her twenties. She is impeccably dressed in a hip-hugging orange dress that complements her dusky skin. She gives Simone a weak, nervous smile. "Uh, good evening."

"Welcome to *Stories with Hart*. We appreciate you being here to answer our questions. Todari, my producer, has sent me a number of questions from our live viewers. I'll ask them until we run out of time." Corsica, wide-eyed, nods. Simone launches right into it. "Our first question is, how did you get mixed up with the shadowrunners in the first place?"

Corsica bites her lip. "I, uh ... well ..."

Simone leans over and touches the other woman's arm, soothing her. "Take your time. You're safe here."

Corsica nods as she fidgets, crossing and uncrossing her arms. She focuses on Simone, trying not to look at the camera. "I needed the money. I answered a modeling ad." She blushes. "It was a generic, 'beautiful woman wanted for special, private job' thing. I assumed someone wanted ... naked pictures. But it wasn't that at all."

"What was it?" Simone smiles, encouraging her guest.

"I was told it was a practical joke on Mr. Trent." Corsica shrugs and smiles, then bites her lip. "I was hired to pretend I was a casino girl, and to slip the toy into his pocket. He was supposed to find it later. Then it was to activate and, you know, show me uh, dancing naked for him, singing 'Happy Birthday.' I recorded it earlier."

Simone nods, looking serious. "So you didn't know it was an AR jammer?"

"Oh, no." Corsica shakes her head. "I'm not good with technology."

"It's all right. The person who hired you, they clearly took advantage of you, your naiveté, and your beauty." Simone takes a breath and smiles. "Now we get to the crux of the matter. Our viewers want to know who hired you. It wasn't Reel2Real, was it?"

"The troll?" She shook her head. "No. All the trolls did was watch. I thought they were the ones giving the gift. The person who seemed to be in charge was—"

Before Corsica can finish her sentence, the side door slams open loud enough for everyone to hear. Simone leaps to her feet. Behind her, someone with a headset hurries towards the noise. Simone shakes her head, stamping a foot. "You can't be in here! We are live on the air! Security!"

Then Simone steps back, looking frightened as she bumps into the chair she was just sitting in. “Oh, God! Security!”

Three masked figures in black run in front of the camera, shooting everyone they see in the studio, starting with what appears to be the camera man and a key grip. Corisca screams and tries to hide behind her chair as Simone continues yelling for security. As a security man comes running into the studio, he is shot.

Then the center man shoots Corsica in the head. The pretty latina woman crumples to the floor as Simone pulls her pistol from her inner jacket pocket. As she draws, the center man shoots her twice—once in the chest, once in the head.

Instead of falling over, Simone starts to laugh. She smiles, even as blood drips down her face. “Gotcha.”

From the left side of the screen, Hyperion, Medea’s partner, barrels into one of the masked men, taking him down with the sound of breaking furniture and bone. From the right side of the screen, Hey Jude tackles another one of the masked men, knocking him right through the image of Simone. The reporter’s image blurs and disappears as Takeshi flies into the screen from behind the camera, kicking the masked would-be assassin in the back of the head. As he doubles over in pain, Takeshi hits him with a flurry of blows that knocks him to the ground.

Hyperion and Hey Jude have their men captive and unmasked, revealing two Japanese men. Simone walks in from the back of the studio, looking fit and fine, if a little out of breath. She waves to the camera. “It’s all right, everyone. I’m fine. Corsica is fine. I’ll explain everything in just a moment.”

Two Knight Errant officers burst into the studio with their weapons drawn, followed by several official-looking men in suits. Simone smiles at them. “We have this under control. Before you take these men away ...” Simone walks over to the masked man still on the floor. She leans over and pulls his mask off, revealing a third Japanese man. “This is the mastermind behind the assault on DocWagon 19.” She stands and tilts her head in a listening pose. “His name is ... Botan Sato. He is an employee of the Marketing Information and Forecasting Department for Shiawase Atomics, a direct rival to Gaeatronics.”

While she speaks, two more Knight Errant Officers arrive, and all three intruders are taken away. Simone walks to the other part of the studio where her usual desk is and takes her place behind it. Studio interns and other personnel scurry through the frame to clean up and replace the broken furniture. In the background, the security man who had just been shot is clearly seen. He even gives a shy smile and waves to the camera.

“First, I must apologize to Knight Errant for not letting them in on the ruse of this very special edition of *Stories with Hart*,” Simone begins. “Knight Errant officers work very hard, and I didn’t want to alarm them unnecessarily. Nor did I want to plan a trap that didn’t go off. And, as you all saw, we were quite ready for most anything.” Simone’s smile grows as she glances over to the other part of the studio before returning her attention to the camera.

“Corsica is in the studio with us, and is under the protection of Knight Errant. However, the woman you saw—” an image of the beautiful latina woman appears next to Simone, “—was not Corsica. She is actress Mercedes Malone and looks nothing like Corsica. Corsica’s image is being protected for the time being. I interviewed Corsica earlier this evening. We had Mercedes deliver the answers Corsica supplied. The rest of that interview is currently reserved for the Seattle Metroplex DA office. After the trial, I will run the interview exclusively on the *Stories with Hart* website.”

Simone rises from behind her desk and walks back over to the sitting area of the studio. There is a now couch along with two larger chairs behind it across from Simone’s chair. The table is nowhere to be seen. Seated on the couch are Medea, Takeshi, and Gunther. Behind them in the appropriately sized chairs are Hyperion and Hey Jude. “At this point you might be wondering what actually happened here tonight.”

Simone takes her seat and nods to the camera. “DocWagon 19 and DocWagon 17 are here to tell us

all exactly that.” She turns to her guests. “Good evening.” There’s a smattering of greetings all around before Simone smiles. “Well, where should we start?”

Takeshi glances around and, by silent consensus, speaks for them. “First, we are all now DocWagon 19. After a careful review of everything that happened, personnel records, and such, Mr. Novakowski determined that Medea and Hyperion were well suited to be part of our team. We’re pleased to have them aboard.” Medea and Hyperion nod as Takeshi speaks.

“Congratulations. That’s wonderful to hear. And we already know you will all make an excellent team.”

“On and off duty.” Takeshi gestures to his casual clothing. “We are here off duty. DocWagon isn’t responsible for any of this, ah, ruse.”

Simone beams. “Of course not, but I’m glad you were here. So, let’s explain what we did.”

“In short? We couldn’t let what happened that night go. Odder had been killed, and we decided to get the man behind the plot.” Takeshi glances at the camera. “SIMaeon continued to dig. He felt he had to, for Miyuzaki.”

An AR image of SIMaeon’s teenager persona appears briefly on the screen. Grinning like a madman, he waves, and then disappears in a small burst of flame. By the lack of reaction from Simone and the DocWagon 19 team, they didn’t know he was there.

“He found traces of the attacking hacker that led back to the Shiawase Seattle office. He didn’t know who had done what, but he told me about it.”

“One thing led to another,” Gunther adds. “My drone had gotten a serial number off one of the enemy drones, and I did my own research to find out who made it, who sold it, and who it was sold to.”

Simone looks solemn, professional. “And it also linked back to the Shiawase Seattle office?”

Gunther nods. “Yep.”

“It was about then that you contacted me.” Takeshi gestures to Simone. “About finding Corsica, and that she was scared.”

Simone turns to the camera. “Finding Corsica was the keystone to breaking open the mystery. Mr. Sato treated her as nothing more than a pretty face. She, on the other hand, had seen and heard enough to realize who he worked for, and that she might not be safe once the story of what had happened at the Gates Casino made the news.”

“It was Medea who came up with the plan to grab Mr. Sato.” Takeshi nods at her as she takes over the story.

“One of my many arcane talents is illusion. I’m very good. The interview you witnessed was an advanced form of illusion.” Medea’s smile is cool and professional. “The rest we left up to Hyperion, SIMaeon, and Hey Jude.”

Hey Jude clears her throat. “I talked to Gaeatronics. Portex is consulting with them on something big, but they won’t say what. Just that they appreciated DocWagon’s rescue of him and limiting the collateral damage to the campus. Apparently, the assassination squad killed three security personnel and injured eight other Gaeatronics employees.”

“Then there was the rumor mill.” Simone gestures to her seated guests. “Three days ago, Hyperion, Hey Jude, SIMaeon, and Gunther started letting people know that Corsica was around and willing to talk to Knight Errant. We knew the rumor would reach the ears of the people we wanted to hear it. Fifteen minutes before this show began, I sent one of my interns out for a soykaf and to brag about Corsica being in the studio with us, and that she was going to reveal something amazing.”

Takeshi shrugs, “And if our ruse didn’t work, then we would have just spent an evening watching the live broadcast.”

“Not a bad deal.” Simone preens for the camera and then laughs. “Also, we would have continued the interview with Corsica for—” Simone pauses as one of the producers walks out and whispers in her ear.

She nods. “Just upload it for me.”

Takeshi, Medea, and the rest exchange glances as Simone turns back to the camera, assuming a more formal demeanor. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’ve just received this message from the Shiawase Seattle office. And I quote, *‘Botan Sato was fired from his job in the Marketing Information and Forecasting Department for Shiawase Atomics as of four days ago for insubordination, unwarranted use of Shiawase Atomics resources without permission, and for unacceptable behavior. Shiawase Atomics was not involved in, nor does it condone, Mr. Sato’s attacks on DocWagon 19, Gaeatronics, Chrome Holly, the Bellevue Pour House Tavern, or Studio 15 and Miss Hart. Shiawase Atomics sends its sincerest regards to Miss Vonvara’s family for her tragic and untimely death.’* End quote.”

Hey Jude mutters, barely heard, “And I got a bridge to sell you ...”

Gunther opens his mouth, but snaps it closed as Takeshi’s clears his throat.

Simone smiles the insincere smile of a woman making a choice she’d prefer to avoid and nods to her guests. “Studio 15 and *Stories with Hart* appreciates Shiawase Atomics’s quick response to the actions of their former employee. Thank you to Shiawase Atomics for their candor and information about the state of Mr. Sato.”

Simone turns to Takeshi again. “Where were we? Oh, yes. I would’ve continued the interview with Corsica revealing ...” She stops and tilts her head in a listening pose. A frown creases her beautiful face as she shakes her head at the camera. She listens a moment longer as the DocWagon 19 members glance at each other.

Finally, Simone sighs and gazes at the camera. “I’m sorry. At this time, my legal department is advising me not to say anything more about Corsica, as it might jeopardize the legal case against Botan Sato as well as possibly—” Her eye twitches in annoyance as she pauses for a moment, then begins again. “—as well as cause Shiawase Atomics to take legal action against Studio 15. Again, I’m sorry, everyone. My hands are being tied.”

She turns to her guests. “I’m sorry. I don’t know if we can continue at all.”

“Thank you for having us on your show. We appreciate it. But perhaps this is a good time to end the interview.” Takeshi’s suggestion is laced with the slightest edge of a command.

Simone nods knowingly. “An excellent idea. Thank you, everyone, for following up with me and helping me solve the mystery of who attacked DocWagon 19, the enigmatic Portex, and why. Good evening.”

Only Takeshi answers, “Good evening, Miss Hart.” Then the guests are doused in darkness, and the camera moves in for a close up on Simone’s face.

“I hope you’ve enjoyed this special edition of *Stories with Hart*. It’s not every day that I become part of the story, and this isn’t the first time that I’ve followed up on a story because the truth required it, but this is the first time that I’ve used this show to capture a criminal. I want to thank the off-duty DocWagon employees who helped make this possible: Takeshi, Hey Jude, Gunther, SIMaeon, Medea, and Hyperion.”

Simone smiles. “And that’s all we have for this episode. Join me again next week for another edition of *Stories with Hart*. Thank you and good night.”

As the Simone’s face fades from sight, text scrolls up the screen.

SIMaeon IS AWESOME!

WARDROBE FOR SIMONE HART PROVIDED BY THE AMINA COLLECTION – STYLE AND SAFETY COMBINED.

SIMaeon IS THE BEST!

IN MEMORY OF HARAH “ODDER” VONVARA.

The screen splits into two. On one half, the show’s credits continue to roll. On the other half, a commercial for the next Stories with Hart episode begins.

Simone, wearing a couture version of a safari outfit, walks through Seattle’s Woodland Zoo. It’s a wondrous place of flora and fauna, but she doesn’t stop to look at the lemurs or lions or birds of prey as she walks past them. Instead, she stops at a gate with a sign that reads “CRYPTOZOOLOGY EXHIBIT” and looks at it, then looks at the camera. “Next time on Stories with Hart, Woodland Zoo’s special cryptozoological exhibit—educational entertainment for the whole family, or a massacre waiting to happen? You decide.”

Simone smiles at the camera, then turns and walks through the cryptozoology exhibit gates as a roar is heard in the distance.

THE END

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