

Cyberdawn: Beginnings

PREFACE

The world is a safer place.

Large wars a thing of the past. Convenience technology everywhere; from monorails to a computer in every home. The streets themselves disarmed with the widespread elimination of guns. Bio-tech on the uprise, the industry at the border of a new age of genetic manipulation. Technology and philosophy now holding more sway than ancient superstitions and ritualistic services. The world itself on the verge of a global unity, separate nations soon to be a thing of the past.

The world is perfect...

INTRODUCTION

You think your world is perfect? How little you know. Something can be perfect for two entirely different things. A fine line between peace and complacency, between social maturity and defenselessness.

But don't mind me, I'll just stay here and get drunk; not for the first time. It's become my habit of downing a long stiff one just before another world comes to an end. Needless to say, my liver's probably turning some pretty funny colors by now.

But you just hold onto your perfect world, your growing peace and prosperity. You'll probably never even realize when it was that you became a subjugate race. You'll just wake up one day like I did, and by then it'll be too late.

By all that used to be holy, *far* too late.

PROLOGUE

A man dressed in priestly robes; light brown hair and medium in all respects. A silver cross hanging upon a wall behind him, around him a small library of books, many quite old. Even some scrolls of ancient appearance, photos of even older artifacts ranging from clay tablets to rune-inscribed monoliths. All of it around this priest as he quickly scribbles notes into a book bound in leather.

"If I have this translation right then that means this other passage..."

A line drawn through the book's neatly typed text, with an arrow pointing over to the note he now writes in the margin. Then looking once again over at one of the other old volumes, sparing a glance at a photo that's been zoomed in on a section of writing on the monolith picture.

"Those characters don't even match up to the same original root language as the rest of what's on it, but if my own translation is correct then this section everyone's been having trouble with..."

Another glance at the photo just to be certain then some more scribbling into his book; corrections of what lies within the leather-bound covers.

More reference, more scribbles inside narrow margins, footnotes to amend or correct what has long been held as canon. Work that takes him through the deep night, and yet only a single lamp to light his room, but more amazing is what one obvious research tool is not at his disposal. In a world where such is considered as much a common necessity as a knife or a fork, the absence of anything resembling a computer can be as mysterious as some of the tomes surrounding him.

Another turn of a clump of pages to insert his corrections in a new section, then time to reread what he has written.

"But that practically changes the entire meaning of this passage!

Revelations goes from being prediction to a record of what has *already* passed before, and the rest of this... A warning. Not a prophecy on how the future will turn out but instructions on how to *avoid* it. And for thousands of years we've not been listening."

The priest grabs up one of the older scrolls, desperately perusing through its ancient script.

"But how could such an error creep in? Surely the original translators were able to— Unless the translators were— Yes, here it is; the original translation matrix used and— These characters were added to; changed. Even so long ago, something was going on. It's one matter for such things to really exist, but for them to almost... work in concert..."

He sits back in his chair, dropping the scroll carefully to one side as he pauses in his work to consider what he is discovering.

"Oh, even the Arch Bishop's never going to believe all this."

With a sigh he closes the leather-bound book he has been writing in, its front cover face-up as he holds it in his lap between two trembling hands. The book is the Bible.

BOOK I:

Backstories

CHAPTER ONE:

Black Jack

Night dark and chill; the cold heart of shadows comes nigh.

"Father Malakai, this is a dangerous neighborhood to be walking around alone in."

The priest, a man not quite thirty years in age, average and trim of body, light brown hair going down almost past his ears in careless straight swaths, his black priest robes and white collar nearly all the protection he had for a late night walk. That, and the bible clutched protectively to his side.

"I am not alone, Robert," the priest calls back to the approaching other, "my faith and God protect me. Besides, have you not heard? The streets are perfectly safe now that guns are under complete control."

"You really believe one leads to the other? And it's Black Jack; you and my mother are the only ones that call me Robert."

The other now with the priest, a man a bit older than him, a man a bit over six feet, well-built and strong, a darkly-tanned man with suggestions of his mixed white-black parentage. Dark eyes, thick black hair, his chin caught in some phantom zone between half-shaven and mostly-shaven, his powerful build hidden beneath an unkempt appearance and a sloppy disarray of clothing. Street clothes though he wore, but pinned haphazardly to his chest a badge. The type of man who would spare few smiles for anyone, except perhaps this priest alongside whom he now walks.

He gives a small bulge at his right hip a loving pat and emits a grin that most people might consider more threatening than friendly.

"With one of *these* most any neighborhood is safe. I don't care what they say about the current state of world peace, there are still some

places that aren't too safe, places where a priest like yourself shouldn't be walking around alone in."

"Perhaps you are right... Black Jack. So, do they still have you looking out for the greater good, or have they transferred you to something more exciting yet?"

"If you mean do they still have me enforcing these lousy gun-control laws, the answer is unfortunately yes. Half my life alternating between the military and pulling body-guard duty for loose change and I'm actually stuck rounding up people who rightly believe the only safe person's an *armed* one."

"It could be worse," a fleeting grin from Father Malakai, "the criminals could be armed as well."

Black Jack gives a brief snort then replies, "You don't need a gun to be armed, just one to make sure the armed criminals stay away from you. But enough of my gripes, Father; where are you headed that couldn't wait until morning?"

Late night in a street that could be in any big city but just happens to be in Los Angeles. Shadowy old brick buildings interspersed with far newer structures of glass-like steel, amber street lights that hover ghost-like about their tall support posts, distant billboards with colorful advertisements that leap out a few yards before their surface in full three-dimensional glory to loudly push a product or coming movie. Crowds of cars zipping along distant and nearby streets, a few lights arcing lazily about in the sky overhead, and the elevated tracks of the monorails that cut through the downtown. The ground still damp after a recent rain, a few stars out and single moon, and no one in this dimly-lit street but a priest and his cop friend.

"I just thought I'd go for a little stroll over to the Arch Bishop's. Nothing to be concerned about."

"Except that he's on the other side of town and I know you've got a car or at least a bus pass. So, what gives?"

The priest smiles lightly as he clutches his bible just a touch tighter, but not a smile that seems reassuring enough to Black Jack.

"Nothing of concern. I just... didn't feel like using the church's car; we can't afford the gas to run it as it is, and my bus pass expired. The church is poor now, or hadn't you heard?"

"I heard."

The doubt is clear enough to read on Black Jack's face even as he sees in his friend's eyes something he would hide.

"There's something more, Father. What is it?"

"You should learn diplomacy, Robert; anyone else might think you're threatening me with that tone. I just want to show the Arch Bishop a few things."

"Some more of that old-time religion again, Father? Maybe that's why attendance at your church is down; too much of that occult stuff of yours lying around."

"Or perhaps just too much occult..."

The priest let that odd statement linger for a moment, the silence cut short as the street-light they now pass beneath flickers off.

"Didn't think those things ever went off," Black Jack glances up. "Might call this one in; it'd *still* be the most excitement I've had all—Father?"

To Black Jack's well-trained eyes, Father Malakai seems more apprehensive, more than could be accounted for by just a simple blanking out of a street-light. His pace quickens, his bible clutched tighter.

"Hey, if you want a ride," Black Jack offers, "I got my car parked just around—"

"No cars," too-quick a reply, then a gentle smile by the priest and a lighter tone. "Perhaps it's all the old books I've been reading, but I'm starting to think that some of this technology we have just isn't as safe as we believe it to be. I'll walk, though I would appreciate the company."

"Anything for an old friend," the other grins, "then maybe you can tell me what's really on your mind."

"What? But Robert, I've no idea what—"

"I was barely out of high school when I joined the military and you were mid-way through elementary school, but I was *still* good at reading people. But I can wait."

They come to a corner, turning right on into a wider street, though this one deserted even of street bums. Black Jack's right hand slips casually to the bulge at his waist, eyes darting about, though he never misses a beat in his conversation with the good priest.

"Nothing, really. Just some of that *old-time religion* I want to show

the Arch Bishop. Nothing that will—”

Another street light goes out; the one under whose light they just now enter, but now followed in turn by each such light down this block. An expanding row of darkness spreading out in both directions from where they stand.

"That does it," Black Jack brushes aside his coat to reveal the police-issue gun he now pulls out from the holster, "too much coincidence. Someone's messing with us. Just stay close and don't go trying to tell me it's just some technical problem."

"Actually that's not at all what I had in mind," the priest replies, looking more apprehensive. "How many old plays do you read?"

"What?"

Black Jack's eyes darting around, gun at the ready and body tensed. Only half-listening as he tries to spy out what gang of punks is playing games with them.

"'There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' That quote just seems appropriate right now."

"You've been reading too many of those old books; it's just a gang of street-punks."

Black Jack raises up his gun clear for any to see while his free hand drops casually behind himself, then shouts out loudly for anyone nearby to hear.

"I'm with the Los Angeles Police, and as such one of the few in this country actually licensed to use this thing. And that's just what I'll do at the first sign of any trouble. So whoever you are, turn the lights back on and *run*."

No voices answer, but instead what sounds like a dog growling, then a wolf howling, then... something. An animalistic noise like unto a growl but not one Black Jack had ever heard. Its threatening tone, though, is unmistakable.

"Great. They got a whole zoo with them. Okay then—”

He's just aiming his gun out for the darkest clump of shadows when Father Malakai's hand comes gently to the barrel of his gun.

"That sort of weapon will not work here, Robert. No weapon even *you* possess will save us now. Nothing but the power of faith can stop

them, remember that."

"What are you—"

"I am afraid my researches have brought us both into a dangerous place. Much I wish I now had the time to tell you."

From the look on Black Jack's face, it's clear he's ready to think his friend has lost his mind. Then more displeasing sounds, and now a shape coming out of that very same shadowy clump that Black Jack had been leveling his gun at. Something on all fours like a dog, but bigger... much bigger. Peeling out from the darkness, four-legged form standing nearly shoulder-height to the priest. Black Jack immediately re-aims his gun but sees only a calm look from his friend before the priest walks boldly out, holding his bible close to his chest in one hand, and pulling out a small cross hanging around his neck with the other.

"Only faith, remember that."

"Father, come back here. That's some kind of escapee from the zoo. You've got to—"

Another growl, another shape from another shadow. Then one from behind Black Jack, a quick look to see one peeling out from the shadows of the other street they had just come out from. Finally a fourth illuminated by the flashing hologram of a billboard, lighting up the top of the four-story brick building that comprises the wall to their right; a dark shape like some huge canine growling down at them. Black Jack was still willing to believe it some pack of trained animals, sent after them by some unruly street gang seeking replacements for the deadly range of artillery they once had in their glory days.

Until the one on the roof spreads out a pair of very large wings.

"By the hand of the Creator, you vile scum of the Pits shall stay back," the priest began intoning, his pace slowing to a stop as he reaches the midway point between Black Jack and the first creature. "My faith alone shall cast you back!"

The first creature started prowling forward, but much to Black Jack's surprise, as Father Malakai holds up cross and bible, the creature stops. Low threatening growl as it takes pause. The second one was on a similar approach to the priest, and even the one behind Black Jack seemed more intent on the holy man than on anything else.

"This is just too much," Black Jack aims his gun to the one

approaching from behind, "someone's about to lose their trained genetic-freak pets."

One shot, catching it full in the side, then another aimed true to the head. The only response he gets is a tilt of the thing's head, a warning growl, then he is ignored as it continues its cautious approach to the priest.

"Body armor. That does it."

The free hand that had slipped behind his back now pulls out another gun while the right hand holsters his police-issue to replace it with a third gun he pulls out from behind his right side. Both pistols have one thing in common: excessive caliber.

"L.A.P.D.," he calls out, one gun aimed at the rear creature, the other at the first one, his arms spread apart as if to take them all in. "Call your pets off before you lose them."

The second creature from the shadows approaches the priest from his left, then quickly pauses as Father Malakai brings round his small cross.

"Robert, I suggest you save your ammo and get away. These are sent by no street gang, nor anything you've ever encountered."

"As long as they bleed, I'll do fine. Okay, they had the warning."

A report from the extremely-illegal-even-for-police gun in his left hand that sounds like a small crack of thunder, and a similar one from his right hand. Two shots each, in each case their intended targets being caught full in the front. The one before the priest rears back from the impact, shaking its head more in anger than pain, while the second one at a lot closer range rolls back onto the ground but still clawing and very much alive.

"What in the name of—"

Two more shots from Black Jack before the large creature moves no more, while the other beast quickly recovers itself.

"*One* shot should have put a foot-wide hole clear through it. What manner of creature—"

Loud unearthly screams down from above, unholy call to shake even this brave officer to his spine and nearly down to his knees. From the rooftop it heralds its leap, wings spread and straight down for one brave priest. Two remaining others as well, three faces of death yet only but one can a good priest try and fend off.

"Father, *no!*"

Two more quick shots for the flying one, but it moves more like a streak of darkness than physical being. The one weakened by Black Jack's shots comes face-to-muzzle with the small cross, a howl as it burns a deep engraving into its forehead while the determined young priest shouts out.

"Faith, remember that! Faith in—"

One large cave of teeth chomping off the hand with the offending cross, steam billowing out of its mouth at the contact before it can spit it out with more a cry of pain than when Black Jack's shots had made contact. In the same moment the one to the priest's side plowing into him while the one from above dives straight onto him, a claw right across Father Malakai's face as teeth clamp in tight about the top of his head.

The priest's screams of pain are only drowned out by Black Jack's screams of anguish and the multiple reports from his pistols. The cry coming from Black Jack's mouth over the violent loss of his friend is almost as unintelligible as those coming from the three creatures as they proceed to quickly shred the priest. A defining moment in blood.

Atop one of them Black Jack leaps, catching one arm about its neck to pull it back while with his other he jams the barrel of one gun straight into its mouth.

"You killed my friend!"

He pulls off a shot straight into its mouth that blows out the bottom of its throat from the inside, releasing a wash of discolored blood as it drops gurgling to the ground.

"I don't take *kindly* to that sort of thing!"

The other two rear up from this event, facing now the one who had killed two of their number. This close Black Jack can now make out more of their appearance, and sees them now as like nothing he has known of before. Heads like some jungle cat's but face and body covered in scales from which a light covering of dark fur grows. Large leathery wings folded back and claws curling out from their paws that hold more in common with long steak knives than with anything born from Nature. Their breath, when they growl, is like sewage, their sharp cries enough to come close to piercing his eardrums.

"What in Hell *are* these things?!"

Back and off the dead one he leaps, another quick shot at the nearest of the two before both guns click empty. So both weapons he

throws at them as one readies to leap, his left hand reaching back over his neck while the right fist shoots out.

Straight in the face his punch catches it, enough to drop it to the ground momentarily while at the same time Black Jack shakes his hand in pain.

"These things must be made of *brick!*"

His left hand has now pulled out yet another pistol from somewhere behind his neck and now fires at the second one. Straight in one eye he catches it, but even that only seems to stun it, but at least enough time to take quick stock of the situation.

Father Malakai's body was literally in pieces, a mess of torn limbs, chewed body parts, and strewn entrails around a pool of red. The remains of the cross are now a twisted blob of silver, and the only intact thing is—amazingly— the bible, which had been tossed to one side and the creatures now seemed to take some effort in stepping around.

"He was clutching that thing awfully tight..."

Over to the book he runs, picking it up without pause save to aim his left hand back to fire off another round, then as fast as his feet can move for the end of the street and the beginning of where the street lights still work.

The noise hit him like a wall. In all the sudden events, he hadn't noticed the utter silence from the outside world, how nothing of normal street sounds had penetrated into the small street once the lights had gone out. Not traffic, nor shouting signs with their audio components for foot-traffic, nothing. He had only heard the growl of his two pursuers and now—everything at once.

In fact, now he could hear nothing of the creatures; their growls had stopped as abruptly as the noise of the city had resumed. A quick and very puzzled glance back but instead of some darkened street he saw the lights as normal and nothing of shredded priest or vicious beasts.

"I've seen bad movies that begin like this."

Back into the threshold of the small street he ducks his head and sure enough, now it's a dark bloody street once more, devoid of outside noise but very much filled with the growl of the pair of creatures even now leaping through the air straight for him. Two quick shots at the closest one then back out into the city again and a dash around a corner.

Nothing came out, at least not that he saw. Just himself holding a smoking pistol and passersby giving strange looks at him and his pistol, then a glance at his badge and it all seems right.

"Some sort of fancy projected hologram to cover things up, which means this was a hit. Father Malakai and his curiosity really got him into something this time. So much for the world being a peaceful paradise. I'll really miss him."

Nothing of strange creatures came out into the open, nothing odd around except himself holding a brand of gun that went several calibers beyond police-issue. Deciding it safe enough for now, he puts his gun away into its hidden holster, then with bible firmly in hand, starts a brisk walk down the street. Down past the busy rows of lit signage popping out into the air and trying to engage him to test some product or step into one store or another, through the crowds of people just finishing with their late-night fun and feeling quite safe about the trip home, and down towards a police car parked at the end of the block.

"It'll be fun calling *this* one in. What could he have been looking into that got him into so much trouble? It's not like anyone bothers with churches and priests anymore, and all he ever did was look through those occult books of his. And what sort of designer creatures *were* those things..."

He passes by one store giving away pocket phones, another place that appeared to be a juice bar with several stations set up for 'Net access as people sipped away, a place where anyone could get their free home-computers from the local Phone Company, though closed now, and finally a small church. Not a church of any of the old expected faiths, this one is of one of the newly risen ones. 'The Church Of The Internet, with quite a busy clientele for so late an hour.

One city block pretty much like any other, complete with the monorail passing by overhead.

To his patrol car, the door unlocking at the touch of his fingertips, then a seat inside and a pause to take in the sad fate of his long-time friend before steeling himself and activating the com-rig with the sound of his voice.

"Officer Hannigan calling in."

Flicker of light and the image of a uniformed young lady staring

back at him from where it hovers off to the right side of his dashboard.

"Got you on secure line, Black Jack. What do ya' got?"

"A body."

"You're kidding." For just a moment the young woman registers surprise then quickly regains her professional composure. "Traffic accident?"

Small attempt at humor; as computerized as cars are, traffic accidents are nearly unheard of nowadays.

"I think it was a hit. I'm feeding in the location now," fingers typing away at the keyboard along the right side of his seat, "it was... Father Malakai."

"No!" More obvious shock now which the lady officer didn't bother to hide. "But who would ever want— He didn't have any enemies—"

"I know. I think he was looking into something that got him into a lot of trouble, so I'm going to head for his church for a look around. Tell whoever gets to the crime scene to be careful; someone's set some very vicious designer pups loose. Took four shots with my... standard-issue at point-blank to bring one down."

Her look of shock deepened some more. It was unofficial common knowledge amongst certain members of his station that Black Jack used a bit more than what he called "those whimpy suck-issue" guns the rest had.

"Sending out two patrols now. A third will meet you at the church. Black Jack, I— We'll all miss him; I hope you find who's behind it."

"Me too. Black Jack, out."

He clicks off his comm-link, the image flickering out, then leans back for a last quiet thought to process just what had happened.

"And here's hoping that it *is* a who."

The location of Father Malakai's church had long ago been programmed into Black Jack's patrol car, so he just sat back and let it do the driving. A run-down section that used to be home to upper-end houses surrounding a magnificent church that bordered on a pocket-cathedral, complete with stained-glass windows and a bell in its single tall tower. Now run down by too many years of neglect and lack of funds, the paint peeled off to an old grey, the tower covered in dirt and grime, the stained windows

long lost of their colorful grandeur and looking more blacked-out than anything else.

Beside it the Rectory, where Father Malakai stayed. Once home to several priests, but with the recent disgrace and unpopularity that all the old faiths had fallen into, the good priest had it all to himself. All the place needed was a tumble weed or two rolling on by.

He parked in front of the Rectory, got out, and went around to his car's trunk, thumbing open the lock. Inside a standard-issue shot-gun and a tire jack... at least until Black Jack tore aside the mat they both lay on top of.

"Not taking any chances with those things out there," Black Jack reaches in and draws out a particularly large rifle and cocks it once, "I knew there was a good reason I was against gun control."

A small box of extra shells loaded into a pocket, then some reloads for his pistols before closing the trunk shut and starting down the weed-lined path to the Rectory door.

"Probably found some wannabe drug-lord and tried to convert him or something," he mutters to himself. "It'd be just like Malakai. The only priest in town hanging onto what's left of the Church and— Why'd it have to be him?"

He stops at the door and looks for a moment at the knob.

"Big surprise here," he snorts.

Just a light shove of the door with his foot and it opens. Slightly ajar and unlocked.

"Okay in there," he calls in, "I see anything but empty hands reaching for the roof I start shooting off appendages."

A first step in then with his foot slams the door the rest of the way open. When it didn't smack off of some unexpected visitor behind it he entered in. A foyer made for the priest to greet any visitors, give comfort and advice to those in need, then a hall down to where the rooms for the priests would be.

"Nothing out of place so far..."

A careful walk down, eyes alert. Nothing stealthy about his step but not something you'd want coming your way. Rifle ready in both hands as he comes to the first door and kicks it open. A room where once one of the priests used to stay, now ready as a guest room. He moves on. Two

more rooms like that before he comes to something different.

The wall adjoining it to a neighboring room had been knocked out to make room for the small museum of old books that line the place, some stacked nearly to the ceiling, with a small old desk at the center of this library, and a single large cross hanging up on one wall. But what was once a disarray of intellectual pursuit is now a mess of shredded books, ancient tomes torn apart, shelves tossed carelessly to the floor, and a pile of photos dissolving in what seems to be a small pool of some acid.

"Not all that surprised," Black Jack sighs. "This place was really worked over."

Stepping carefully over through the debris to one old wooden bookshelf now lying in pieces on the floor.

"Looks like someone took an axe to the place..."

Then picking up one of the books, its entire two inches of thickness cleaved neatly in two. He fingers the sharp edge of the cut.

"No axe did this. It's either a claw off one of those creatures I saw or a one-foot razor blade."

A noise, something settling, but enough to send Black Jack spinning around and aiming his rifle. It *looks* like just another pile of the toppled books and shelving, but Black Jack is not one to make anything but the most negative of assumptions.

He fired.

Confetti explodes up from where he fired his rifle at, wood shavings from the shelving flying out like shrapnel as a very large hole appears in the middle of the waist-high pile. More importantly though, the pile cries out as a narrow fountain of green liquid shoots out from the hole.

The pile of books shimmers, the upper mass of them changing now in appearance. Not just books and furniture all strewn into the same pile, but another one of the creatures that had killed Father Malakai, standing atop a smaller pile of torn books and beneath a toppled bookshelf leaning against an opposite wall. The green liquid was coming out from its side.

Another shot thunders out, this one for the head to send the creature flying backwards, nearly slamming into the desk, cracking it beneath itself.

"So far we have designer cats with portable holo-projectors. I am

not liking where this is going."

A third shot just to make sure then he races out of the room but briefly pauses. The one thing that hadn't been disturbed was the hanging cross. On instinct and not a belief in religion, he grabs the large cross then heads out and down the hallway. More growling, coming now from on ahead of him yet nothing in the darkness to be seen; Black Jack fires anyway, aiming for the noise.

A cry and an empty section of wall bleeds green then shimmers, another beast now there to block his way. Gravely wounded but alive, it leaps.

Black Jack uses his rifle as a short staff to fend it off with, the creature's saliva dripping out a large glob to splash onto the floor where it starts to eat a hole in the rug. Gnashing teeth too close, no time to pull out anything nor room to use his rifle. It quickly has him on the floor before Black Jack remembers something.

What he saw happen between Father Malakai and the first creature because of his small cross.

Holding the rifle up with his left hand, he comes up with his right and the foot-long cross.

"In the name of— Oh heck!"

Black Jack boldly presented the symbol of holiness in his own way; by beating the creature over the head with it. Repeatedly. Each whack got a howl of pain from the creature and left a burning mark across its head.

"By authority—" thump, "of the Los Angeles police—" thump, "I arrest you," thump. "You have the right to—"

Growl!

"Have it *your* way then!"

One last thump on its nose, then as it opens its fanged mouth wide, Black Jack shoves the whole cross straight in, jamming it quickly in as far as he can reach. The reaction was a bit more than Black Jack had expected. The creature howled in pain as it reared back up off Black Jack, the cross now wedged firmly in the back of its mouth. More than just like choking on a bone, hot steam started coming out of the creature's mouth from where flesh made contact with metal, the silver beginning to get a slight molten look to it. Then more screaming as the cross sinks its way deeper into the creature, as if melting its way through. A slash of claws as the beast

flails around then the last thing Black Jack might ever expect.

The creature's head explodes, a headless body dropping to the ground at Black Jack's feet. Nothing then to break the silence for long moments but the sizzling of the stump, covered in part now with a new layer of shiny molten metal. For a short time Black Jack does nothing but just stare, then carefully straightens and stands up.

"Hmm, must not like silver."

He prods it once with the toe of his shoe just to make sure, then steps over it and heads for the rear door.

"I was never much on religion, but I think I just got some. Better make sure this place is cleared out before calling this in. Then I want to know what in blazes is going on here."

The door led out to the side of the church and a small garden separating Rectory and church. Across this to the entrance for the priests, his rifle now ready to be his speaking voice at the first sign of trouble. The quiet and still night had taken on new meaning for him now, a surer sign of trouble than the rowdiest of gangs. Into the church, the changing area empty, only one spot ever used now, even where the altar boys used to put on their own robes now empty. Through here then out into the main assembly room, before him the altar itself.

The church—like most churches of old religions nowadays—is in as much disrepair as the outside would suggest. Father Malakai had only bothered to keep the first couple rows of pews clean, for those were the only ones that ever got filled and then only rarely. The cloth covering the altar is worn and torn in many places, the grime on the tall stained windows so thick it probably looks night in here even during the day. No one comes here anymore, they much preferred the newer religions of technology and philosophy.

The entire church was empty save for one thing. A man covered in a long trench coat, standing at the other side of the altar and apparently urinating into its side. The gleam of a smile came out from the shadows around him as he completes his task, then looks slowly up at the barrel of Black Jack's rifle aiming at him from across the room.

"Can you think of a quicker way of desecrating a holy sanctuary?" the man's voice grating and low. "Well, my job here's done."

"Just don't move or I blow off your head. Those cats with the

leather hides; they yours?"

"I use them for little errands. Aren't they just the cutest—?"

Blam!

At this range Black Jack knew he couldn't miss, that all that should be left of this guy is a stump where his chest used to be. Yet nothing more than a slight breeze disturbed this man's coat as the shot impossibly deflects away, shattering the head off a statue of a saintly-looking young woman.

"Now what'd you go and do that for?" the man complained, brushing once at his coat. "I just had this thing dry-cleaned."

The rifle cocked and another shot rang out. This time the shot ended up deflecting straight into the figure of the man hanging from the large cross behind the altar.

"Well, if what I did didn't properly desecrate this place *that* sure did. Thanks for the assist."

"You've got some pretty tough body-armor on," Black Jack levelly remarked. "I can compensate for that. I'm aiming right for your face now, so start talking. Who are you and why'd you have my friend Father Malakai killed?"

"A friend of that priest? Hmm, been looking for a patsy for his death and all this. Well, thanks for volunteering."

The figure started walking around the altar, coming over to Black Jack's side.

"One warning before I shoot." He carefully aims his rifle straight for the shadowed face. "Stop moving, and start talking."

"And if I don't?"

Another step forward and Black Jack was true to his word. He fired, the shot going straight into the man's face and coming out the back side. The only problem was the shot didn't seem to actually contact the head on its passage through it. The figure just stepped out into the grimy light of the altar room.

"Now before you go babbling down onto the ground about demons and creatures of the night," the creature spoke, almost a kind amused tone as its pale face came into view, a face much like a twisted nightmare of leather and sharp points, "and while you still *have* your mind, let me just keep things straight by saying that I'm not one of those loathsome lower demons. I just summon them up."

"*What* are you?!"

"*Now* you've got the right question," the figure stops right before a wide-eyed Black Jack, his chest pressing right up against the barrel of the rifle, "but you've only yourself to blame, you know. Most people would have seen my little pets and run away screaming in disbelief, thought the whole thing as some nightmare. Then when news of your friend's death came around you would have naturally assumed that it was just a standard mugging, that you'd blacked out, and several years of therapy would have made you agree. At least assuming you would have made it out at all, which is also something that shouldn't have happened. That's just the way it's all supposed to work, or at least has in the past."

"Answer my question!"

He pulled the trigger again, or at least tried. It seemed stuck, and Black Jack had the unnerving feeling that somehow the one before him was responsible.

"Yeah, I know," the man shrugged a grin, "shouldn't happen, almost like magic. I never tire of seeing that expression. Good thing you didn't make it in here until *after* I was finished desecrating this place. Now it's about as much a safe haven as that street your friend died on."

A primal cry escapes Black Jack's lips as now instead of firing his rifle he uses it like a club and brings the fat end of it slamming up into the guy's face. Force enough to crack the wooden end off on contact, and force enough to send the figure sprawling, but not for any real harm. Quickly Black Jack leaps down to take advantage of the moment, but even quicker did the man roll around to his feet, then leap straight up. Thirty feet up into the rafters to land atop a large wooden beam. Black Jack ended up contacting the ground then rolling swiftly over to see where his opponent had landed.

"But that's..."

"Impossible, I know," the figure called down. "Now let me show you how easily I handle you... *Sleep!*"

Black Jack blacked out.

The heat woke him up, that and the crackle of fire. Still in the altar room where he had lain before but now a growing roar of fire all around him. As quickly as he could he regained his senses, glancing first around

for his rifle and seeing it blazing atop the altar. The grime was burning off the stained windows, the worn cloth already ash, the pews snapping and sparking in the spreading conflagration. No where any sign of that strange man, just fire all around.

He cursed to himself and shot up to his feet. The ceiling was already starting to crack in places, small sections dropping down into the flaming rows of pews. But despite all the confusion of recent events, his baser instincts kicked in. He ran away from the altar, leaped over the railing, then sprinted down the center aisle through the pews. Burning walls to either side, reaching the far end just as the choir balcony above was looking ready to give way, then out the front door and within sight of his patrol car.

As it turned out the church wasn't the only thing on fire. The Rectory was farther along, the remains of the roof caving in to what was once the interior. The quiet run-down neighborhood was lit up with tall flames, the silence broken by the distant sounds of fire-engine sirens as he reached his car and thumbed it open.

The first thing he saw was the com-rig, the second Father Malakai's bible that he had left on the seat. The bible he grabbed up and stuffed inside his shirt as he called out his presence.

"Officer Hannigan with an emergency here. I'm at Father Malakai's church and the whole place is on fire. Some weird looking freak was here going through his stuff. I don't know how he knocked me out but he got away and left me quite a mess. Description follows, but you aren't going to believe much about it..."

He'd left out the part about the man taking a point-blank shot to the face and living; the whole pointy leather face seemed enough for his superiors to swallow. The burning church was soon surrounded by fire engines and their teams hard at work to put out the blaze, as well as five other patrol cars sectioning the area off, and one plain-clothes man with an official air about him talking to Black Jack.

"We found the street where your priest friend was killed. Not much left of him."

"Whatever those things were, they had pretty long claws," Black Jack was relating. "They piled on him, cutting him up and disemboweling

him before I could do anything. Some sort of armored jungle cat would be my guess, because the shots it took to—”

"Yes," the man cut him off. "You said it took four shots just to bring one of them down?"

"There were three others besides that one. I figure someone's running an outlaw gene lab and getting some pretty deadly stuff from it."

"I see..."

Another officer came up to the plain-clothes, holding out the burned remains of Black Jack's rifle with a pair of tongs.

"We found this on the altar," the officer stated. "Looks like it matches the holes in the two bodies we found."

"Bodies? You mean those weird cats I found going through Father Malakai's stuff. I don't know who that guy is that sent them but I want to be on the team that hunts him down. If there's anything—”

The plain-clothes gave a nod to some other officers then broke in on Black Jack's statement.

"The only bodies we found were of a man and a woman in the Rectory, one with her head blown clean off. The cleaning staff from the looks of it."

"Man and— No, they were two more of those beasts. The one's head exploded after I shoved a cross into its mouth."

"A cross?"

"Must have been a reaction to the silver, but that guy I saw in there—”

"Her head was blown off with a shotgun," the officer with the gun put in with a sad look, "got some powder traces around the stump."

"And I've little doubt we'll be finding a match for one of your other unlicensed pistols as well," the plain-clothes told him. "Your priest wasn't torn apart, no sign of claw marks at all. He was killed, but by gun shots from a very large caliber pistol. *Four* shots to be precise, and fired at nearly point-blank range."

It was now that Black Jack noticed that the other officers coming up to either side of him had handcuffs ready and guns aimed.

"I'm guessing this fire is because your mind snapped after killing your long-time friend, though the shrinks will have to find out why you killed *him*."

"But I— No! We were attacked by those creatures; took all I had to get away from them!"

"And no one saw or heard a thing?"

"Some sort of holo-projection I guess, I don't know. Listen, that guy I spoke with was even weirder than his pets. I fired my rifle full into him and—"

Arms grabbed him from either side, one officer's voice speaking quietly into his ear.

"Black Jack, don't make this difficult. Maybe it was some muggers you were shooting at and missed; that's why you snapped. Just come along, we don't want to hurt you."

"I *didn't* do it! It was those creatures. That guy in the overcoat set me up!"

"With yours as the only fingerprints around Father Malakai's body?" the plain-clothes said. "You were bound to get out of control sometime, Black Jack, I'm just sorry such a good man as Father Malakai had to be the victim when you did. Officer Robert Hannigan, you are hereby stripped of your badge and relieved of duty pending a proper investigation. Department equipment will no longer respond to your fingerprints or retina pattern. Take him away."

Several sets of hands grabbed onto him in anticipation of his sudden lunge at the superior, the large man a match for the four that tried to hold him back.

"It's a *set-up*, why aren't you believing me?! I know what I saw and what happened. Hook me up to a lie detector if you want, but I'm telling the truth. You *know* I'm not one for fantasies."

"Don't worry," one uniform holding onto him said, "we'll get you the good cell all to yourself, then all chip in for a lawyer or shrink or whatever else is needed."

"I don't need a *thing*," he pushed the one officer away, only to have two more take his place, "but for you guys to believe me! Now let me—"

In the end it took six officers to secure him with cuffs around hands and ankles before tossing him into the caged rear seat of a patrol car. The fire was nearly out by then, but nothing left to prove anything but his guilt, nothing left to speak of why someone might go to this length to cover up whatever Father Malakai had stumbled onto. He was still struggling in

the back seat as they drove away, headed for a downtown station he knew quite well, but now from the other side of the fence. Two officers in front, one of them driving.

"Wasn't there a pool around at one time as to how long it'd be until Black Jack snapped?" the passenger-side officer quipped with a quick grin.

"That's in poor taste," the driver said, "that office pool was just meant as a joke."

"Hey, just trying to lighten the mood. I mean poor Father Malakai was about the only priest left in the neighborhood and here Black Jack goes and—"

"I *didn't* do it," Black Jack said between clenched teeth, "and at least wait until my back is turned before talking about me."

"Sorry, Black Jack," the driver calls back, "the kid here's new. Hey listen, if you did it or not, there's a lot of us that'll stick by you. It's just that you're about the only one that has the kind of artillery that punched those holes in poor Malakai as well as the two burn victims back at the church. Not looking good."

"The Father was always curious, especially when it came to the occult," Black Jack mused. "I think that's the connection."

"Oh now we *know* he's lost it," the passenger-side officer remarks. "The occult? It's no wonder the old Church is in the gutter. He should have given it up and joined a *real* religion like the Church of Sigmund Freud."

"That'll be *enough*," the driver-side officer snaps. "No more talking by anyone until we reach the station."

Through the middle of town now, the lights and animated signage ever present but the cars and foot-traffic all but absent at this post-midnight hour. A blinking light brings them to a stop at an intersection, pause enough for Black Jack to have a quick look around as he tries to think of what he can do.

A small cluster of hookers shied away from their corners at sight of the police car, leaving only one figure waiting to cross the street. A kid younger than Father Malakai, golden-blond hair sticking out from beneath a hat, and definitely shorter than the deceased priest. Sort of like that old song, five-foot-two and eyes of blue, for when the young man turned around, Black Jack could see that his eyes were indeed blue. A sharp blue

that flashed briefly as he caught Black Jack's eye.

The thing was, the rear windows of a patrol car are darkened so no one can see who might be in the back seat, and yet despite that this young man was looking straight at him from the street corner outside. No mistake about it. A glance that held while the car waits for the light to change.

The couple of seconds their gazes lock seems far longer and from that Black Jack could not pull himself. A brief emanation of good feeling from this one, then a soft double click and he snapped out of it. A discreet glance down showed the cuffs around both ankles and hands had fallen open.

The light turned green and the car started up.

"I'm sorry guys," Black Jack apologized.

"Don't worry," the driver said, "if you say you were framed, then we all believe you."

"Not about that..."

Through the rear view mirror the officer driving could see the look on Black Jack's face, a look that spoke of farewells and regrets. Just an instant and Black Jack acted nearly as the other officer realized what was about to happen. Black Jack was operating on instinct now, an instinct widened in perception by his recent encounters. The cuffs had fallen away—and somehow he knew that stranger at the corner responsible—and while the inside back of a police car has no handles for criminals to use, instinct told him to try. He gave a shove at the door and tumbled out just as the car had begun picking up speed.

He hit the pavement, rolling up to his feet while the official screams of his companions called out from the open door. Quick glance around; hookers trying to make themselves scarce, but no sign of the young man whose gaze he had met. No time now, the police car was pulling to a stop, and he just knew the eager young officer in the passenger's seat was grabbing up his gun. Black Jack sprinted.

Down the street into a alley between two tall buildings, somewhere behind him the scream of tires as a patrol car chases back, pausing only once to let out the one officer that would come up from behind while the other continues in the car on around to the other side. He knew the tactic, had used it often himself.

He stopped before a closed garage door, saw the electronic lock to

one side then just smashed it in with his foot before giving a heave at the door itself. Some sort of company garage, several cars parked and waiting for some executive or other to use them. He went for the nearest one, a sporty looking job, and pulled at the handle. Naturally it didn't open, though a voice sounded out.

"You have activated the Theft Avoidance System. Your fingerprints have just been electronically relayed to the police and your location noted. Please remain still and do not engage in any more illegal activity while a patrol car is on its way."

"Too late for that."

He clenched one fist into the other, reared back an elbow, then smashed the elbow straight into the window. It shattered away, enough for him to open the door from the inside and soon have him hot-wiring the ignition.

"Warning! Continued unauthorized abuse of this vehicle will only result in making this worse when—"

Rip!

"Always hated those things." The car started as he tossed the torn wires aside, then climbed up into the driver's seat, slamming the door closed behind him. "Now to lose them before I have half the force and all of the local news crews after me."

"Hannigan, halt!"

The younger officer standing right in the middle of the garage opening, pistol held in both hands.

"Some kids just don't know when to leave well enough alone," he muttered, then loudly, "Out of my way!"

"Step slowly out of the car, Black Jack. We don't want to—"

Screech!

Black Jack floored the car in reverse, heading it straight for the opening and where the officer just happened to be standing. The young man had just a moment to realize that Black Jack wasn't about to stop and leaped out of the way. The car missed the officer by inches as it screamed out, turning deftly around into the alley to face the rear towards the direction the patrol car was presently coming from with spinning lights, then gunned on ahead out for the other end of the alley and on into what little late-night traffic there is. The patrol car paused long enough for the younger officer to leap on inside, then shot off after the rogue officer.

Down one long strip of pavement, around a stalled car, and over to the wrong side of the road. Quick swerving around another car coming straight at him, then a sharp right turn onto another road decorated by drunks clustering around a row of four late-night bars. The patrol car was quick to catch up, but only to see Black Jack press his stolen vehicle into a sharp left into a small alley that ends at a ramp too narrow for any car. The ramp led up to a closed warehouse door, its outer side five full feet above the ground and the remaining couple feet of space beside it. Nonetheless, Black Jack races the car at full speed up the ramp, taking it on his two left wheels before launching off from the top with a sharp turn to careen over a low three-foot wall into an empty parking lot beyond.

The patrol car was stuck in the small alley, trying to back up from the ramp while their quarry speeds on away.

"I need a plan before they start surrounding me," he said to himself as he raced the car back out onto a street again. "A place to go and find out about what's—"

He felt the weight inside his shirt then reached a hand up to feel. The bible was still there, the bible held so tightly by Father Malakai as he was on his way across town.

"Arch Bishop O'Malley it is. But first I've got to—"

Suddenly the car lost all power; the lights went off, the engine stopped, and the whole thing just started gliding down to a stop. He slammed a frustrated hand into the steering wheel.

"Damn! Didn't think they'd get the vehicle code so quickly. That's what I get for stealing a company car."

He was out of the disabled car before it glided to a full stop, already the sound of siren-bearing reinforcements waking up the night. Across a dark street he would now run, up to the back of an older building then along it until it broke away into an alley barely a couple of feet wide to squeeze his large frame on through. But he didn't come out the other side to where he knew other uniforms would be waiting. Instead he took advantage of the narrow confines and, bracing his feet into one wall and his shoulders against the opposite, proceeded to climb his way up between the buildings while distant official-sounding shouts urge him to come out and give himself up.

Fifteen feet above the ground he came level with a window then

carefully crawled his way along between the opposing walls until he had come over to it. First his fist slammed out then both hands reaching as the rest of his body dropped.

He pulled himself in through the broken window. An upper floor of some sort of warehouse, though no time or inclination to see what any of the boxes or storage containers were about. He just ran out of the room, found some stairs, and was soon making his way as far down as they would take him.

He came out in an underground parking lot and loading dock, one large truck secured there though its trailer currently detached.

"Well, this is starting to look familiar..."

"Repeat, come out with your hands up. We know you're in the alley, Black Jack, and there's no way out."

The officer at the megaphone paused for breath and a tired look at the uniform next to him.

"I don't know; if anyone can find a way out of there... As many times as he's been reprimanded for excessive violence, I think we really should—"

"One more warning," the other uniform told him, "then we go in and—"

The wide garage door up from the basement level of the building to their right exploded outwards as the truck part of the semi came roaring out. A sharp right turn over an inconveniently-parked patrol car, then the truck starts speeding away, and not an officer there was about to stand in its way. A couple shots pinged off the side of the truck to no effect, save Black Jack's voice calling out through the window as he drives away.

"See? If you'd had *decent* firearms you'd have *got* me by now!"

All the one officer could do was stop and stare while the one with the megaphone elbowed him in the ribs.

"See? What'd I tell you?"

They found the semi abandoned in, of all places, the flood-control channel that ran through the southern section of the city. Driven right through the barricade and down the embankment, now three officers on foot looking it over while one calls in on his portable radio.

"Drove it straight down into the wash and abandoned it... Yes, we're looking now but I don't think we'll find much. There's at least three sewer tunnels that drain out into this section, ones big enough for even Black Jack to walk upright in. Even if we figure out which one, they branch out in so many places that— Yes sir, all-points right away."

He clicks his radio off then turns to the other two officers.

"Looks like he got away clean. They're going to put out an all-points for him."

"Poor Black Jack," one of them shakes his head, "what do you think made him snap like that?"

"I don't know," the third officer sighed. "I just don't want to be the one that finds him. A crazy Black Jack is a *deadly* Black Jack... At least more so than usual..."

Somewhere in the sewer tunnels one Robert "Black Jack" Hannigan was crawling through the darkness, sloshing through the stinky muck, until after a couple miles of tunnels he comes out into an open pocket, one sealed off with a metal door to which he just happened to have the key. Inside a small section of sewer had been dried out enough to make for a small room with a closed hatch in the ceiling above— about the only such round metal cover with a latch and secret lock installed.

"I'll assume they're going all through my place right now, but I doubt they'll be looking around *under* it. At least not for a while."

The circular makeshift room had one single function; to be an armory. A rack of illegal weapons, some spare bullet-proof vests, and some other odds and ends he had gleaned from both the police store room and his time in the military. Some of it obtained back when the department was tossing out things suddenly deemed too illegal or immoral for even uniformed officers to have, some of the rest from various times in his personal history. Closing and locking the door behind him, he walked across the cold stone floor to take an assessment of his stores.

"Good thing I kept the military-grade stuff," he fingers one of the vests, "from the looks of those creatures I'll be needing it. And one or two grenades— hmm, all I got left— some extra ammo, a couple more pistols, and some rations. Now, let's see..."

Over to the one table in the small room, there to take out and open the bible for its first examination. A normal enough looking Catholic bible,

save for an assortment of margin notes scattered through its pages.

"Looks like Malakai was questioning his faith; there's corrections all over this thing. Probably has to do with what he wanted to show the Arch Bishop."

A few more pages, more scribbles, then he just closed the book and placed it back inside his shirt, this time with a bullet-proof vest covering it as he proceeds to change.

"I'll have to let the expert look this one over. Now, at any time did I mention this bible to the others, or in front of pointy-face and his little zoo... No. Father Malakai? Nope, he just said he was going to the Arch Bishop's, never anything about the bible. Good. That means they know that he knew whatever it is he knew, but not about whatever's so important about this bible, and since he hadn't reached the Arch Bishop's yet then that should be safe. All I need's a disguise so my buddies don't recognize me then it's off for some help and a run across town."

He was reaching for a shirt to put over the vest when he thought back to what it took to kill those creatures and how they had torn apart the priest, then reached for a second vest to layer overtop the first one...

Morning saw a man walking the streets like any other. Just a bum, one of the homeless that refused to even *try* and get new lives. Yet out from the dirty folds of cloth the dark eyes of one Black Jack look as he passes through the morning crowds and into an open circle of small buildings, a pedestrian-only promenade. Amidst the shops open for breakfast and early-morning customers, upon one wall a large screen hangs suspended, its eight-foot diagonal stretch now lighting up with a view of a newsroom that leaps a few feet out into the air before it.

"This important bulletin just in. An all-points has just been broadcast over radio, video, 'Net, and all broadcast lines for one Robert Hannigan, alias Black Jack..."

The newsman's image is replaced by a particularly unflattering shot of Black Jack.

"...He is wanted for the brutal slaying of Father Malakai of the old Downtown Christian Church—" a new image, now of the father's saintly face smiling out, "as well as the burning of the Father's church and rectory, and the shotgun slaying of two parishioners that were in it at the time."

Another view, this one of a church and rectory nearly burned to the ground as two covered bodies are being hauled away on a litter. Gasps now arise from others nibbling at their donuts and sipping their juice.

"Hannigan was apprehended on the scene but quickly escaped in a chase that resulted in the deaths of two of his own fellow officers."

The new view now of the patrol car that had been chasing him up the ramp, but instead of it safely backing down as he had *seen* it, it goes careening up the ramp and straight into the side of the building, ending in a giant ball of fire.

"That's *not* what happened," Black Jack muttered to himself between angrily clenched teeth, "and where'd they get that footage anyway?!"

Back to an image of the newsman again, reading from his report.

"It is rumored, though as yet unconfirmed, that Officer Hannigan has been sited on several occasions for excessive violence and that not but an hour ago a search of his locker at police headquarters revealed a small cache of drugs stolen directly from the police lockup, or perhaps confiscated himself on any one of several raids."

"I haven't even been *assigned* to a drug unit in well over a year. This *really* stinks!"

"If you spot him you are to take no action against him, but report his presence to the police, or log it into the Security Net via your home or vehicle connection. He is to be considered excessively dangerous."

The report began looping, as it would a few more times for any one that had missed it in favor of their morning breakfast. Black Jack had seen enough, though, and started to make his way out of the promenade after first rummaging a trash can or two just to make it look good. He knew that if the report was up on that Board that it would be plastered all across the state before lunchtime. Getting to the Arch Bishop's place was not going to be easy, if ever it was.

"Black Jack, what have you gotten yourself into now?" he mutters quietly to himself. "Looks like I'll be needing a lot more disguises..."

CHAPTER TWO:

Anya Petrova

Most assassins might have their faces covered against being seen, or a black jumpsuit as they climb up the outside walls of the tall glass skyscraper. Few would ever walk in right through the front door and know they would get away with it. This is one of those few.

A jumpsuit, yes, but more of a stylish functionality than the black night-cloak of a ninja. Her face plain to see, ear-length reddish-brown hair tied back, and a beauty that one might label as knock-out looks, the kind most people believe belong with a far lower intellect. The flow of cloth tightly along her limbs might suggest a slender but muscular body-tone, or perhaps a confident gait masking a strong sense of paranoia.

And lastly, as she enters in through the decorative glass doors, the white color of her skin might also set her apart in a country known for a far more yellow tone, for this is Japan. Specifically Tokyo.

Behind her a tall city just lighting up for the approaching night; holo-signs blaring along roadsides as high-speed traffic darts along, monorail trains zipping through the heart of the city, roadside 'Net-cafes crowding up with people getting off from their day-jobs for a quick drink and bit of computer use. The change-over time between the daytime crowds and the nighttime ones.

The building a tall glass and steel apartment complex, the front door locked with an ID-scanner, beyond that a wide semi-circular reception desk where a uniformed man keeps vigil. No way for one who does not belong to get in.

But then someone else comes up to the locked doors, runs a card through the scanner, then swings the door wide in his brisk effort to get in

and home. The young lady waiting in the shadows is in the right position to jump quietly over and grab the door behind him before it shuts, then pauses a moment as the man hurries his way past the front desk. A matter of timing that would seem to stretch coincidence, for at that time the uniform behind the desk drops his snack onto the floor behind the desk and so bends down to retrieve it.

It is in that moment that she rushes in, quiet as night, to slip past the guard around the opposite side of his desk as the other before her has gone, then out of sight behind him as he comes back up and sees the one who had first entered. A smile and nod to the first as he greets the tenant, asking if he had a good day, an act which turns the guard away from the beautiful looking jumpsuit. The first has pressed the button for the elevator then turns around to acknowledge the guard with a brief smile, but only as a stairwell door to the rear of the room and other side of the reception desk just now eases closed.

A matter of timing that could never be this good if rehearsed.

On the other side of the door she pauses, but not for breath; one step more and she will come in sight of the camera at the top of this flight of stairs. Her eyelids drift shut as she takes focus, feels out, like a sense reaching. Then a touch, a flash, and her eyes spring open and she leaps up the stairs; two bounds to the top right before the camera, then over a railing and up the next flight, her actions to register quite clearly with the security cameras.

Somewhere in a security room, at that exact same moment, the two guards whose job it is to keep watch on these viewscreens, only for a moment turn away as a ping from the microwave oven tells them that their dinner is ready. Behind them an agile female figure is leaping up her third flight of stairs on three different monitors, but for the moments it takes them to walk across and quickly retrieve their steaming-hot meals, she has come up to the end of a fourth flight and ducked out through the door. An instant later one of the guards turns with his cup of noodles back to the viewscreens, just as empty as they were before.

Motion-sensors are a bit more difficult, but it was not just for need of speed that she was leaping up those steps. Instinct told her which steps to leap over and how far, an instinct that guided her in those few quick moments over sensor plates, around unseen beams of coherent light, and

up to the one door whose electrified knob was currently disconnected from the sensor grid and due to be fixed that coming morning.

Now before her a hallway of doors stretching on, one floor of apartments like any other in this building, but not yet the one she wants. Still a few to go. No one had seen her come up or her face, so she fluffs out her hair, straightens out her jumpsuit, and walks right down the hallway as if she belongs. Down and around a corner and eventually to before a set of two elevator doors to wait.

Her hand drifts over the button but instead of pressing it to signal the nearest passing lift, she just hovers her palm over it and again closes her eyes. A moment later the door on the left opens, revealing an empty car.

"Not that one," she whispers to herself, "the other one."

The first one closes just as the other one opens, this time a small room with one man already in it; an elevator car that would have normally passed her floor up since the one free lift had already responded, but not this time. Her palm drifts away from before the button as, with a charming smile, she enters on into the occupied elevator.

It's the man whose entry had allowed her into the building, currently trying to snap closed a briefcase without spilling out the overstuffed papers. The breeze of her entrance catches one of his papers and wings it up to a top corner of the small room, just happening to cover over the lens from the security camera hidden behind the lit translucent paneling.

"Oh, I am most being sorry," her voice with a trace of a Russian accent as the doors close behind her, a finger pressing one of the floor-buttons, "I did not mean to—"

A scowl turns into a tired smile at sight of her lovely features, a sigh from the man as she shakes his head in amused exasperation.

"Just the way my day's been going," his English only slightly accented with Japanese. "You're Russian?"

"Russian-American," she replies as she bends down to help him retrieve some of his fallen papers, "my family moved to the U.S. when I was a teen."

"And now you find yourself in Tokyo," he smiles, "you sure get around."

"I go where the money is," a shrug as she hands him his papers. "Oh, this is my floor."

The doors open again, the draft from this action dislodging the one paper from its covering view before the hidden camera lens but by that time all it can catch is the back of a reddish-brown head.

Another hallway to the end of which she walks, stopping before an apartment door like many others. At this point, most other assassins would have thick gloves on so as to not leave fingerprints when they pick the lock and open the door, but not this one. Her right hand hovers an inch around the knob but not touching it, while her other hand hangs free and does nothing for reaching for any lock-picking tools. A quick glance to either side to make sure she is alone, then she closes her eyes in concentration.

The inside of the lock she now sees, its gears and tumblers, then the pattern of their connecting. Focusing, reaching, imagining. First one tumbler then another, the lock picking itself.

Click.

She opens her eyes, a deep breath to draw as recovery, then feeling the one bead of sweat now crawling down her face from the effort. The door is unlocked, and now when she places both hands cupped before the knob, it slowly begins to drift ajar until it's to the point where she can quietly prod it wider with her foot.

Not once did her hands touch anything.

The room beyond is completely dark, so before entering in she now pulls something out from a side-pocket of her jumpsuit. A pair of goggles she folds out, ones with nighttime optics. Darkness springs into clarity, though in truth she probably didn't need them at all. She just prefers to play things safe.

From out of another pocket what might be a small palm-radio or miniature phone, were it not for the two electrodes sticking out, now primed and ready. That in her left hand, her right hand open and ready, then she carefully steps inside.

A small suite, before her the main room, opposite her a wide picture window overlooking the now-nighttime view of modern Tokyo. Colorful lights and displays, a city more awake at night than the day it would seem, a large passenger plane just coming in for a landing in the distance. She had no need to look around for her target, he was easy enough to spot. Just the one man sitting in a wooden chair before the large window, looking out onto the city with his back to the door and nothing

but a score of steps between his back and the assassin. She takes one silent step forward then hears him speak.

"Did they at least send a human?"

He spoke in Japanese, which despite anything to the contrary she might have led the one in the elevator to believe, she knew quite well. A quick glance around but no one else to see, and nothing her instinct could tell her. They were alone, so he must be talking to her. But she had been so careful, how could he know?

"If I must die, at least be it by Human hand," the man continues. "You can see I was expecting someone."

His hand raises up, in it a glass he brings to his lips, a sip before continuing.

"No doubt your professionalism prohibits your talking. I can respect that. They may have also told you to dispense with me without paying heed to my ramblings... I can see how they would want that. Can't have anyone listening to me, I just might say something they'd not want heard."

Okay, so he had expected this, but she still had her orders. A few steps closer, the door drifting closed behind her, then stopping beside a small end-table. There is a decanter and empty glass on it.

"For you, if you want. No, I'm not trying to trick you into drinking some poison— they'd just send someone else anyway. I just don't like to drink alone, and since this is my last drink on this Earth, I was hoping you wouldn't mind. Please?"

She had a strange feeling about this man; all she could get as she reached out was honest intentions and a fatalistic mood. No deceit about him, no ulterior motives. Just someone who doesn't want to die alone. But then something more, a flash through her mind. That same sense that guides her in ways no one could understand and fewer even knew about, told her that from this one's lips might come a hint of something important.

Very important.

She knew how and when to pay attention to that inner feeling of her's and so would do so now, despite her orders to the contrary. The man would hear the clink of the decanter against the glass as she lightly pours herself a drink.

"Thank-you," he replies with a nod to himself. "A toast then to

humanity. *Honest* humanity..."

She sips when she sees him do so as well, not a word but making sure she sets her empty glass down with a slight clink to signal her finish.

"Again, thank-you. Even a faceless drinking partner is welcome, especially in these deadly times. Oh, you may not think them any more deadly than other times in History, but they are, I can assure you. I've seen the evidence."

The weapon in her left hand is ready, but after another silent step or two she takes pause, still unsure as to why.

"You've been told I am a corporate spy, someone who's infiltrated the mighty Sony Corp to steal information for a rival foreign company, and so must die. You'll be expecting me to say I'm innocent, that I'm as loyal to Sony Corp as you are, and that is just what I will say. Probably more loyal, in fact. They set me up after I saw what I saw. I pressed my little investigation then tried to get what I knew to the powers at the top of the corporate ladder. Mister Myoko might have listened to me had I been able to get to him, but I see that was never meant to be. From what I could find out, they've infiltrated every other company around, both here and outside Japan, not to mention the government and for all I know every other government around. Sort of makes you wonder about the growing movement towards a world unity..."

Another sip from his glass, another step forward by the assassin.

"Don't think me crazy for suggesting such a plan of so massive a conspiracy, think me mad for who— or *what*— is behind it. I saw the pictures of some rather disturbing evidence currently being held in California. Seems as some of the older more fanciful legends are true."

Another sip, a couple more steps, and she's only a few short feet away, yet still he does not turn to look around at his killer-to-be.

"If you were one of them you'd have rent me limb from limb by now, I suppose. Good. At least you're Human. A woman too, to judge from your delicate step and willingness to listen... Well, you can see why they had to set me up, made it look like I'm a corporate spy so as to prompt the executives at Sony Corp to give the order to kill me themselves. They can be quite tricky, very subtle in their manipulations, I know that now. Learn from my mistakes."

A last sip, an empty glass to be set down, and he can now feel the

presence of his assassin standing right behind him.

"If what I think is accurate, it will all come down in the States, and no doubt quite soon or they'd have just let me babble on in public to be branded a lunatic. No doubt like so many others before me. Who are *they*, you now ask? It's best you find that part out on your own or you'll never believe it. Just be ready to believe in the fantastic, in things born of nightmares and shadows. Remember all that I have said, and may you accomplish more than I could have; please don't let my last breaths have been wasted."

His hands coming down to rest to either side now, a slight tremble of his shoulders as he readies himself, then a faint nod.

"Well, let's get this over with. Only with my death will one such as you be free to carry on. And I apologize ahead of time for what I have now drawn you into, but someone must know."

No more words from him, just looking straight ahead out at the panoramic city-view. She brings up her left hand and presses the two cold electrodes against the back of his neck, directly to either side of the vertebrae at the base of his skull. A slight pause, as for the first time she had some sympathy for this life she was about to take, then she thumbs the button on the back.

In essence the weapon is a taser, though of exceptionally high yield. An electrical snap, flash that starts from behind his head and comes out in a bright sparkle through his eyes, then nothing but a black char mark at the base of his skull and his head drooping forward. A good assassin would then check for a pulse with gloved hands, but this one knew already, could sense the life when it left him. He was dead.

His words were strange and hard to forget, but she had other business now to attend to. First a quick search of his body then the room. No papers, no corporate secrets to be sold on an open market, no evidence of anything. He had checked into this room with nearly nothing in the way of luggage. Then a quick check of the room's computer terminal. He had logged onto the 'Net for some quick banking. The log was still intact and confirmed that there had been no big payments into his account such as would be the case for a corporate spy. What he had done was to transfer his entire life savings over to other accounts... Dispersing his wealth amongst his family, from the looks of it.

There only remained one thing to clean up and that was the glass she herself had used. She wiped that clean then put it down next to the one he had used. The only thing now remaining is the body.

Some might toss it out the window and make it look like he'd jumped or fallen; a sloppy prospect considering the burn mark at the base of his skull. Another might think to make it look like some accident, but what accident would explain a fried nervous system and burned-out skull? In the end she just left him, propping his head up so his dead eyes could stare out to the view he'd wanted to be his last.

Then she left; goggles back in her pocket, prodding the door open with her foot, then letting it drift closed behind her. Someone would find it, know it to be a murder, and an investigation would ensue. But cover-ups are not her job; there are others available that are far better at it. She just walked down the hallway, paused at the elevator, and waited.

A crowd of giggling young men and women in the car, half drunk from some party they'd just come out from. They barely noticed her enter, and didn't notice at all when the elevator opened up in the lobby and she went staggering and giggling along with them past the guard and right out the door.

No one had seen the assassin yet many had and not known it; the killing would remain a mystery. It's what made her skills so much in demand.

Her way home was round about. A quick change of clothes in her car then dinner, a nightclub, fending off the usual advances to her beauty, then back to her own corporate-sponsored apartment complex where a quick smile greeted the guard at her own reception desk. A guard better armed and more alert than the one from where she had made her hit.

But throughout all this she couldn't help but think over what the man had said. Her professional training told her to pay no heed to anything the victim might say, but her instincts wouldn't let her forget a word, and she trusts those instincts most of all. Conspiracies? Things not Human? Some sort of evidence in California? And then a feeling that something very horrible was nearing, something with far-ranging consequences.

She paused before her apartment door, but not in thought. The door still locked and secured, even her own precautions still in place, and

yet... she knew. She again palmed the taser, her entire body slipping into a battle stance that to the untrained eye seemed little different from her more casual bearing. A twist of the lock, sliding the door slightly ajar, brief pause, then action.

She gave the door a hard jerk forward and back, slamming into someone's nose on the other side, then slamming it open again to violently interrupt the other's recovery. In with a kick to land one figure on the ground, her left hand whipping around as twin taser darts shoot out from their moorings to hit a second victim in either eyes— the sizzling pop nearly as loud as the short scream— then a spinning kick around as her thumb hits the retraction button on her taser. The leads quickly snap the darts back in as her foot gets a pained cry from her next dark victim.

She has not her night-goggles on, can see little more than vague shapes, yet every strike hits something she should not know to be there. Kicks, short jabs, then one hand reaching out to tear off a mask as the other comes up with a palmed can of pepper-spray right for his eyes. Two down, two wounded, and they have yet to lay a hand on her. She then stops, whipping around to face a slightly taller shape in the darkness, the lights from the city coming through the curtained window to lightly backlight who she now faces.

"You were told not to speak with him, not to listen to anything he said. You disobeyed."

"How would *you* know what went on. I was alone. And where's your corporate ID? If there's any complaints I take them only from my boss."

"We have ways of knowing things, Anya Petrova, that would surprise you. And I never said I was with Sony Corp. I suppose that would make me one of the few people in this country *not* under their employ then. Why'd you listen to him?"

"I followed my instructions. If you aren't with Sony then it's none of your business anyway. Now out of my apartment before I toss you and your friends off my balcony."

"As long as you were listening, you should have paid closer attention." A few paces forward, darkness still clinging to his face. "There are powers even Tetsui Myoko must respect, if even he knew about them."

Her mind flashed back to what the man had said, about others

infiltrating and manipulating. It was starting to sound like he was right, that his contract had been manipulated into happening from someone outside of Sony Corp.

"We'll see what he says when I drag your body before his feet," she replies. "Mister Myoko doesn't like people manipulating him or his company."

"I'm sure he wouldn't, but then you'll never tell him. You know, you were such a good operative, one we would have approached in time, I'm sure. But we didn't want it to happen this way, it was to be on our own terms, our own setting. Pity. It's been impossible to get anyone directly inside Sony Corp so far, you would have been our first. And such a well-placed one at that. Corporate assassin hired directly by the all-mighty Tetsui Myoko himself. Just a real pity. I guess we'll just have to stay with manipulating them from the outside."

On instinct she whirls around, her foot catching the one behind her across the chin, while turning aside to grab up a small table-lamp to send hurtling to another figure. Then a quick spin around and leap for the figure who had been speaking.

He was gone.

"Just me and the goons, I guess," then in a louder voice she calls out, "Lights!"

Nothing happened.

"Didn't expect him to leave that hooked up, but it was worth a try."

Before her she could make out four dark shapes, the shadows clinging to them like silk, in fact moving with them despite any efforts of the outside illumination to the contrary. They were spreading out, trying to surround her and get their range as she backs up a step.

"You guys seem to like darkness a bit too much."

One hand quickly reaches back and jerks the curtains all the way open, enough to light up the room from the brightly-lit holo-signs across the way that she knew would come in useful one day. The room lit up enough to dispel the shadows and show the four figures before her.

Shadows still clung tightly to their skins, an unnatural more personal darkness that hid their features. The one she had gotten in the eyes with her tasers was to her far left, amazingly still standing and even more amazing the gore that his eyeballs had become seemed to be sliding

back *up* his face and into his dark sockets. The other one by the door she had wounded also seemed to have amazing powers of recovery, for she could see no sign of the injuries she had placed upon him.

They had nothing but their bare shadow-covered hands, yet from their fingers sets of claws now slowly grew out, from the lips of one of the figures a low growl not unlike a beast. No trick of the light or those clinging shadows, and no portable holo-projector could be that real, even if they could sneak it up here.

"Not human." Even as she says this in disbelief she knows it to be true, some deeper voice within her nodding confirmation. "Looks like that guy was right. I guess I'll have to accept his dying apology."

Growl! Leap!

One from the center came right at her, claws out and with them a gleam of long sharp teeth. Quickly dropping to her back, hands and legs up to catch him and fling him back behind her as she rolls. Crash of shattering glass as he smashes through the large window at full speed, then Anya rolling back up to her feet for an explosion of pepper spray at the next one in the same instant that he now charges. A wild scream of pain then the other two rush her at once.

Not for nothing she was the company assassin. A leap up into a ball, springing off the ceiling to land behind them with both feet springing out into their backs before she lands on her hands to then push her body up and over to end up on her feet facing them. The one she had shoved through the window was just climbing up from the edge of the ledge as the two she just kicked landed full into him, the three of them careening out into the open air for a collective scream before arcing down to the ground so very far below.

"I knew there was a reason I like living on the thirtieth floor."

Around now to face the remaining one, already recovering from the pepper spray to his eyes.

"Not getting too surprised at anything I see now," she acknowledges in Russian-accented English, "well, perhaps I can still surprise *you*."

This one comes more carefully, a few test swings out before him, one of which shreds through a couch to one side.

"I don't know what you are, but you're paying for that upholstery."

Night-light!"

Much to the attacker's surprise and shock, the room now lit up with full don't-look-directly-at-the-sun light from every lamp and light fixture the place had, in this room and all adjoining ones. The creature stepped back with a loud growl, trying to shield its eyes with what Anya could now see to be fur-covered claws as the light seemed to eat away at its shadows.

"Didn't *think* you'd find my backups," she grins. "Now if you don't mind, I've had a busy day."

Whirling kick to the head, double fist jab, and a hard shove send the creature out through the broken window, his feet sprouting claws to cling him precariously to the edge of the drop as he fights to regain his balance while battling the effects of the most-painful light.

"Normally I wouldn't try this," she begins as she strolls over to stand a few feet just out of his reach, "but since the only witness is about to die..."

Deep breath to calm, then low hum in her throat as her gaze fixes down at his feet. The creature still clawing at the air for balance as her hum grows louder, her concentration building. He almost has his balance, one foot daring to pick up and reach forward for more solid ground when her hum ends with a sudden eruption of sound, a single loud syllable with her eyes nearly rolling up in the back of her head.

"*Sa!*"

It was more than sound that slammed into the creature, hit him full in the chest like some large hammer thrusting him out off the ledge and several feet across into the air and out of reach of anything to grab onto for his long plunge down. His scream soon fades then abruptly ends.

Anya's eyes right themselves then the shaking began. Legs suddenly weak, hands barely able to support her against the shredded couch as she eases herself down into a seat. Several long slow breaths before the shaking stops, then a look around her apartment to make sure that was the last of them.

"I must be getting better at that; headache's not as bad, though I'm sure the hunger pains will soon hit."

Slowly she gets up, making sure she's not going to collapse before trusting her full weight on her feet again.

"Quick bite— assuming those creatures left my kitchen intact while waiting for me— then I've some complaints for the Suits back at Corporate. *Someone's* going to explain what this is all about then pay for this damage."

A hand reflexively reaches to massage the side of her left temple as she surveys the damage, then spies the lamp she had hit one of the creatures with, shattered there on the ground.

"Why'd it have to be *that* one? I'll have to go all the way back to Hong Kong for another!"

Anya didn't waste any time; it was still night when she walked into the front reception area of Sony Corp World Headquarters. Her face was known around here, though everyone knew better than to ask just what her job happened to be. Rumors flew, of course, but nothing that even Anya would confirm. They knew her, some feared her as the hand of the corporation itself, others respected her.

She walked briskly up to the reception guard, controlled anger set into her face.

"Miyaki," she calls to the guard in Japanese, "who's in? I've got some complaints to report."

"Very late, Miss Petrova," he nods back. "I can check, but it can't wait until morning?"

"Nothing she does can wait," a second guard comes up with a quick grin, "it's the nature of her job... Or so I hear."

"Come on, there's always someone around here. I need to see a Suit, and *now*."

"It looks like Mister Tetso is in his office," the first guard looks down at a screen behind the desk, "I can page him."

"No need for that."

An elderly Japanese gentleman in a business suit just coming out from an elevator door, a couple nods of respect from the guards, then Anya walking with impatient briskness over to him.

"Tetso, there's something going on here and it can't wait until morning. Someone just broke into my apartment and tried to off me and that's just the *beginning!* Never mind the fact the place is supposed to be so secure—"

"Miss Petrova, this discussion should be taking place in a more

secure room, perhaps?"

"Whatever," impatient wave of her hand, "and I think the big man should hear this as well."

"I am sure that he will, Miss Petrova. Now, if you will just follow me..."

From the corner of her eye she caught the guard she had addressed as Miyaki glance down at his terminal then visibly blanch. Some quick typing to confirm then a sad glance to his partner as both begin discreetly reaching for their sidearms.

Mister Tetso led her up to a door at the very back of the front room, opening it for her then pausing to let her go in first. Warily while trying to not seem so, she enters in, before her a small meeting room with two other doors along the right-side wall, a table along the other side. Her hand drifts lightly across the latch in the door-frame as she passes on in.

"Now," the door clicking closed behind Mister Tetso, "what seems to be of such a problem this time of night?"

"The target wasn't the corporate spy, but I think someone around here knows that," she pauses, not taking a step further, just looking the empty room over. "No one with Sony Corp sent those things after me and yet they knew about the hit. I even heard it said that the hit was engineered from the outside, someone manipulating some Sony Corp execs. I think that's enough to wake up Mister Myoko for."

"Perhaps. First have a seat and then we can discuss this."

His hand touched lightly to her shoulder to urge her forward, but instead she reaches swiftly back, grabs hold, and shoves him forward into the room to stumble to the ground. Immediately there's a shot fired through one of the other two doors, one which he began desperately dodging even as he tumbles to the floor. He knew what was waiting.

A quick angry shout over his shoulder to stop any more shooting then he calls out to Anya.

"You won't get out. Your ID's been revoked and a kill-on-sight order issued."

"Only Myoko himself can issue that kind of order against me," her taser now slipping smoothly into her hands, "I demand to see him."

"I spoke to him myself," stumbling up to his feet, "the order came from his own lips."

"When? Where?"

"Over the..." he hesitates a moment before replying, "the phone. He told me over the phone."

"He never gives orders like that any way but face-to-face," she snaps, and at her harsh look his left foot slips him down to the ground again. "Exactly when was this."

"I- spoke to him, just now. He gave the order himself."

"You said that, now- What was he wearing?"

"What? Why...", another struggle for both thought and footage, the latter one failing once again, "I spoke to him just- I mean... Why, it had to be a suit of course."

"And where'd he call from? Answer!"

He was eyeing that taser, knew just how over-amped she'd made it to be.

"His home, probably. Now just surrender and we'll make it a quick-"

"He never wears a business suit at his own home," she snaps again, both his feet now slipping. "You'd know that if you'd really spoken to him. Now what's going on?!"

"I'm not lying, Anya, I- he gave the kill-order himself, I spoke to him just now."

She could see the struggle in his eyes, something between remembering a script and fighting for control. She knew then that he believed what he said, even if what he said might not be true. Carefully she reached out, touched lightly upon him with the thread of her instincts, then was certain.

"Whoever they are they're really good at brain-washing," she sighs. "Sorry about how this has to go down, Tetso. I doubt you even know what's really happening."

Falling back to the ground, backwards roll into a ball as the door drifts open on its own. Two shots fired from the two guards outside but Anya not there to be hit. Instead the bullets pass directly over Mister Tetso's head and through the wall opposite, hitting some hidden person observing through a spy-hole. In that moment Anya propels herself quickly along the floor with her feet, ramming into the legs of the two guards outside, her free hand coming up to slam into one's groin, while the other

clenches a fist around her taser then slams up into the underside of the other. Both men are on the ground in pain but not before she has rolled up to her feet and into a mad dash for the reception desk.

Fingers rushing madly across the keyboard the guard had used before any more action can be taken.

"He's right; my password doesn't work. But I should at least be able to get a message off to—"

The screen blanked, replaced by a grinning ghostly face reaching up at her. Some might have screamed and run in fear, she just closed her eyes, growled out something low and fierce, then opened them up again. The image had been dispelled.

"And here I thought I was the only one that could do stunts like that. Not looking good."

"There! Get her!"

A couple shots as several more uniforms come pouring out of that one small room, Mister Tetso in their midst. No time now for anything but action.

A diving leap up and over the large desk, curling into a ball then up to her feet in a run straight for the front doors. Somewhere overhead a large turret swiveling in her direction, ready to shoot out a pair of wired darts just like what the weapon in her palm used, and just as deadly. She hits the door before the turret swivels into range, but it has locked and the fingerprint-controlled locks no longer respond to her.

"I can tell I'm going to have a big headache in the morning *this* time."

Harsh glance and the doors snap open, and with her back to the guards none could see how she did it. More shots, but she seemed to have an instinct for ducking them just as a trigger is pulled.

"Get her before she escapes!"

"But Mister Tetso, *how?* She's— well, the best at what she does that the company *has*."

"All the more reason to kill her before she gets away, you fools. Now *after* her!"

The night in Tokyo is too brightly lit for one on the run, even at the likes of two and three in the morning. Everywhere she might turn she knew she would find the hand of Sony Corp; from the company logos at

every street corner, to the security they provide for such public transits as the monorails or bullet-trains. Escaping would not be easy.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons why she preferred to drive a car rather than take public transportation; in her line of work, taking a bus after a kill would be kind of silly. And she liked to make sure anything she drove was padded with enough armor, just in case. That would explain the way she now drove across the nearly empty corporate parking lot and directly for the closed gates with the armed guards ready and waiting for her. Shots were already starting to glance off the bullet-proof windshield as she floors the gas-pedal.

"I hate leaving a job so abruptly."

More shots than guards diving aside as she rams straight through the gates, sparks flying as the electric current flowing through them is broken as the gates forcibly swing wide. Current dancing off the skin of her car as she guns past and into the night, soon to be followed by others in chase. Of that she was certain.

"Tetsui would never treat me like this, or anyone else he'd personally hired," she reasoned as she drove. "He'd invite me over to his place first, give me a chance, then if he felt the need, quietly dispose of me in the middle of a pleasant conversation about his garden and briefly mourn over it later on. That head goon seemed to think he had some sort of control over things, and that one guy in the room..."

She had long ago ripped out the auto-nav system of her car, which would make it more difficult for anyone to shut it down by remote. That still didn't give her much time. Once out of sight of the main building, she spun around a corner and pulled down into an open underground parking garage, wheels screeching as she quickly looks around. Then a sudden stop before one guy just getting out of his own poor excuse for a vehicle. Abrupt stop right before him then leaping out and tossing a set of keys into the bewildered man's hands as she shoves him out of the way.

"I'll trade you! Just hurry up and leave."

Just as the man's stuttering out a question, she fixes him with a sharp gaze and focuses her concentration as much as she can.

"Take the car and run. They're after you."

The words drilled directly into his mind, had him shivering with nervous fear while she leaps into his car and starts it up. By the time he was

to his feet, limbs shaking, Anya had sped out in his own car.

She pulled the car out of the garage at what any watching would consider a normal speed, then off and to the right. Moments later the car she had previously been driving came screeching out and around to the left, nearly on two wheels.

"I may have pushed him a bit too much but what choice do I have?"

Then it hit her; the headache. She winced in pain and hoped she wouldn't have to do anything more like that for a while. From outside the car she could hear screeching wheels and desperate gunshots but knew they were headed away from her. Her ruse had seemed to have worked, she could relax. At least for now.

"That mark stumbled into something big, alright. If I can't even get to Myoko then I am in big trouble. No where in Japan can go and not be found, and I don't think they give me time to try and contact him... What that man said, about infiltrations everywhere, and something— Evidence, he said, things I would not believe. Well, right now I being very open-minded, but Mister Myoko will need hard proof, whatever it is that goes on."

She drove around a bit more before making another switch. The car would be found abandoned along an empty roadside.

Four in the morning and the sleepless city as empty as it would ever get. Hat drawn down over her head, scarf around her face as she walks up to the automatic teller, slides a card, and punches in a number. An error message pops up followed by a display that reads "Please wait...". She knew what *that* meant.

"They confiscated my accounts?! This just gets better all the time."

Quickly she walks away, not bothering to wait as suggested and leaving her card still in its slot. Around into a street alley, then ducking out of sight as she pulls out a small set of portable binoculars with which to observe. It was just minutes later when the patrol cars quietly encircled the auto-teller, armed men approaching and calling quietly out in Japanese.

She had seen enough.

She left the hat and coat behind, knowing that even if her face hadn't been marked on camera, those items of clothing would have.

Another walk through town, another disguise grabbed up before taking a taxi, then the last form of transportation they would ever expect; a monorail across town and the latest disguise used ditched after exiting.

It is nearly an hour later when she arrives at another teller, sliding in a completely different card and punching in a different code. The name that flashed up on the screen in response bore no resemblance to her own, not by sounding alike or by rearrangement of letters. A completely different persona. She started punching in her request, and when given the choice of Yen, Mark, or Dollar, specified dollars, U.S. currency.

Quickly pocketing the cash then taking back her card before slipping away once again. Her emergency account that she always hoped she'd never need, but somehow knew she would. She didn't speak when near or walking away from the terminal, and remained silent the rest of her journey as she makes her way across town to the one place where she might escape the grasp of Sony Corp and those forces manipulating it long enough to figure a next move.

She had made a quick early-morning stop at a public terminal before arriving at the airport. Some juice and short breakfast as she typed away at a terminal. By the time she was finished she knew one thing; she had been erased. Her ID with Sony Corp removed, her known bank accounts confiscated, her apartment listed as open for lease and no doubt cleaned out. She knew that by now none of her local contacts were going to speak to her much less meet with her. Her face was probably secretly entered in all the public surveillance systems by now as well.

So it was a blond wig she wore when she made certain select purchases from scattered locations around town, contacts she knew would at least wait the time it took for her to pay for the not-always-legal goods she would purchase from them before selling her out. Then switching to brunette as she enters the airport with a stout leather gym-bag as full as she can stuff it.

Casual look around, no sign of being conspicuous as she crosses the main thoroughfare of the immense international airport. Dark glasses might seem odd for this time of morning, but better than a chance retina-scan by a remote snooper. Then over to stand in line for a ticket and waiting until her turn for the young lady behind the counter to ask in

Japanese of her destination.

Most people that met her knew her for at least a slight Russian accent, more so if under stress. But when she wanted to she could manage a flawless American accent, as she did now when pretending not to understand the lady's request.

"Oh, I guess you're asking about my destination? My Japanese really isn't all that good; it's all I can do to manage an order at one of your restaurants."

The young lady smiles then switches to accented English.

"No problem. Where you want to go?"

No place in all Japan she could dare show her face, or most of the Far East for that matter; the reach of Sony Corp is that strong. But the alternative had suggested itself, or at least one man alone in an apartment had before she had killed him.

"California. Do you understand? That's in the United States. I got my visa right here."

A picture and identification, complete with her wearing the same brunette wig. A legal enough ID, she had lived over there after all, just the picture had needed to be changed. The lady looked it over, ran it through the scanner, then typed at her terminal. Minutes later Anya was being handed her ticket while a young Japanese face smiles well-wishes at her.

The next difficulty would be security and the bag she now shouldered. The time in line seemed interminable, the longer she was there the more chance she feared of discovery. She had hidden her traces well enough, but then her apartment was supposed to be secure as well.

"What?"

Anya responded to the request in English.

"I said your bags, Miss," the guard repeated in English now. "We need to scan them. Just a standard precaution."

"Oh, that," she giggles once as she passes them up. "You won't find anything in there but some new cookware I bought. You know, pots and pans."

A more focused stare into his eyes for the brief moment of contact when she hands him over the bag, the phrase repeating low in her throat.

"Pots and pans..."

He takes the bag then passes it into the machine, all the while she

still repeating that one phrase under her breath, eyes focused on the man. When the alarm went off and the view pops up on his screen of the x-ray of the inside, she focuses even more intently, repeating under her breath.

"Pots and pans, pots and pans, pots and—"

The outline clearly indicates a host of distinctly non-kitchenware items, not the least of which is a sawed-off shotgun. But he relaxes at the sight and switches off the alarm, motioning her through the scanner-gate as her bag comes out the other side.

"Just some pots and pans is all. And your body-scan comes up clean. Have a nice trip."

He picks up the bag and passes it over to her with a kind smile which she returns with near gaiety.

"Oh, I will! Your country is nice and all but it just seems like forever since I was back home."

A last grin as she turns to leave then, once out of sight and concern, putting fingers to temples for a quick massage. Just a few yards now between her and the gate and crowds enough for her to hide in, enough to lose herself in. All she has to do is make it to the plane.

Then the feeling hits her. She stops, quickly looking around. No sign of guards, corporate Suits, or the tell-tail signs of hired assassins such as herself. What then?

It moves like a shadow, slipping quietly between the footsteps of others, passing beneath the gazes of the mortal, the breath of the living a cacophony in comparison to its movement. Perhaps Death itself come to reach out and touch.

Anya suddenly whirls around, a long plastic knife slipping out of her right sleeve and into her hand as she thrusts forward behind her. The knife stops a foot before the nearest person she can see, a fat man who gives a start at the sudden appearance of a weapon aimed in his direction. Fearful words in Japanese, to which Anya says nothing as she continues to hold her plastic knife level in the air where she stabbed it.

The knife is a plain grey-orange color but now it begins growing red from the tip slowly towards the hilt. Then the red stain expands from around it, slowly in a circle that spreads around the empty air itself. A few startled gasps as the air bleeds, red drops out from nowhere onto the floor, quickly growing puddle now spilling out around the blood-free shape of a

footprint, but one with claws.

Anya pulls back the knife then gives a short punch forward into the air. A gasp is heard but not from anyone seen, then the fat man crying out as an unseen weight is felt crashing into him. He steps back then a thump onto the ground and only then does something appear; a body right out of nothing.

Not man nor woman, but humanoid, covered in scales and fur, claws on fingers and toes, a deep knife wound at its belly as life slips away. Uprising of voices and cries of fright, during which time the beast's killer quickly wipes her knife across its fur then slips out through the crowds.

"That man mentioned something about fanciful old legends," she mutters to herself while weaving through the crowd, "I think I'm getting the idea."

Guards come rushing now to the disturbance, people rushing away in fright and forward in morbid curiosity. Two people bumping past her, but on the third that instinct kicks in again. She whirls around again with her plastic knife.

Its tip plunges straight into the chest of what appears to be a normal enough tourist, sudden gasp stuck on his face. At first it might seem as if she had killed an innocent, but then he flickers like an image and what she now stares at is human enough but no tourist. Skin like palest moonlight, ears up into sharp points, a suggestion of fangs form under his upper lip. No tourist clothes on this one, but long dark robes covered in a twinkle of stars, his feet in fancy slippers curled up at the toes. From the knife wound a dry hiss of air slowly escapes, the smell of some putrid swamp.

"You have—" gasp to suppress obvious pain as the stranger smiles back at her, "more potential than we thought. Must have been that time with the parapsychology group in— Russia. Not enough though. We'll... get you, get what we're here for. But, of all the weapons to be using, how... did you know that—"

Slow glance down at the length sticking out of his chest, the wound there spreading like a slow tear through cloth as the putrid odor increases.

"—plastic is what my species... Oh, blessed relief."

His skin split up to his face and down his middle, falling apart like an overused coat as it and his robe fall to the ground. But no body left

behind, just an intense explosion of foul smelling gas that quickly has others in this section of the airport gasping, then nothing. Just his skin and what he wore, both looking like discarded rags which she carefully prods with a foot.

"Plastic's the only thing I can get past the body-scan," she shrugs. "But I'll remember it if I ever bump into anymore of— whatever you are."

People chasing through the crowds now, but not all of them guards and not all of them going for that first strange body. She can see three people and two flickers of shadow headed for her. Through the crowd she pushes, nearly bumping into the man taking tickets before her designated terminal.

"Do not worry, Miss," he smiles to her in English, "the plane will not leave without you."

"Let's just hope it leaves without *them*."

She rushes past him, hurrying into a run now down the long hall. Behind her the ticket-taker has stopped the three men after her but not the unseen shadows that slip past. Down past a slowly-strolling family she now runs, weaving around two businessmen then into a dead-on run. Two shadows slip around the family, then on seeing her bolt, head straight for her, intervening people or not. The two businessmen unexpectedly fly apart, each hitting a wall hard enough to knock them out, while a woman gasps and grabs for her children. Nothing to see as another person is suddenly flown aside, nothing to go on but instinct as Anya zips her gym bag partway open and reaches in.

Eyes closed, aim, and fire. A loud echoing report then followed quickly by another. For a moment two furry figures flicker into view, but only momentarily as they quickly recover. Another shot straight for the head, slamming him right into the other and onto the ground. Blood dripping from some invisible source, but this time she senses no life slipping away, just slow dazed stirrings.

"What's it take to *kill* those things!"

The shotgun slips back into her gym bag as she comes to a stop before the stewardess and the covered gangway, a gasp on the other's face as she sees what it is that Anya had just put away.

"Miss, I am sorry," she starts off in English, "but you cannot bring—"

One hand swiftly up to her throat, pushing her back against the wall as Anya's breath comes into her face, gaze catching her in full.

"Just my carry-on, got that? Now start closing this ramp up and I don't care *who* else has to get on board."

A flicker of something from one set of eyes into another then Anya releases her grip. Instead of yelling for help or continuing to complain about the gun or shots fired, the stewardess just calms down and now gets a smile across her face.

"Have a nice flight. Last call for flight fifty-nine for California, nonstop."

One family hurries at the unexpected last call, while a pair of businessmen remain unconscious. Back at the ticket-taker three desperate and deadly passengers literally toss the ticket-taker aside and start their own charge on down the hallway. From the hand of one of these three a narrow shaft of light erupts, burning a hole straight through the father of the small family group and narrowly missing the stewardess as it sizzled into the wall just as she closes off the gangway.

Back inside the plane, Anya stows her gym bag and plops into her seat, one hand immediately going to her temples. She has heard the noise outside and knows that whatever those things are they'll rip through the walls to get to her. She already has a headache, left hand massaging her temple constantly now, but no choice left her.

"Take off, just take off..." quietly muttering to herself, "take off, take off..."

"Are you going back to America? Welcome to Japan airlines," says a smiling young stewardess. "We still have some minutes to take-off, would you like—"

"This is the Captain, everyone to your seats, we're taking off immediately. Repeat, buckle your seatbelts."

The announcement repeats in Japanese even as the cabin gives a lurch, as much a surprise to the stewardess as to anyone else. Quickly feet scramble as the plane pulls away from the gantry, leaving some strange creatures howling in frustration before they tear into the remains of a family wailing over a dead father. They leave no one in that hallway alive... or intact...

The seat belt light goes out and soon the stewardesses are walking

the aisles. Anya signals the nearest one as she tries to massage the pain out of her temples.

"I've *never* pressed myself that far before. This is gonna— Yes, stewardess, get me about four aspirins and a pillow. I think I'm going to be sleeping this entire trip. Nonstop to California, you say?"

"Nonstop," she smiles pleasantly, "straight to Los Angeles."

"Good."

Tired sigh, wig pulled off to be later stowed in her gym bag, but for now it's four aspirins with a glass of water, then a pillow and not long before she drifts off into a fitful sleep. Conspiracies, strange creatures, warnings from a designated target; she had much to think about, much to sleep over.

Now if only the voices in her head would stop screaming at her she might get some rest.

CHAPTER THREE:

Agent Black

"Good morning, Agent Black. Your mail is on your desk, including one Red Envelope. Morning briefing in fifteen minutes."

Trim, clean, and neat. A six-foot black business suit sporting dark brown hair short and neat. Polished leather shoes, a pair of dark sunglasses where the eyes would be, and a tanned complexion currently set into a no-nonsense look devoid of emotion. The perfect poker-face, the complete look that just screams government agent.

Just a nod from Agent Black as he passes up the circular reception desk on his way to the rear, through security doors and scanners, and then into the circus of desks, computer terminals, and floating holo-displays affectionately known as The War Room. It is somewhere in Washington D.C., in one of those agencies that officially does not exist and whose lineage to one of the better-known more public agencies is murky at best.

Currently a dozen others around as he makes his way to his desk, flicks on the screen there with a swipe of his thumb across the scanner, then does a quick review of the mail on his desk while looking over what appears on his screen. The flat-panel screen projects out no holographic display, viewing possible only from directly before it in the chair he now sits down in; to all other angles it is blank or at best a vague swirl of colors. Even standing too far behind where Agent Black sits and the screen is unreadable, and that's the way he likes it. An old technology, perhaps, but one a lot more secure than the images floating out over other people's desks.

The Red Envelope he opens carefully, keeping its contents at his lap-level before giving a quick nod to himself, placing two of its sheets into

a drawer accessed via a key, then dumping the rest into what might appear as a sealed trashcan by his desk then pressing the "Incinerate" button at its top. A quick flash as he continues on.

"Hey Black," another business suit with a grin calls over from a desk, "We have an office pool going; are you for or against world unity today?"

A couple of chuckles to which Agent Black makes no reply, just finishes up at his screen, which currently includes typing out a live-message to a contact then waiting for the reply.

"You really shouldn't mess around with Agent Black," a slightly older man walks past the one who'd called out on his way to the coffee station, "he could probably stop your breathing with a quick jab and kill you seventeen different ways."

"Oh please," the first rolls his eyes, "I gave up fairy tails a *long* time ago. If the renowned Agent Black is so good, then why does he keep pulling menial assignments. I mean, any first-year recruit can do what he does."

"That's the thing," the second now over by the coffee pouring himself a cup, "some say it's because he's too good at what he does and someone got jealous, others say it's because he started investigating things he shouldn't have. Of course, you could always ask Agent Black himself."

"Okay," the younger man gets up from his own desk with a mischievous grin, "I think I'll do just that."

Across the room he goes, weaving his way around desks and terminals while half a dozen people observe from the corner of their eyes and another half dozen try suppressing a building smirk or giggle.

"Hey Black," the man says when nearly there, "how come is it that if you're such a great agent, you always get these cheap assignments? What's it been, chasing after protest groups the last three assignments? Sounds a bit beneath your abilities."

Nothing to read beneath those sunglasses, which could be the reason why indoors and out of the sun they're still worn, and just his fingers typing away at his keyboard with face fixed towards the screen.

"Oh come on," the one now by his desk placing a hand down at its edge, upon which he rests, "is it because you went out with the Undersecretary's wife? Or perhaps since you've said as much *against* as *for*

world unity that they don't know where you stand. Or maybe it's—"

One hand still typing as all this is being said, the other going down to open up a drawer, reaching in to take something out, then without his gaze ever leaving the screen before him, that one hand come stabbing down onto the back of the man's resting hand with a fork. The man just barely sees it in time to jerk his hand away, nearly toppling off the desk in the process.

"Hey! You trying to skewer me? He tried to *skewer* me!"

Grins and giggles now released from their restraints, as Agent Black's second hand rejoins the other typing, his face never having shifted in direction or expression.

"What're you all laughing about?" the man nursing the hand that almost got skewered on a fork, "he tried to do me bodily harm."

One man come up from behind the younger one, a chuckle and slap to his back.

"That was just a warning shot. If Black had wanted to do you harm, you'd be on the ground right now with that fork stuck in your chest. You'll find that Agent Black is a man of very terse words and very direct action. Just remember that the next time you approach him."

The morning fun done, people ease back from the brief amusement to their jobs and reports, the New Guy having been properly introduced to the office's local legend and target of many jokes. Agent Black finishes up with his typing as expressionlessly as ever, then turns off his terminal and places his keyboard away into a locked drawer, its key to be pocketed before getting up. If anyone had wanted to have a look at his work, it would have to involve something more obvious than merely sitting down at the wrong desk or other bad excuse. Agent Black then walked across the room, past the new guy who had just been victimized, and towards a set of double doors at the far side. He got a sour look from the New Guy, but nothing more that the man felt like daring.

He arrives in a long meeting room, a flat terminal to every seat, waiting holo-projector at the table's center, a keyboard built into the table at the lead position. Acoustic tiling overhead, the walls— if one checked with a light touch— vibrating with the constant hum of the signal constantly passing through them to thwart any eavesdroppers. As always, he is the first to arrive, a moment ahead of he who would lead this meeting, the

office's Chief of Operations.

"I'm going to have to write out a memo telling everyone to stop running anyone new into you," the one behind Black a balding man in a suit, "sorry about that incident, Wes."

Barely a glance to acknowledge as Agent Black goes over to one of the places to take his seat while the other takes his place at the head of the table behind the one keyboard. Others now coming in, one at a time, each down to a different seat until Agent Black is one of six facing the one at the lead waiting. A check to see all is in order, a press of a key and the doors click locked, then each one there in turn presses his thumb against the scanner attached to his or her screen. The screens come to life, then the holo-display at the center glows to life with the department logo; a department under the NSA, the Special Operations Office.

"Good morning everyone," the one chairing the meeting addresses them all. "Not too much happening in the world today. Problem in the Middle East, of course, one by the name of Sheik Al-Yanzi out of Yemen..."

A face pops up in the central holo-display while additional data appears on selected private screens.

"...Seems as he's trying to keep Yemen out of the world order movement, no doubt for some sort of additional payoff. Johnson and Smith you'll be handling this one."

The two on whose screens the additional data had appeared both nod; a man and a woman.

"Get him out of the way somehow, our government is not about to let a blackmailer stall the world-peace process. Next." The central view changes to a map of the Dakotas, slowly rotating around in place.

"Someone getting a local Indian tribe all stirred up. Another end-of-world prophecy. Hazelet and Door," two more private screens light up with additional information, "see about placating the natives. They're starting to get television time."

Two more nods, and now the central holographic view changes to a shot of a street-riot, obviously taken from some televised footage. Just one private screen pops up this time, one before a blond young woman of appealing looks but serious expression.

"Agent Charity, I hate to stereotype you, but these little Chicago

riots are getting worse. Started out in some small neighborhood, but the more television time it gets the more others join in just so they can get their faces seen along with everyone else. It's a sport that needs to be stopped right now. I want you to go in there and down-play this thing enough for the rioters to get bored with it."

"Usual reporter front," the blond nods, "I'll find something else to take up the public's interest."

Finally the screen changes again, footage of violent protests, a fire starting, signs held up amidst screaming voices.

"This one specifically came down for Agent Black. It's another protest against world unity, one that's gotten a bit too violent. As usual you are to look into it, stop the demonstrations, and apprehend those behind it. Any questions?"

There were none.

"Then dismissed."

Screens and displays switch off, a lock audibly clicks open, and people begin filing out. Before anyone has left, however, the one at the lead seat calls out.

"Agent Black, a word..."

The others leave, just Agent Black and his superior alone in the room before the latter will speak.

"I know all you've been getting lately are these protest assignments, looking into anti world-peace activities for the benefit of our foreign allies, but it's what they give me. I don't know who you angered upstairs but--"

"I will do my job," Agent Black finally speaks.

"You sure personal feelings won't get in the way on any of these? I know you're not too crazy about this whole world-unity thing--"

"The world needs a world government," Agent Black replies, "I am just suspicious about the specifics."

"Maybe it's that contradiction that gets you these assignments. This is well below what we both know you're capable of, Wes. Maybe if you just kept a bit quieter of your views and dialed down on the curiosity, you wouldn't be--"

"I will do my job the way it was meant to be done. Anything else?"

A look over at the one with the sunglasses then a sigh and vague hand-wave of dismissal.

"No, go do your worst. Just *try* and not turn this into another conspiracy. It's just a protest by a gang of violent thugs."

Curt nod and Agent Black leaves.

He arrives in a New York City neighborhood. The details he had been given said the protests had resulted in several burned buildings already and that no quarter was to be given. Just find those behind it, arrest, and haul away with extreme prejudice. First he'd found the burnt-out buildings, the ones seen burning in the video footage. Taped off now by the local police, his ID gaining him entry to silently make his way through the gutted building looking for clues.

"There's a fire department investigator coming down to help you out, if you wait," the lead cop had told him, "I'm sure he can help you identify—"

"I'll work alone. Everyone stays out, fire department included."

And with that clipped order continues on past the policeman and into the building's smoldering remains.

Not that he wasn't sure if a fire department investigator couldn't do the job, he just didn't trust other people's motives. How was he to know if what some other investigator told him was really what that other person had found out? Better to just do it alone.

Some prodding and sniffing, looking over the burn marks until he had led himself to what seemed the ignition point. A pile of charred bedsprings as all that remains of a pile of mattresses, a black spot burned an inch into the concrete floor beneath it being the obvious origin of the fire.

His first thought was what does it take for a fire to burn through an inch of cement. Then bending down to run a finger across then sniffing carefully at what he'd found.

"Not gasoline. Something hotter... Quite a professional-level accelerant for a random riot."

Back up to his feet then soon back out to the police line and one officer come up to question.

"So, what'd you find?"

"Need to know basis; you don't."

The cop puzzled briefly at that as Agent Black gets in his car and drives away...

The drive down to the adjoining neighborhood wasn't far. Once out of sight of the burn-site and around a corner, he came into a poor neighborhood, poor but with none of the usual signs of drugs, gangs, or even violence. Just a kid's lemonade stand, someone rummaging through garbage cans, and a few signs planted into people's lawns.

Down with world unity!

No world peace without civil rights!

Human rights is the doorway to real peace.

Just a sampling of signs, but as yet no violent demonstrations. A violent group of radicals he was told, so still he must be careful. The clustering of signs was thickest before the house with the lemonade stand, so there he parked, his car's security activated before he left for the broken picket fence.

"Lemonade mister? Only a quarter."

Quick swivel of the sunglass eyes and brief emotionless remark on his way past.

"Not now."

The girl shriveled up a bit at that glance, shyly eyeing him as he walks straight up the short path to the front door. The doorbell broken so he knocks.

"Coming..."

The harried look, wisps of hair hanging too far down over her face, the bowl of cookie dough she had in hand still stirring, it was obvious. She's a housewife.

"Agent Black." Flash of an ID, quickly pocketed. "The one who made the signs."

"Oh, that would be me." Blows a stream of air at the errant lock of hair while still stirring the cookie dough. "Mary Eglund, sorry I can't shake your hands right now. My group is Parents Against World Unity. You want some literature? We have a flyer just run off from my computer."

"You led the protests?"

"Oh the march? Yes, though we were really hoping for a lot more press coverage. I guess they found the fire a couple blocks up more interesting, though I've not had the time to turn on the television to find out. Three kids and no time."

"You didn't set the fire?"

"What?" Her stirring stops, the shock on her face clearly not faked. "Now why would anyone even think— Are you trying to tell me that—"

"Just the facts," emotionless bland delivery, "This protest march."

"Oh yes, about twenty of us, though our group has well over fifty and growing. It's not that we're specifically against world order, it's just that there's some places in the Middle East that have a lot of human rights issues we want to see solved before there's any world unity. After all, if none of this brings equality and democracy to all corners of the world then what use is it?"

"The march. Peaceful? No riots, screaming, threats against public safety?"

"What?! The most violent thing that happened was Ed Claver stubbed his toe against the curb. We're parents who want a perfect world for our children to inherit. We even filed our protest permit. Just what sort of people do you think—"

"That will be all, Miss Eglund."

With not even a "Good day" he turns around and starts back for his car, leaving a stunned mother with hand frozen to her stirring-spoon.

"Just what's this all about?" she calls after him. "What manner of—"

"You don't have the clearance, Miss Eglund."

By the time Agent Black has gotten into his car, the young girl is up on the porch clinging to her mother's legs.

"Mommy, he scares me..."

The rest of his investigation was similarly empty. The reports showed violent protests complete with fires and out of control behavior, yet everywhere he turned he found nothing but a concerned parents' group trying to point out human-rights abuses. The file said violent and radical, armed and dangerous; his investigation said PTA. It was an inconsistency and he didn't like inconsistencies. It could be someone playing a joke on him, but that burned out building was more than a joke. In his suspicious mind, he could not discount the fire having been set to make that parents' group look bad, but why would anyone bother?

On the plane trip back, he broke out his laptop computer and

logged in to query a few of his contacts. In all cases the question was the same: where did the order come from for this investigation? Someone at the NSA main office said it had come over from the FBI, but his contact at the FBI knew nothing of it and suggested the CIA. CIA pointed back to the NSA, which was where he'd started. No one seemed to know where the assignment had come from.

So while he was at it, he posed the same question regarding his last few assignments, all those mundane "get the protestors" jobs. Several had resulted in actual violent suspects being apprehended, public threats averted, but still nothing the local police shouldn't be able to handle, so why him?

In all cases the assignment traced back into the murky maze of government bureaucracy, and by the time his plane had landed and he was on his way back to the office, he was properly suspicious. The kind of suspicion that he knew would get him into trouble— again— but that which he could never turn away from.

Step one, he would say to himself, assume everyone is on a conspiracy or otherwise can't be trusted. At least until proven otherwise and then they go on the "don't need to watch *too* carefully" list. Step two, don't make it look like you're on your own investigation because that's what gets agents disappeared and operation offices closed. By the time he'd walked back into the War Room and over to his desk, he had his plan.

First, a quick report saying something to the effect that no local involvement was found and maybe a foreign group is responsible. That report to be filed after he was finished, just to make it look like his current computer time is being spent on some follow up to his given assignment. And the way his terminal screen is made so only he in his seat can see its contents, along with a few creative programs running for anyone snooping into his activities along the network, that's all anyone would have reason to suspect he was doing.

Then some quick queries. He'd already determined that all the proper paperwork had been filed for the assignment calling for the elimination of the "radical" parents' group, so now it is time to look into assignments given to others. That barrage of terrorist activity, tips of violent affiliations, and other violent protests against world unity. In short, most of the assignments sent through this office in the past eight months.

At least three terrorist threats where the threat was eliminated before anything bad could happen, though naturally those involved deny planning any such thing. One illegal gun-running operation in a Florida fishery; the guns had been shipped out before the agents had arrived so a sting was arranged to catch them, some guns planted to have reason to take them down. Then there's the ship that was ferrying protestors across to Catalina Island in California; they had blown themselves up before agents could arrive to apprehend them.

It went on like that, in no case there being what he would call hard and fast evidence that actual violence was being threatened. As much as he lives in a world where hard and fast evidence is mere rumor, some of this was *still* questionable.

Then he ran a cross-check with all of the assignments; contacts, companies, who owns what, everything. If he was shocked at what he found, there was no display from beneath his sunglasses to reveal such. For most of the recent assignments, usually involving threats against the push for world unity, they were all for companies or people that could trace their affiliation back to but one source.

General Organics.

What had started out once as a sometimes violent pro-Earth group by the name of Greenpeace, had since turned into a worldwide megacorp based in California and run by a bunch of nature-loving businessmen and scientists. Now they develop and market technologies that work *with* Nature, stand against the mad rush of technology at the land's expense. Quite a lot of money being made and all to fund their research into rain forests, the oceans, and Nature in general. Not ones for specifically being against a world peace, just against dirty technology. Fanatics of a sort, but they had long since gone from mindless protesting and into offering concrete alternatives.

The average person might say that it was just coincidence and bad luck that several of General Organics' operatives just happened to be on the march against world unity. A more suspicious mind might argue that General Organics has a secret agenda of its own against the whole world-unity thing. But Agent Black's professionally-trained paranoia said that someone is out to make General Organics look bad or even bring them down. The questions would then be, who and why.

Nothing General Organics did was specifically against the recent push for world-unity, but they are being set up to make it look that way. And while some of what they do can seem annoying to others with less fanatically altruistic concerns for the environment, none of them would have any reason to go to such lengths, or the contacts to push through these assignments.

"Back from your assignment already? Must have been a cake-walk."

It was Agent Hazelet, just coming in.

"Wish mine was that easy. Seemed routine at the time but those older tribesmen are pretty insistent. Keep saying all the signs are here, demons among us, the whole thing. You ever try to calm some riots without treading on ancient cultural toes? Be glad you got the simple one."

Agent Black paused at his work to look up at the brown-haired man; an efficient enough man, about the same age as Black's thirty-three years, but somehow Agent Black managed to put on an air of far more experience, or at least one of being more mysterious from the abrupt way he would talk. Times such as now, for example.

"There are no simple assignments."

"Just simple agents, that what you're telling me?" A grin as he goes over to one of the other desks, bending down to retrieve something from a drawer. "Well Agent Buddha, as much as paranoia is our trade, sometimes something is just what it seems."

Drawer slams, and Hazelet returns across the room with a electronic notebook in hand.

"The world's getting simpler. A single world government would mean no big plots between foreign governments, no wars to stop or instigate, just the occasional crowd-control assignment such as the ones you keep getting. A far simpler world to rule."

"In the right hands," Agent Black levelly replies, "I imagine that would be a *good* thing."

The statement catches Agent Hazelet short, puzzles for a moment, then a quick shake of his head before leaving the office once again. Few bothered to figure Agent Black out anymore, fewer still to look into how long it actually took him to finish up an assignment and what he did the rest of the time. He was a cog that had fallen loose in the machinery.

That was just the way he liked it.

His digging through the computerized archives was finished by the time anyone of concern had made it back to the War Room. In that time he had found more cases similar to that of General Organics. Other targets, many actually having a good point to make such as with that parents' group, then suddenly breaking out from peace to a fit of violence that rated the same order to be stopped. Or at least, that's what it might *seem* like; perhaps the violence was just as false as for that parents' group. In all cases, the protests of such groups were against the push for world unity, in all cases some minor statement of legitimate concern that would never stop the coming unity completely but just delay it if addressed.

Conclusion? Someone is in a hurry for this world unity to take place. And in all cases, the order to stop them came from the same murky source as his own recent assignments. Is it any wonder he makes such short pithy conversations? Such theories as this voiced would gain him even more inglorious assignments. It was investigations such as this that had pushed him from the top of the fast-track to top agent down to being the one who looks into riot-control. Better to be quiet about things and let others think you've been beaten and are following along like a good little lap-dog.

So he waited, just a few more days until the next assignment briefing when opportunity would strike...

"First an update on recent assignments," the head of the office at another briefing around the long table. "The riots in Chicago are finally losing steam thanks to the public face of our Agent Charity. Nice work there."

A nod from the blond then the other continues.

"That Yemen Sheik seems to have suffered a disgrace; something about having knowingly eaten pig. Seems as that's pretty off-limits over there. Good work as well."

Two more agents exchange a brief grin as the briefing continues.

"The problem with those Dakota Indians is another story, though."

"I'm sorry, chief," Agent Hazelet puts in, "we tried but those old guys are stubborn."

"Fortunately for you one of them just had a fatal heart attack two

days ago," their chief informs them, "the other elders are too busy mourning, or taking that as a sign or something, to mouth off. You're off the hook."

Two sighs of relief, though for Agent Black it was just too coincidental.

"We also have an update on that violent radical Agent Black here couldn't seem to nail down."

The central holo-display pops up with a frozen view now of that same mother Black had met, the one stirring the cookie dough, only now she has a rifle in her hands, face frozen in screaming obscenities as she hangs out a second-story window firing down at running crowds below.

"Her views took a decided violent turn at the local school when she started knocking off shots at anything that moved."

The press of a button and the image starts into motion, a news tape of her screaming out "down with world unity" while pulling off shots. If Agent Black was shocked by this he showed no sign, just carefully watched the footage as she repeats the same phrase over and over again, until one policeman's bullet finds its home in her forehead, sending her plunging out of the window to the ground below.

"Fortunately that problem seems at an end," the one at the lead of the table continues, "but not before some kids and teachers were killed."

The view now pans across a scattering of dead and bleeding bodies; two teachers and five children, one of which catches Agent Black's eye. It's the same girl as at the lemonade stand, the mother's very own daughter.

That actually stirred an eyebrow from Agent Black, which for him would be the equivalent of screaming out at the top of his lungs in shock. He had met the mother, and unless he had completely misjudged things, had seen her to be nothing more than a devoted mother that believed in human rights. How do you go from that to shooting a school yard full of kids that include your own?

Then there's the look in her eyes. Yes screaming and angry, but it seemed to Black there was no real emotion behind the anger. On one close-up he saw the empty look in her eyes behind the mask of manufactured anger. A sure sign of hypnosis or brain-washing.

"You really dropped the ball on this one, Wes," the other reprimanded. "You're usually such an excellent judge of character. What

happened?"

The type of techniques to so quickly and so thoroughly program someone to do something like this, something so obviously against her nature, are known to a very few, most of them government sources. His suspicious mind had already entertained the possibility of someone in this very office being connected with the set-up.

"I'll look into it," is his only answer.

"You do that," a cross look, "In the meantime I have one up for grabs here. A terrorist just came to our attention, but fortunately he's not had the opportunity to do anything yet. He's the head of a violent organization that must be brought into justice before he can do any real harm."

The central holo now pops up with a file photo of a man with trimmed hair and a neat tie, face a little on the pudgy side.

"He looks like an accountant," one agent remarks.

"He nearly is," their chief replies, "or at least for his day-job. By night he's responsible for half a dozen bombings all across the globe. Here's what we have on him."

Information scrolls by, complete with casualty reports from his actions and known affiliates that read like a who's who of international bad guys.

"I've never heard of half these bombings," Agent Charity remarks, "nothing in the reports or news."

"Local governments trying to keep them quiet during the world peace talks," is the explanation. "You can probably guess why."

"Quiet enough that *we* don't hear about them?" she persists. "We can track rabbit populations in Australia from orbit by their spore, how come we didn't—"

"Agent Charity, their governments covered them up, okay?"

"And all those affiliates, how'd he make it past Customs?" Agent Charity again asks. "He should have been flagged immediately."

"Records have him as born in this country to an ordinary enough life," it's explained, "but sources higher up now tell me that is all an elaborate front. He's in California now and ready to move into action."

"He still would have had to come into this country at *some* point," she states, "under whatever name he'd have used at the time, and then we'd

have a constant trail of observation from—”

"Agent Charity," the chief sighs, "I fear you've been hanging around with Agent Black too much."

Of the information scrolling by, Black noticed now that the origin of this assignment was left blank.

"This assignment," Agent Black cuts in, "where does it originate from?"

A finger types on a few keys then a shake of the head.

"Looks like that's classified."

He had expected as much. No doubt those same murky origins as the rest.

"I need a team to go out to California and apprehend this terrorist. He is to be treated as shoot-on-sight. Volunteers?"

Some people talking in low tones back and forth, weighing the pros and cons, who might be best for the job, but Agent Black needed no time to weigh anything.

"I'll go."

"Okay, Agent Black is one. This one should be simpler than the last one, we already *know* who the bad guy is, all you have to do is point and shoot. Who else?"

"I'll go," it's Agent Charity now giving Black the eye. "Someone needs to keep an eye on him and we've worked together before."

"The two of you it is then. You leave immediately. Now, this next assignment..."

Agent Black is very good at reading people, and from the look Agent Charity is giving him he knows that she too suspects something.

The flight is in first class, a commercial flight deemed more appropriately low-key than anything else. Both had waited until they were strapped in and the plane taking off to engage in anything but small talk, then drawing the small partition down that blocks both their seats off from view of the rest of the cabin and it is Agent Charity who is first to speak.

"You're good enough at reading people to not miss the difference between a housewife and a mad shooter ready to explode. Also the guy we're now after probably really *is* an accountant, so how come nothing out of you? Practicing at being inscrutable or something?"

"I met with that woman," Agent Black finally decides to say, "she was no shooter. You could tell that from the inexperienced way she held that rifle. And the look in her eyes—"

"I know, programmed. I saw it too and kept waiting for you to say something. You didn't."

"Why wait for me if you have your own suspicions?"

"Probably for the same reasons you kept your own mouth shut. Someone set her up, someone *government*. You not speaking means you can't discount a plant in our own office, and I trust your judgement."

"Not something I often hear," he flatly states. "How long has this been going on?"

"Since you fell out of favor. It was obvious you had been investigating something too closely for someone's comfort, which always means there's something there *to* investigate. Been keeping an eye on you ever since."

The press of force into their chests tells them the plane is taking off, the additional scream of engines enough to cover their low-toned conversation.

"I see the reports you file. They started getting less accusatory the lower you fell, but I caught the tone. You've spotted something but don't have the evidence to back anything up. So, what is it?"

"If I have no evidence, why would I say anything now?"

"Because," she calmly snaps, "you need someone to trust, as much as you'd hate to admit that even to yourself, and we came up through the ranks together. So spill it."

She let her question hang there, gave him time to contemplate behind those ever-present sunglasses what answer he might give. The plane was levelling out and the seat belt lights switching off when he finally spoke.

"I was starting to see something beneath the surface when my assignments began taking a less interesting turn. I'm guessing that means I was on to something."

"Any idea what?"

A blank expression for answer.

"Okay then," she persists, "we'll keep it to this current case. What makes this supposed terrorist so interesting?"

"The fact that the order comes from the same unknown source that most of my assignments have been coming from. Beyond that—"

"I know, need to know. I swear, you can make someone suspicious just by being in the room. Like that thing with the Indians; nice coincidence until I glance over and see you bland as ever."

"No coincidence. I suspect the old man was murdered."

"I knew you'd say that." She leans back in her chair with a sigh, easing the chair's control-lever into the reclining position. "Next you'll give credence to their warnings."

"If someone would kill to silence them, then their warnings must have something in them," he replies with the same emotionless features, "no matter how fantastic the implication."

She gives him a look then tired shake of her head.

"You're a good agent, Wes, but sometimes I wonder..."

She woke up half an hour later to see Agent Black typing away in his notebook. She looked over to see what he was about and saw a picture of their quarry with some text beside it. He didn't seem to mind her looking.

"Thomas Tyler," he explains. "Seems he has contacts back in Japan and the Japanese government is eager to trace down the rest of his terrorist cell over there."

"And that's where the order came from?" she asks. "An inter-government request?"

"As of thirty minutes ago it is. When I checked before we left there was no such information, and that was five minutes after leaving our briefing."

"Do you always double-check what the boss tells you?"

Bland look.

"Never mind. Okay, so either he *is* a terrorist or something else is going on here. Bets?"

"I used a couple of my own contacts," he ignored the question and continued, "ones outside the Agency. Seems as Mister Tyler had recent e-mail and phone contact with an account manager over at Sony Corp world headquarters in Tokyo. It also seems as said account manager was just found dead in an apartment."

"Sounds intriguing." She eases her seat back up into an upright

position. "What's the local news say about that?"

"They don't. This news is only an hour old and not been released yet. The apartment wasn't his own but a room he'd just leased for that night."

"He was on the run," she guessed, "knew it was coming. Anything on the suspected killer?"

"Listed as a rogue Sony Corp operative, nothing more except may have already fled Japan. Question is, was the killer getting that man before he could talk to someone about this terrorist cell he's got contacts with or something else?"

"And what did our guy in California talk to him about," she continued the line of thought, "Some fictional terrorist cell or did he show him something else? And just how rogue was that operative? You know, being around you can make a gal *real* paranoid."

"It's only paranoia if there's no one really after you. How often is that true for our line of work?"

"True. Listen, I'm going to freshen up before we land, you want a bar of soap or something?"

No answer, not that she expected any, so with a shrug she stands up and starts to step past him. A hand to her elbow pauses her.

"Agent Charity. Those questions you asked at the briefing, actively voicing your suspicions. Those are the same sorts of questions that got me down to where I've fallen. The only way you're going to be in a position to find out anything more is if you stay under the radar of who or whatever is behind these things."

"That why you're always so tight-lipped?"

"Need to know," he says after a pause.

"Okay then," a quick smile then more serious, "I'll watch out for myself. But just remember, you have a partner now who'll listen and that makes you more dangerous than before."

The partition drawn aside and she leaves, down the aisle for the labeled room at the back, leaving him with his laptop to ponder.

He pondered things for a while, musing over all the ridiculous possibilities that stem off from such a vague and ill-defined conspiracy. Perhaps that is why he still lives, because he doesn't have enough information to be much more than a passing amusement to some higher

power. But Agent Charity is right; with someone to help who is not as far down in favor as he now is, he could be a lot more effective in figuring things out. If indeed there be something more than merely his fanciful suspicions.

It was twenty minutes before he realizes Agent Charity had not yet returned, long enough for his professional paranoia to kick in. Securing his laptop, he got up and made his way to the back. Just two restrooms, one occupied. He checks the empty one first to be certain then steps over to tap on the occupied one.

"Agent Charity?"

A gruff grumble is his reply, followed moments later by a flushing sound, the latch sliding aside, then the door opening up. An overweight businessman squeezing his way past, grumbling under his breath.

"A blond young lady, did you see her?"

"What, you mean in *there*?" He thumbs back to the bathroom. "Only thing I saw was my own face in the mirror as I sat and squatted. You think I had a pretty young lady on my lap? I think you had too many of those peanuts they serve."

The man shoved his way past, back away to his seat, leaving behind him an empty room and a puzzle. A passing stewardess's arm was caught by his hand for a quick question.

"Blond young lady back here for the bathroom about twenty minutes ago. Did you see her?"

"Not that I remember," she shrugs, "but then I don't pay attention to everyone that goes in these things. You want a pillow or something?"

He leaves her to her duties and steps into the just-vacated small cubical, propping the door open with one foot just in case. Quick survey, nothing more than a sink and one of those steel toilets with the blue liquid to sluice down its side. That and a faint sulfurous smell.

"What's that guy been eating," he remarks to himself at the odor.

Carefully he lifts up the toilet lid, but it's clean. He prods the trapdoor at its bottom open but still nothing worth seeing. Nothing in or under the sink, then a look behind the door.

Single scrap of cloth stuck on the inside doorknob, one torn loose from the same dress Agent Charity had been wearing. Same color, same material, the very same one. She had been in here and struggled. Only a

brief struggle, though, or someone outside might have been alerted. But if worse had come to worse, where do you hide the body of a full grown woman?

He glances down at the toilet, but its trapdoor is far too small, not to mention the noise one would make dissecting someone, as well as the mess of blood. No sign of that in here, none at all.

Quite clean in fact, especially for being just after one who had left such a foul odor from his biological efforts. And the sink? Still dry; no hands had been washed, or blood drained away. And all this is assuming one could perform such a disposal in the brief time permitted.

He quickly stepped out, another look into the other bathroom. Much the same story, clean but not as spotless as the first one.

"That other one was cleaned, but—"

A glance over to the overweight man, now at his seat just as the stewardess is bringing around a selection of food trays on her cart.

"No thanks, Miss, I just ate. Before I got on, that is."

The cart passes him up but Agent Black's eyes don't leave him. Telltale signs, a stray piece of cloth, forgotten chunk of jewelry saved as a souvenir, anything. But it is not to be.

"Hey man, you going to use that or what?"

His stance before the empty cubical is now at the start of a short line, so without a word he walks away, choosing to walk right past the seated fat man, head aimed straight ahead but eyes beneath their sunglass shields drifting down for a quick scrutiny of the man as he leans back for a nap. Nothing out of place, just a belch then quick wink when it looks like Agent Black is too far past to catch it, then eyes closed.

He didn't know how, but that man had just killed Agent Charity and disposed of her body. The fact that she had posed those questions at the briefing and just poised herself as his ally was not to be considered a coincidence. And that implies that someone at the Agency *is* keeping watch on him, someone who would kill anyone else that might help him out. He could make a big deal of arresting this fat man but that would just lead to himself being locked up and perhaps suspended for creating a racket on board the plane, not to mention alerting whatever is behind this that he is more closely on their trail than one might suspect. No, as usual his best action lay in no action.

Back to his seat, alone now for the remainder of the trip, poor Agent Charity having paid the price of befriending him. He had known her a long time now, one of the few he might think of as trustworthy. He would miss her, as now the sunglasses hid any sign of sadness.

Any wonder he keeps to himself.

As the plane neared its landing, Agent Black brought out his laptop once again. A quick remote log-in to certain government resources he has access to, then the name of Thomas Tyler entered in as well as a copy of the picture for a visual match. His answer comes just as the landing warning is given and the seat belt signs pop back on. One Thomas Tyler, photo matching a security picture within reasonable parameters, has just purchased a ticket at the Los Angeles Airport, the very same place he's about to land at. Said ticket purchased not ten minutes ago.

"Looks like I'm in luck," he remarks to himself.

He closes his laptop, secures it into his briefcase, then buckles his seat belt as instructed. The rest is waiting.

He's nearly the first one out of the plane, hurrying on down the embarkation corridor while in his hands not a gun for the terrorist but a printout of the surveillance photo as the man bought his ticket. His assignment is to bring the man down, but his intentions now are to pull the man over for some private conversations. If someone was setting this Thomas Tyler up, then Agent Black wanted to know why. What did he know?

It shouldn't be too difficult tracking him down; he had the flight and gate number for the ticket the man had bought, the rest is just a matter of-

"Stop that man! In the name of the police, *stop!*"

Thomas Tyler nearly runs headlong into Agent Black, babbling incoherently as he then rushes past. Hot on his heels are a number of local blue uniforms, their brandishing of guns enough to send bystanders in a hurry to be out of everyone's way. Shouts and weapons Agent Black both ignore as he pulls his picture ID out to wave before the oncoming police.

"Agent Black, I'm taking command of this operation. I want you to—"

"Out of the way, he'll get away!"

First one rushes by him then another shouting out as too he runs past.

"He's a killer, so unless that's a forty-five caliber ID, get *away!*"

One gunshot goes whizzing past his head, missing the target but glancing off a concrete pillar to send a small chunk of masonry straight into the neck of a man standing innocently by. He cries out as blood comes out from his neck, but ignored as the police continue on after their quarry.

"In the name of the federal government," voice calm and level as ever, "I insist that you—"

Two more shots, several more uniforms passing him up.

"I so hate being violently ignored."

To the last uniform about to pass by Agent Black, he stuck his ID out at about eye-level... suddenly and quite hard. The man had a real up-close view of the picture ID before the fist behind it had him swinging partway under it on his way to the floor.

"I said, Agent Black. Now what's the rush."

A groan is his answer, followed by a swift shaking of the head and what sounds nearly like an animal's growl. The uniform is quickly to his feet and back in on the chase.

"I can see I'm going to have to do this differently. Okay then..."

Calmly but quickly over to a hovering display where a map labels his current location. Quick glance to see the direction the chase is taking, if to judge by the screams of the crowds it passes through, then deciding on his own alternate route.

Now it's Agent Black into a quick run through confused crowds, down a short corridor, left turn and in through a service entrance labeled as "Employees Only". Quick ID flash past some confused worker, on by racks of boxed supplies, through a busy kitchen with its dozen cooks, sideways quickly around a cutting table full of vegetables, swinging quickly around a chef with a long knife, running leap up over a mop and bucket on the floor, then out the other end through a swinging pair of double doors and into a public corridor once again for a last dodge around a passing janitor apparently coming in to retrieve his mop and bucket. All in one swift mad dash through hidden hallways then come to an abrupt stop and a resuming of calm dignity; during his running and leaping his sunglasses have not jostled a jot. Now where he stands, the sound of gunshots and

screaming is just catching up to him, so he stays back behind a wall, listens carefully for the confused shouting and panicked rambling as it nears, then suddenly launches out an arm, grabs onto a collar, and pulls back.

A scraggly looking face of panic, one Thomas Tyler being held at the back of the neck by Agent Black.

"Calm down, I'm with the government. Why are they chasing you?"

"The m-monsters. They want me, I know too much. Everywhere, anyone. Could be you. You're not a monster, are you?"

All said in a quick babbling, a near terrified tone. Too terrified for one that is supposed to be a terrorist on the run.

"I lost an agent and friend on the way here to get you, vanished right out of the plane. Tell me what you know."

"Was them, it was," the quivering terror in his eyes, the nervous shake of his body. "Just like in the—"

More gunshots, cries getting closer. The man went from frantic to something well beyond.

"They'll catch me, get the only proof—"

Quickly he fumbles something out of his pocket, stuffs it into Agent Black's hand.

"They mustn't get it. Only way of proving, you'll see."

The object stuffed into his hand is a single key. Agent Black immediately sticks it into a pocket but he's not finished with the one before him.

"I'll get you to a safe-house, then you can tell me what's going—"

"They mustn't get me. *Please!*"

With a strength born of fear, he struggles out of Agent Black's grip and starts into another panicked run, just as the blue uniforms round into sight.

"Get him!"

"Police, out of the way!"

"Kill!"

"Agent Black, special agent for—"

The snarl sounded like a very large tiger, the breath a stronger sulfurous scent than in the cubical on the plane, and yet it came from the first blue uniform to come running up into him. Growl then a wide

backhand and Agent Black found himself flying several feet. Six foot and not weak, he was tossed like a rag doll to slam against a concrete wall. Stunned, perhaps from his still-spinning head did he hear a dozen policemen growl like animals, see one drop down to all fours and start racing his way on ahead like some mad jungle cat. Dozens of witnesses as this mad chase continues, as Thomas Tyler goes running screaming up an escalator.

Dazed but still able enough, Agent Black pulls up his gun and fires. The shot thumps straight off the back of one of the police, a clean hit. But it doesn't even slow the man down. Instead, the uniform hit leaps up ten feet, straight up to the middle of the escalator to block their quarry's path.

"I really hope I'm seeing things," Agent Black mutters to himself as he reaches into another pocket, "but in case I'm not..."

Now he pulls out the *unregistered* gun, the one with the noticeably bigger caliber. Still a bit dazed from how he'd been tossed, he fires out two shots. The first gouges a foot-wide chunk of concrete out from the wall beneath the escalator, the next slams full into the head of the one waiting near its top. The man's head should have blown clean off, but instead the growling policeman is tossed up and off the escalator, head literally over heels, landing on his back on the other side. From the displeased growling, the policeman is alive if none too pleased.

"My own *vest* couldn't have stopped *that* shot, and I hit him full in the face."

Recovered enough now, he runs over to where rabid cops are tossing screaming bystanders aside in their efforts to get to the man struggling to get out the top of the escalator, terrified people running over one another in an effort to be away from this madness. He just makes it up there when two more leap up from below, landing just before him as they reach out to tackle their target.

One cop at the back of the pack is suddenly whirled around, the first thing he sees is Agent Black's gun, or rather the blunt end of it as he slams it into the uniform's face. A hard crack that would have sent most men to the ground in quick need of medical help, but all it does now is create a gash of green blood, quickly healing behind it, as the cop now calls back in a deep nearly growling voice.

"Police business only!"

"Agent Black," both guns up barrel-to-nose with the cop, "here's my ID."

Blam!

Not much left from the neck on up at this range as the body drops, but it does get the attention of several of the others in a brief pause before a scream of horrendous pain comes tearing out from the top of the escalator. Agent Black actually saw Thomas Tyler getting torn apart; one arm ripped loose by a policeman's bare hands, a leg twisted off as casually as you please, while the rest of the policemen leap up and on him like a pack in frenzy.

Agent Black is not sure what to make of this when a light touch to his shoulder distracts him.

He whirls around to see a beautiful young woman, ear-length reddish-brown hair tied back, her eyes perhaps knowing more years than her body had seen, and in one hand a large leather gym bag stuffed full. For no reason he then knew, he stayed his normal reaction for just a moment as she spoke.

"Don't bother, they aren't human."

A glance back to see a man being torn limb from limb by growling men on all fours, and with all seriousness agrees.

"I see your point. Might explain a few other things at that."

"Come with me," she whispers. "Quickly, before they decide to clean house around here."

He allows her to pull him a few yards away, just around a corner out of sight of the bloody brawl, before stopping for a question. The surrounding section of airport is a backdrop of screaming frightened people.

"What do you know about this? Just who was that man?"

"Not much, and I suspect just an unlucky man who stumbled across something. Just like I did. That's why I had to leave and allowed my... instincts, to bring me to you."

"Leave..." a guess from his own instincts perhaps, or perhaps from his utter lack of faith in the concept of a truly random coincidence, "Japan?"

A guilty pause, far away look as if consulting some unseen object of guidance, then a slight nod.

"Just off the plane, not a few minutes before I found you. I was looking for that man as well."

"To kill him?"

"To question him. Listen, we need to talk... Agent Black."

"My name, how did you-?"

A fatalistic smile her only answer before again tugging on his sleeve.

"Call it being a good guesser. I'm Anya, now come on before they realize we're among the witnesses."

They both left together, quiet and unseen, while the last of one Thomas Tyler is slurped up off the floor.

A short while later, Agent Black and Anya Petrova sitting in a corner booth of a small innocuous coffee shop some blocks from the edge of the airport, his briefcase on the floor beside her leather gym bag. At the other side of the room is the bar, its television tuned into the local news while the bartender there readies for the afternoon crowd.

"A man torn apart in full view of hundreds of witnesses and not a thing about it mentioned, not a single witness who can remember. I questioned a few myself moments after we left the airport."

"That's why I wanted to get out of there," she quietly replies, "I suspected it would be something like that. So, just how open-minded *are* you?"

"Enough to listen. And you? You believe in monsters, the supernatural, that sort of stuff?"

"You'd be surprised. How's about I go first. My... instincts... tell me you may be open-minded to my story. I certainly hope so, because I have nowhere to turn right now."

"You start, I'll listen without interruption," he agrees, "then if I determine you need to know— and can *survive* being told— I'll tell you what I can of my own story."

"Good enough..."

Coffee and sandwiches come, left off at the table by the waitress, then once just the two alone again she begins.

"I am Anya Petrova, hired assassin under employ of Sony Corp. Nothing overtly illegal about it, at least not in Japan where Tetsui Myoko

owns nearly everything..."