

# ***Part One: Nightmare***

"Hello, hello. Remember me?  
I'm everything you can't control."

--*What You Want*, Evanescence

## ***Prologue: Visitation***

Lieutenant-colonel Allen Sanders still pulled on the heavy, camouflaged shirt of his ACU fatigues when he marched through the thrown-open doors to the Lawrence-Livermore Trans-Universal Field Generator facility. In his wake tromped three heavily armed soldiers, their Field Officer, and the Officer of the Guard. They met a short, plump woman in jeans, sandals, and a faded t-shirt showing GEEK CRED! in bold lettering, a Star Wars movie poster under the words. Four soldiers, also in armor and weapons, stood gathered in a semi-circle behind her.

"Report!" Sanders called into the gathering.

The soldiers deferred to the t-shirted woman.

"We've experienced an operational anomaly," she said, raking her fingers through her short, unkempt brown hair. Her voice sounded hollow in the canyon of the atrium. Except for the ceiling tiles fifty feet up, all the surfaces were polished terrazzo. "I can't imagine what caused it, but we're efforting that analysis right--"

"Chief Engineer Eglemann." Sanders's tone rumbled. "It's two o'clock in the morning. English, please."

The woman froze. She scrunched up her face as if she smelled something bad. "The generator's active."

"Active? What exactly do you mean?"

"It turned on. We have a trans-universal event forming in the well."

No one spoke for a second. Sanders stared across the wide, empty atrium at the massive double doors to the generator room. "It turned on," he finally said. "I wasn't aware it even worked."

Eglemann winced. "Yes, sir. That's precisely the problem."

The colonel turned to his Field Officer of the Guard, a thin, hard-carved captain with a hatchet-cut frown on his face. "Place a perimeter around this building. No one comes or goes without our knowing." He acknowledged a brief affirmation, then turned a sour eye on the t-shirted woman. "Eglemann, you're with me, and I want your explanations somewhat more lucid." He strode toward the double doors, Eglemann falling in beside him.

"Right now I can't imagine what to tell you," the engineer said. "We were doing dry calibrations, not even a power source engaged, and the thing ... just ... turned ... on."

They reached the doors. Sanders put his hand on the palm reader near the twin latches. "You're an engineer," he said as the reader scanned him. "I shouldn't have to inform you that it can't just turn on. It's connected to two secure nuclear piles and it would take authorization from the Director of National Security or two United States senators--"

"I know that. I also know we have a Category 1 trans-universal event standing beyond these doors and I have no idea how to shut it down."

Frowning at that, Sanders thrust down on the two latches and hauled open the massive doors. The action required effort, but not as much as the size of the doors suggested. Hydraulics hummed in the wall around the entry, assisting in a task no man could manage alone. The atrium filled with a baritone hum, shouts from multiple voices, and the crackle of static discharges.

Sanders and Eglemann pushed into a scene of confused desperation. A dozen or more technicians in white lab coats tore around an expansive circular chamber, a great, towering cavern of man-made space. The curved walls were faced with seven-foot-tall electronic cabinets on two levels, and freestanding control consoles stood positioned just clear of the overhanging upper gallery. The technicians darted from console to console and panel to panel, yelling to their counterparts on either of the levels. They shouted in dry-mouthed urgency, too loud even accounting for the reverberating hum and static chatter. Though Sanders understood none of the technical jargon flying through the air, he had seen enough of war and black hellholes to know the sound of fear.

In the middle of that confusion, ranging between a thirty-meter disk of ceramic hexagons on the floor and an equally yawning parabolic dish fixed to the fifty-foot ceiling, a wavering tendril of orange light twisted, sputtered, and flared. It danced between the two focusing platforms and within the bounds set by four hulking, antennae-peppered pylons arranged around the ceramic circle. The light didn't seem content to stay there. It wanted out, and to grow.

Someone, seeing Eglemann and the colonel from the second-floor gallery, leaned on the safety rail and yelled down to them. "Power throughput's up twenty-seven percent! We're measuring gravimetric distortions at the perimeter!"

One of the white coats ran up to Eglemann, panting and sweaty. He shoved a tablet computer into her hands. "We've confirmed the reactors are offline," he said. "We can't figure out where the lightning post is coming from."

"Are the N-space positioning sensors heated up?" Eglemann asked, glancing at a barrage of readouts on the tablet.

"On standby."

"Activate. We may not have a cause, but we can plot where the thing is coming from."

"Gotcha." The tech ran toward a console across the room.

"Explain." Sanders wanted to castigate someone. It wasn't professional, but there it was.

"It's all bad news, sir. We've got this event, it's barely held in check by the attenuation pylons, it's growing in energy throughput, and we can't bleed it off because the reactors are offline. We can't control what happens here. If the thing balloons up and we're inside its horizon..."

"We'll be transported to who knows where in who knows what universe and we'll arrive as wrong as a three-legged race horse."

"Yes, sir."

"What about the iron?"

"The iron in the attenuation pylons is all that's holding the event in check. If the throughput level increases much more, those countermeasures may fail."

"Increases by how much?"

She winced. "We don't know."

"Eglemann. We've invested two years and four billion dollars in this little science project of yours--"

"Respectfully, we didn't have the slightest inkling of this level of physics *until* two years ago. We're in baby steps, colonel. Don't expect miracles."

Sanders leaned in to within a few inches of Eglemann's face. "Don't expect miracles? When that thing, that Bright Lights Tornado from Hell, is threatening to whisk us all to the Twilight Zone? I think a miracle or two is called for."

Just then, as if it had been listening, the orange pillar of light winked out. An audible snap, then the humming was gone along with the static charge. A strange blue afterglow punctuated the normalized lighting.

Eglemann glanced around, her eyes narrowed.

"Good job," the colonel said. He relaxed -- slightly -- for the first time since the guard shook him awake. "I'll see to making you a saint just as soon as I've had breakfast."

"Uhh, I didn't do that."

Gunfire. Not just a shot, but a long argument between weapons. Eglemann jumped. The techs taking electronics readings froze in their tracks. Sanders flinched his hand toward a weapon he didn't carry.

The Field Officer of the Guard hurried in past the cracked-open double doors. He was just slapping his pistol back into its holster. "Sir, there's been an incident. With the guard, sir." The captain's eyes shone wide and distant. The man was rattled.

"What do you advise?" Sanders asked. The man had gone four tours in Iraq and Somalia. He could be trusted to keep an even strain.

"Keep the civilians here, escort any others inside the facility to here, and you come with me, sir. I've three men I can trust to guard these folks."

"What's going on?" Eglemann asked.

"Stay here," Sanders told her. "Gather information. I'll be back."

He followed his man to the doors. When they passed through to the atrium, Sanders held a hand out to one of the guards stationed there. "Soldier, your sidearm," he said.

The guard handed over a loaded Beretta and an extra clip.

"This way, sir," the captain urged, and moved to exit the building. He sent two men each in opposite directions through the facility to gather any civilians not already in the generator room. Two more men he left at the doors to the generator, then another prowling the space between the atrium entrance and the generator room's double doors. Each soldier held his assault rifle ready for use.

Outside, only the captain's men occupied the street. No curious onlookers. Of course, there wouldn't be any at that time of morning. The Lawrence-Livermore complex was not a live-in posting. The Officer of the Guard, a wiry first lieutenant, met his captain and colonel with four additional men. The soldiers watched outward against something the officers hadn't disclosed. Still Sanders kept his mouth shut. These were his people; he knew what they were worth. They'd speak when they needed to.

They led him right to the guard shack.

Sanders saw three soldiers posted at good cover outside the low cinder block building. He knew there were others. A secure perimeter had been formed.

"First shift was due to be awakened in four hours," the captain finally said. "Lieutenant, deploy the men to augment security."

"Yes, sir." The Officer of the Guard took his four grunts and tromped into the dark.

"I'm sorry, sir, it's a mess." The captain shook his head. He grabbed at the collar of his armor as if the unit didn't fit properly. "Sixth shift had just come on and fifth was still up and about, so those are the men you see out here."

Sanders pricked up his ears. He heard sirens on the horizon, and the phantom drum of helicopter rotors.

Noticing his colonel's interest, the captain made a vague gesture toward those wails in the night. "We had to call them. SOP. And we can't handle the wounded alone."

"The wounded?"

The captain led Sanders up the walk to the guardhouse and through the door. "Cisneros from first shift, he must have gotten up. He came in here, they tell me, and took up one of the weapons fifth was waiting to sign in."

They stalked through the front office, with the counter, the desk, and the two chairs for the Officer and the Sergeant of the Guard. They crossed this to the back room, the common room, where the guard shifts took their orders and stood inspection. The room was an open space with three vinyl couches along one wall and a pool table far to the rear. The door to the arms room carved out a section of wall across from the couches. That door hung open. No armorer guarded the weapons in the space beyond.

He was instead in the common area, ministering to a dozen men in various stages of undress, many of them bloodied, a few of them laid out on the floor. Two uniformed medics moved among the wounded, as did a number of uninjured troops. Except for the bright fluorescent light and the magazines on the tables, it looked like the aftermath of an ambush.

"He ... Cisneros ... said something." The captain paused half way across the room. He looked toward a door at the back wall, at the colonel, then again at the door at the rear of the room. He didn't see the men around him. "He spoke just after taking the weapon, from right there in the door to the bunks. He just took the weapon and went back there."

For a moment it seemed the captain would go no farther. He had taken his commander to the virtual threshold of something terrible and seemed rooted by a crippling internal tumult. Sanders eyed the doorway to the sleeping quarters, stewed on what the captain had said -- *He spoke just after taking the weapon* -- and glanced about the room. Two video cameras nested in the front and back corners. He'd have to get hold of those recordings.

The captain wrestled whatever demon besieged him, then shook his head as if throwing off a punch. "In here, sir," and he walked through the sleeping room doorway.

Sanders followed, fighting an urge to flee the way he had come. The bunk room stank of shit, blood, guts, and cordite, the smells so strong, so intermingled, so thick that they were trapped there. The walls showed spatters in red, white, and gray -- blood, bone, and organ meat. Bodies littered the beds and floor, some of them face down in a viscous fright show of pooling bodily excretions. Sanders wanted to scream. He wanted to rage. These were his soldiers. And if the captain intimated clearly, one of his own had murdered them.

But Sanders did not rage. He kept his commander's face intact. He set his jaw against quivering muscles and scanned the carnage.

One man stood amid that death. The Sergeant of the Guard seemed planted like a statue before a messy stack of two torn bodies on a blood-soaked bunk. One ravaged corpse lay splayed across the remains of a man still tucked beneath sodden Army blankets. The sergeant stared at the dead meat before him and showed no emotion.

"God in Heaven," Sanders muttered, then, more loudly, "How many?"

"Fourteen," the captain said, his voice cracking. "First, second, and third shifts in bed. A few escaped. Fourth shift was still up. They were in the common room."

Sanders steeled himself and cruised slowly up the long center aisle between lined-up bunks. He tried not to get too much muck on his boots. He knew these troops. He had inspected them, counseled them, been privileged to promote them. And they were dead, killed by their own. In peacetime. On home soil. "Cisneros," he said when he came up to the sergeant. They both stared at the almost naked, violated body thrown across another man's bunk.

"Yes, sir," the captain said.

The Sergeant of the Guard just stared at the corpse.

"How..." Sanders's voice fell away from him. He dragged it back to duty. "How did you stop him?"

The captain said nothing, just turned his eyes on the sergeant. The colonel's gaze made it there, too.

"He wasn't right," the sergeant said. His tone held no inflection. "I was with fifth shift, signing in weapons. Durham, that asshole, let Cisneros take his rifle. Cisneros spouted some crazy shit standing in the door, then he came back here, smooth as you please. And started shooting." The sergeant shook himself, but didn't take his eyes off the body. "I didn't know what to think. I was on my way to him before he went through the door. I was gonna chew his ass for shit talk and breaking protocol. Then I heard the bolt go back, and the shooting. Then men were screaming, running, barreling past me. I had trouble getting through the door..."

"It's all right, sarge." The captain's voice sounded as dead as his NCO's. "It couldn't be helped."

The sergeant gave no hint of hearing. "Then I broke through, and he was shooting them in their beds. And I ... put him down."

Sanders stared at the sergeant for what felt like a full minute. In that time, sirens wailed up and landed outside. The definite *WHOP! WHOP! WHOP!* of helicopters reverberated overhead. After a while, Sanders forced his eyes onto Cisneros, or what was left of him. The man's shoulders, head, and one arm hung off the bed. He lay there precariously balanced at the edge of the mattress, nearly upside down. He was naked except for his sand-colored boxers. His torso was almost split in two, but the kind of split you get from a chainsaw or a shark attack. Or an assault rifle held by a brother-in-arms.

Then Sanders recalled the defensive posture of the soldiers outside. "Is everyone accounted for?"

"No, sir," the captain said. "Three missing."

"Which shift?" But Sanders already knew.

"First, sir."

The sergeant tore his eyes away from the almost naked body for the first time. Those eyes were dead. "I didn't move a thing. Because this is, like, a crime scene. Right?"

"Yes, sergeant, and that was forward thinking of you." Sanders gave him one last look, then turned back up the room. He grabbed the captain on his way to the door. "I want every man accounted for. If you trust them, they gear up. If you don't, lock them in detention. Those orders stand until we find those other three."

"Yes, sir. And what do we do when we find them?"

They burst into the common room, which filled with EMTs carrying stretchers and body bags. Two sheriff's deputies interviewed soldiers, and a crewman from air medevac made initial evaluations of the wounded. Only the beginning, Sanders thought. It would get a lot worse, real fast.

"We subdue and capture them. These are our people. Weapons loose but restricted." They dodged through the increasing crowd, the police drawing near to Sanders. The colonel raised a finger to them and leaned close to his captain. "What the hell happened here, Bob? Does it have anything to do with the generator?"

The captain's eyes were clouded. He was still in recovery. "I don't know. To tell the truth, I'm not too clear on what the generator is. But, sir..." and he squeezed his eyes shut for one mental shake of his head. He opened them and locked his newly steadied gaze on his superior, daring the colonel to dismiss what he'd say. "The men told me -- *all* the men told me -- that he had his eyes closed when he did it. Like he was asleep."

Sanders clamped his teeth shut on "You must be crazy!" He'd have to see that security video. "Find those three men. They may be casualties or they may be threats. Either way, they're problems. And check on our civilians. They and the generator are the only thing here worth attacking."

"Wilco, sir." A stronger, oriented captain sent the colonel a perfunctory salute, then pushed his way out of the guard shack.

Sanders stood a little straighter. He breathed a little easier. He had to. The cops waited behind him. They'd want answers to questions. They'd want the run of the barracks, perhaps even the entire base. And they'd want the video. Sanders had to give them nothing. He clasped his hands behind his back, still holding the pistol, and turned.

"I'm sorry, officers," he said evenly. "It's a little crazy around here. How may I help you?"

One of the deputies touched the brim of his Smokey Bear hat by way of greeting. "Sir, I'm Deputy Granger, this here's Deputy Blalock. We were dispatched here on account of reported multiple homicides. We'll need to secure this area and interview all those present--"

"Afraid not."

"Sir?"

"This is a highly classified government facility. You were called as a matter of SOP, but you can't be allowed the run of the land. The Official Secrets Act--"

"Colonel, a number of your men were attacked. Some are dead, from what we can see. There are detectives on the way. Crime lab boys. The coroner. You're not gonna keep us out of here."

"We'll cooperate in all ways possible, but the security of this facility cannot be compromised."

"Colonel--"

"Please withdraw your people and these emergency personnel to the front gate. We'll arrange procedures to satisfy both your jurisdiction and federal requirements as soon as your chief investigators and our public relations specialists arrive."

The cop blinked. His partner glanced around the chaos of the guard shack and thinned his lips.

"Are we clear to go back there?" an EMT called from the door to the bunk room. "Holy shit."

"Clear the crime scene," the spokesman cop, Granger, yelled. "Get all the injured outside and, and..." He gave Sanders a sour look. "Is there someplace we can take the injured, sir? Someplace not classified?"

"The mess hall is across the way. The lieutenant outside can direct you."

"Thank you so much, sir. You've been a great help."

The police didn't bother Sanders after that. The wounded were carried, carted, or steadied on their way across the road. In a few minutes, the guard shack stood silent, at least within. The shouting, vehicle engines, and helicopter turbines stormed beyond the front door.

Sanders stood alone except for the Sergeant of the Guard, who had come to the bunk room threshold.

"What the hell happened, sir?" The sergeant dearly wanted an answer.

Sanders shook his head. "I don't know, sergeant, I just don't know."

They'd need FBI, Sanders thought. They'd need NSA for the stuff too classified even for the FBI. They'd need the Attorney-General to handle the cops--

A tromp of boots at the building entrance, then someone crashed through the outer office.

What the hell could get any worse?

A soldier appeared in the common room doorway, panting from lack of breath. "Sir! Captain says you gotta come! The generator building, sir!"

They were off again. Sanders followed the soldier. He heard the Sergeant of the Guard behind him, but did not look back. Out in the open, he caught the lieutenant's worried eye and pointed toward the watching deputies. "Keep those men here!" he yelled, then left the dirty work to his officer.

The generator facility had changed in the last several minutes. When the captain had taken Sanders to the guardhouse, the curb in front of the building had been empty, just a short, dull stretch on an empty road. Three

Humvees now parked at odd angles to the curb, one half on the sidewalk. Soldiers crouched in groups of three, using the trucks as shields between them and the facility.

And up the steps at the entry doors stood three men, two in undershorts, one in sweat pants and a sand-colored t-shirt. No shoes, no socks, just sleeping clothes. And each held a Squad Assault Weapon pointed outward from the waist.

The soldier delivered Sanders to his captain, who hunkered down behind the center Humvee. The captain grinned sickly. "Well, sir," he said, "we found them."

"Yes, I see." Sanders peeked over the hood of the truck. "So, can anyone tell me why they're armed? And why they're armed and in their underwear?"

"Sir, I don't pretend--"

"All right. Then here's something I imagine you *can* answer. What are we doing about ... whatever this is?"

"I'll need your go on this, sir." The captain hovered his hand at the radio hung from his field harness. "In case they misbehave." He keyed his mike. "Alpha Team, you have a go."

Watching from defilade behind the truck, Sanders caught a movement far to the left. A soldier had popped up from behind a retaining wall bordering the building's front lawn. He rattled his rifle and dropped back down.

The two near-naked men answered that disturbance with a spray of rifle fire. Bullets thudded into the wall, sparking and blasting out clouds of concrete dust, but the targeted guard was unharmed.

Sanders noticed one other detail that chilled his spine. All three of the gunmen had their eyes closed.

"Jesus, those men are asleep."

"It seems so," the captain said. "There are civilians in that building. High security assets. A situation like this calls for deadly force."

Sanders balked at that. "These are our men. No. Not if we can manage."

"Thank you, sir."

"Have you tried CS?"

"Tear gas does no good, sir. Not so much as a cough."

"Well, they're too well armed to rush, that's for sure."

"On the bright side, they aren't packing more than the mags in their weapons. I mean, where would they hide a reload?"

The colonel shifted his crouch. "You seem to have a plan."

"Yes, sir. With your permission..."

Sanders nodded. The captain clicked on his radio. "All teams, short bursts, overhead, nonlethal. Flank teams stand ready. Engage." He released the mike button and nodded at Sanders. "Let's see if we can get 'em to use up their ammo."

His last few words nearly drowned in a storm of automatic weapons fire. The soldiers behind the trucks, the wall, and at the corners of the buildings across the street threw unaimed bursts into the air while maintaining cover from the generator facility's entrance. The guards at the door answered each burst of gunfire with one of their own. Bullets bit at the street and lawn, some kicking up asphalt around the Humvees, some raining spent back to earth after steep arcs into the night sky.

The racket played out in less than thirty seconds. A thirty-round magazine doesn't last very long.

"Flank teams, go!" the captain snapped into his radio.

Three men rushed in from either side of the building, weapons aimed at their underwear-garbed targets. It took them several seconds to close the gap, but the men at the doors made no move to counter the attack. They just stood there jerking their fingers against unresponsive triggers. The assault crew stripped them of their weapons and bullied them face-down onto the grass. An instant later, the NCO on the scene yelled, "Clear!"

On that word, the entire visible guard force surged at the building. Several took up security positions outside, the now animated Sergeant of the Guard castigating them into a barrier no one could pass. The colonel, his captain, and several rank-and-file flooded through the doors, briefly paused to not shoot the three guards in the atrium, and invaded the generator chamber beyond.

"Thank goodness!" Eglemann cried when she saw who flooded into her space. "The guys out there said we were under some sort of attack!"

"The operative word is 'were,'" Sanders assured her. He watched as the captain dispersed his men throughout the chamber. They made fast work of a search, scoping for any other bizarre dangers that might have been loose that night.

"It's a hack," Eglemann reported. Her crew of engineers huddled close around her at one of the electronics panels along the wall. One of their number cradled a laptop computer trailing a wire plugged into the panel. "As far as we can tell, everything else is a diversion."

"A diversion?" Sanders clamped his mouth shut. She didn't know, of course. "Your theory is incorrect. What we just went through was not a diversion."

"Oh." Thoughts flitted behind Eglemann's eyes, but if she intended to respond, she changed her mind. "But it's a hack. We got a firewall warning, unauthorized outgoing search, so we tagged that and found other internal activity, also unauthorized. Well, it was authorized, but it couldn't have been--"

"It's been a long night. If you could get to the point...."

Eglemann made a strange humming noise, as if hauling words back down her throat. She pointed toward the big double doors for some reason. "All searches were on Doctor Rodriguez's password, but she isn't on site. She's at home. You can't do internal network searches from off site."

Sanders lost all patience. "Eglemann! I don't care!"

The engineer flinched away from him. Her people cowered closer to the wall.

"You don't realize it, but men are dead right now," the colonel barreled on. "Men are dead -- my men -- and my men did the killing! So excuse me if I just don't care about your little computer glitches!"

"It isn't a glitch!" The force of Eglemann's rejoinder deflated Sanders's tirade. He felt immediate shame at his behavior, and a returning heat to his face. He should have apologized. He should have. But Eglemann wasn't done burning him. "It wasn't a glitch, it was an intentional breach of our classified directories. Whoever did this was specific in their targets. They went for everything Nightwatch tagged. Thank goodness most of that's off site and secured only on controlled hard drives. But they went after it nonetheless. We were attacked, colonel!"

Yes, Sanders thought, we were. But not by a hacker sucking down Mountain Dew in some Eastern European stink hole. But then, she still didn't know.

"And one more," Eglemann continued, an index finger stabbing the air. "They were focused on two directories. They wanted everything on Clayton Hostetter but got next to nothing since he's an asset, since his data is hard drive isolated. And they invaded one other directory and got plenty, we're sure of it."

"Which directory?" Sanders asked through clenched teeth. Any number of sensitive files would be disastrous in the wrong hands. The generator. The N-space mathematics sets. The extra-universal address logs and their corresponding connection reports. He discovered he had been pacing before the engineers, and stopped.

"Fiona Street," Eglemann said.

Sanders stood stock still for a moment, then clenched his fists and uttered a single, atmosphere-igniting curse.

"Yes, sir," Eglemann agreed. "I hope we aren't dealing with Snowden."

Street, Sanders thought. Street. How could-- But, yes, that incident two years earlier. She had practically been a celebrity. But no one outside the intelligence community had known the real story. If a hostile power had stolen Street's files... It was like losing the H-bomb to the Soviets all over again.

"I want your data," he said, casting a sharp glance toward Eglemann. "I want it in ten minutes, in your office. Captain!"

"Sir!"

"I want your report, as much as you can muster. Chief Engineer Eglemann's office, ASAP. And I want the video files from the cameras in the guard shack."

"Yes, sir!"

Sanders marched toward the heavy double doors, one fist balled, the other hand gripping his pistol until it trembled. The problem with engineering labs was that they offered so little to kick, and what they gave you tended to be both expensive and delicate.

"What are you gonna do?" Eglemann called after him.

"I plan to find a secure phone. Then I'm calling the NSA, the FBI, and everyone else I know with initials." He pushed open one of the double doors and continued into the atrium. "And when I run out of initials, I'm calling Fiona Street!"

## ***Chapter One***

Work, work, work. Equal parts "Hurry Up and Wait" and "Hey, Guys, Watch This." And all of it while traveling coach.

Childress stood outside the doors of the CVS Pharmacy, bored almost to tears. D loitered with him, his eyes always scanning the dumbasses crowding the sidewalk on both sides of the busy street. D wasn't bored. He got *in* to

it, he always did. D played the Good Nigger, the straight-and-narrow Captain America federal agent protecting the sweet and innocent taxpayers from blah, blah, blah. He didn't mind dressing like a gangbanger and lurking in doorways, but then, D was a man without standards.

Childress was smarter than that. He stood there at the drugstore's entrance and watched, yes. He shrugged now and then in his oversized hoodie showing its high-contrast black and white silkscreen of a burning American flag. He scowled at the natives, a good hundred protesters, mainly black. They gathered in two tight knots, one in front of the CVS, the other across the street in the Walgreens parking lot. They'd spread into the street soon enough, that's what you did when nobody gave a shit what you thought or even noticed you were protesting. They'd spread into the street to gum up traffic and make the cops act.

Stupid to get the attention of the law. What, they thought they were white college students?

"Linny Ball will never fall!"

"Black lives matter!"

"Welcome to Naptown: one day with no police shootings!"

Right. Nonsense like that. The kind of stuff white folks tolerated only so long as it didn't muck up their plans. These guys were good at it. Now and then they pulled out cigarette lighters they maybe had always owned, had bought at the drug stores, or had taken from a bag passed by the protest organizers. They held those up and flicked them on, yelling, "Can't get whiter, shoot me for a lighter!"

Childress had to admit, that last one had a ring to it.

He looked at D, and grinned. If he had to stand around and watch brothers and sisters make fools of themselves, at least he could have fun with the boys.

"I ain't sayin' they ain't got a point," Childress said. "But it's a fact the dumbass was a black man, in a red state, and harassed by cops. So why'd the stupid-assed muthuhfuckuh pick that time of all times to whip out a lighter and fix himself a Kool? Hell, I woulda shot the stupid niggah, too."

D huffed. It came off good in his big, zippered hoodie showing a torso-sized portrait of Bob Marley in dreadlocks. D was a big guy, tall and muscled like Childress, and a huff from him was like a threat from anybody else. "You talk so much shit, man. I noticed you checking for your agent's ID more than once." He nodded across the street -- north rather than west toward the Walgreens -- at the gaggle of armored policemen at the McDonald's.

"They make you more nervous than you let on?"

Bullshit. "I said they had a point. Ain't you listenin'? White cop catches a brother walkin' while black, it gonna end in target practice more than the average fuck figures. I ain't immune. Shit, I actually *am* carryin'."

"You're entitled," a breathy female voice said into his ear. "You're a federal agent on duty, cleared by the local jurisdiction."

Childress laughed. "Spoken like the lily-white red-headed Barbie doll you are, Cap. This really ain't your conversation."

"I don't see--" his in-ear radio complained.

"And that's why you white folks need to shut up and listen." Childress looked at D, at the crowd, then over to the upper floor windows of the boarded-up building behind the Walgreens. "You're the only voice that ain't got no point. All that 'All lives matter' bullshit."

"Well ... don't they?" the female voice asked.

"Only to them that ain't got no worries. You don't go down the street with every cop and half the civilians givin' you the hairy eyeball, so you can talk about 'all lives matter' an' shit. My peeps, we hope we don't get shot, beat down, or arrested every time we go buy a quart of milk."

"Oh, come on--"

D shook his head and scratched that thin little Van Dyke beard of his. "Sorry, Captain Street, but I'm with Childress on this one. You can't possibly understand, being white, with white cops, a white army, and white governments. You're always safe, you just don't know it because you don't have to."

"Really. I'm a woman, you know."

"Yeah, we figured that out," Childress said. He gave D a tired look. "She gonna keep this goin', ain't she?"

"Hey, I'm right here," the radio in his ear complained.

"That's kind of the point, ma'am." D never took his eyes from the crowd. "You're 'here' all right, in your ivory tower--"

"Boarded up tenement."

"--boarded up tenement, because you'd look too obvious down here on the street. This isn't your thing. Best you and any white person can do in this mess is shut up and listen for a change."

"I'm feeling an urge to remind you fellas that I am, in fact, your boss."



"Yes, massuh." Childress flashed D an evil grin. "Maybe y'all shoulda thought of that before you hired a bunch of civilians."

"Do we have to fill the net with existential chatter?" A new voice, that one, deep and firm. The ramrod-straight Sergeant Grace.

"Top! Glad you could join us." Childress rolled his shoulders to adjust the hang of his crappy jacket. "So you white folks gonna gang up on us poor, defenseless niggahs, that it?"

"I'd just like some quiet," the voice answered.

"Yeah, me, too," another put in. "My ear is starting to sweat."

This was getting to be fun. "Who's that?" Childress asked. "Ponce?"

"Tejada."

Childress laughed. "Sorry, man. All y'all Mexicans sound alike."

"Puerto Rican here," another voice put in.

"Mexican, Puerto Rican, what's the difference? At least, that's what the po-po gonna say when they shippin' y'all out." Childress squinted across to the Walgreens parking lot. "So how's about it? Ponce, Tejada. Got your green cards handy? Your papers, they are in order?" He said that last with a cartoonish German accent.

"You always talking shit, Childress," Tejada said through a laugh. "How'd you ever come to work for the government?"

"Ain't you heard, man?" Childress slapped D lightly on the arm and nodded across the street. "I'm a revolutionary. Bringin' change from within the beast."

"Got activity," D said. "Somebody over at the Walgreens is lining up folks on the curb. Looks like they plan to rush into the street."

"Ponce?" the female voice prompted.

"The police over here see it. They're arranging a wedge to clear the intersection, if necessary. Also calling to the traffic control cars up and down both streets. They don't sound very excited."

"Why should they?" Childress snorted. "Bunch a dumbasses jumpin' out in front of cars."

"Keep a close watch," Captain Street said. "We've been tracking this guy for two years. I'd hate to lose him again."

"We cool," Childress said. "That was Chicago. We weren't ready. Now we bringin' the *downtown* to *Naptown*." D groaned.

"Looks like Intel had this one right," Grace said. "We'll see in a few minutes. Stay sharp, people. The window will be short."

"Understood, Sergeant Grace," Tejada's voice answered.

"Ready, top," Ponce added.

"Like I was sayin'," Childress said, "you gotta be careful if you ain't of the white persuasion in this country. Hell, with a name like Tejada, you don't want Uncle even seein' you on Twitter. How you even spell that, man? There an 'H' in there or some other Mexican shit?"

"It's a 'J'."

"A 'J' where it sounds like an 'H', or what?"

"What are you, Human Resources?" Ponce asked.

Across the street, a knot of a dozen or so protesters streamed into traffic, hands up and shouting. Brakes squealed. The street before the CVS became an instant clot of metal. Vehicles jammed in the intersection, too, forcing both streets to a halt.

"Linny Ball will never fall! Black lives matter!"

"It don't take Human Resources," Childress continued. "It's like those poor bastards who buy a ticket to fly, then when they try to board the plane, some prick in a uniform or a starched shirt grabs 'em 'cause their name sounds all ISIS or some shit. He got a funny name, so they figure him for a terrorist, man. Fucker could be a dentist, for all they know."

"Police are moving." Ponce reported. And they were. The cops filed out of the McDonald's parking lot, plastic shields held in front, batons poised before the shields.

"Stand by," Street said. "This isn't our thing."

"Take D here," Childress said. "Our man D DeBoy, a more unlucky son of a bitch you won't find nowhere. What's your first name, D?"

"Man, I don't have time for this."

"You got all the time, niggah. We ain't got nothin' to do."

"Linny Ball will never fall! Black lives matter!" More protesters poured into the street. They held up lighters, held up hands, and faced the police with attitude and not much else. The cops formed an "L" in the middle of the

intersection and banged their batons against their shields. Other policemen not in armor moved into traffic, trying to unknot the snarl of cars. The yelling, horns, and banging were enough to hurt a man's ears.

"Go on, D," Childress insisted. "Tell us. What's your name?"

D sighed. "De'Juajawan."

"De-*who*?"

"You heard me the first time. *Nolan*."

"Don't change the subject--"

"Oh, please, do change the subject," Captain Street groaned.

"Now, now, I got me a point that needs makin'," Childress said after a bark of laughter.

"Are you *sure* it needs making?" Tejada asked.

The police pressed the protesters back toward the Walgreens parking lot. The protesters resisted, yelling slogans and insults at the cops and giving ground only grudgingly. Suddenly, they charged the shields, hands up and mad as hell.

"I mean, think about poor De'Jua-- De'ja-- What the fuck was that, man?"

"Fuck you, Childress."

"No, man, I'm serious here, serious as a heart attack. Your momma saddled you with that name. What is it, like, ethnic or somethin'?"

"Maybe we should re-locate." D had his eyes on the dustup in the intersection. It threatened to spread their way, which wasn't much of a distance.

"Re-locate? Why?"

"We're standing in the doorway to a drugstore. Maybe we shouldn't be here when somebody throws in a firebomb. Wasn't there credible intelligence for firebombs?"

"Maintain position," the solid voice of Sergeant Grace said.

"Says you," Childress answered. "You ain't the niggah down in the riot, man."

"But I am," Street answered.

"Yeah, right. I think I'd see your alabaster ass out here, that's sure."

"Look down."

Childress looked down. For a second all he saw was concrete, asphalt, and other people's shoes. Then a movement to his left caught his eye and he noticed a cat standing a few feet away, next to the wall. A black cat. Like the one his boss always had at her side.

The cat looked up at him, knowledge in its green eyes.

Dimly, a red jewel glowed on its neck.

"Uh, no," Childress said. "I ain't believin' that."

"Close your mouth," the captain said. "You might eat a fly."

For an instant, Childress thought the cat had spoken. He closed his mouth hard and shook his head.

D laughed as if his guts would split.

"Shee-it." Childress waved a hand at the cat to dismiss it. "You white folks full o' tricks."

D's laughter hitched in his throat and came out as high-pitched squeals.

"Yeah, right." Childress sneered. "So let's get back to important shit. Like, we know that De'Juajawan shit, D's fucked up name, is about as cash poor of culture as every faked-up African-soundin' name floatin' through the 'hood. Names like that are enough to make real Africans sprain their eyes rollin' 'em."

"Did I properly express my opinion that you should fuck off?" D asked past sniggers.

"No, you said I should fuck *me*, not fuck *off*, or somebody else should fuck me, like maybe the American jurisprudence system or, you know, somebody. But why would your momma give you a faked-up African-soundin' name, D? It's like paintin' a scarlet letter on your ass. White boys don't even need a picture, man. They see that name, and they go 'Hey there, uh, Winslow, I believe we have us a nigger here.' Resumes, rental contracts, fuckin' Amazon accounts, they got your number good, man, without ever seein' your cocoa-colored face. Your middle name is 'Sorry-assed', that's for sure."

The police pushed against the crowd, forcing them toward the curb. Then car doors opened, drivers climbed out, and some of them yelled at the cops. More cops entered from the McDonald's lot. Someone, a driver, took a swing at a uniform. The cops took him down in a flurry of nightsticks.

"Peel an eye," Street said. "This is about where he's likely to show up. They don't call this guy Voice of the City for nothing."

"De'Juajawan Sorry-assed DeBoy!" Childress roared laughter. He slapped the wall behind him. "That's precious. I'll have to remember that. Hell, I ain't even got *started* on 'DeBoy'!"

Cell phones came out. When the driver went down beneath four cops, nearly everyone in the intersection, police excluded, caught it on video.

Several more of the stalled drivers, about half-and-half white and black, joined in talking trash to the cops.

"This won't end well," Ponce mused. It didn't sound like he knew he had listeners.

"Focus," Street said.

"Just like I been sayin'," Childress continued. "Here we are, Uncle Sugar's finest, and what we doin'? We're *hopin'* things get nasty. That's some whack shit-- Uh, pucker up, kids and kittens. We got action from the west. Up 16th Street. Watch the sky. You dig this?"

A black object, roughly manta ray shaped, rushed in from the west. It approached at roughly twenty feet off the ground, barely below the power lines. It made ground speed at maybe forty miles per hour.

The black cat started purring.

"Got it," Sergeant Grace said. "Can't tag it official. This could be it."

"Talk time's over, brothers and sisters. Gear up." Childress unzipped his jacket to clear access to his holster.

D followed suit and shouldered into the crowd. He and Childress paralleled each other, moving toward the intersection at widely separated points, always glancing toward the approaching aircraft to gauge where it might end up. Around them, protesters screamed at policemen, who ordered them in loud, firm tones to evacuate the street. Childress and D both had their IDs out and opened, flagging them at anyone who paid them any interest, especially the cops.

The cat followed, weaving through the forest of legs as if everyone stood carefully still.

About the time the police alerted on the aircraft, something more immediate tore their attention away.

"Gun!"

The alarm blasted over the net, yelled so loudly that it peaked out in static.

At an old, claptrap Ford, a fat black man, out on the street and shouting at the authorities, raised something nasty in his hand.

Childress's gun hand flinched, but he didn't dare draw, not with all those police around.

Fuck!

The scene froze for a high-res instant. The man gripped the gun, and it *was* a gun. Childress stood helpless, even restricted by his mission. There was Ponce, short, stocky, with his round, dim looking face and stupid three-day beard and his wrinkled salesman's suit. He grasped some bigwig cop by the arm and stabbed a pointing finger toward Childress and D. Tejada approached from far across the intersection, rangy, a freaking basketball player even, in his jeans and Army surplus fatigue jacket. And the cat, the only one reacting with any speed at all, darted toward the gunman like a black blur. Then the moment broke.

"Look! A gun!" some cop yelled, and a dozen pistols and more than one assault rifle swiveled toward the fat man.

"Drop it! Drop it *now!*"

"Fuckin' cops!"

"Drop the god damn *gun!*"

"They gonna shoot him!"

"Drop it or we --"

Somebody screamed.

The crowd lurched like a drunk, first away from the danger, then toward it, then in all directions at once.

"Fuckin' bastard cops!" And the fat man brought up the gun.

Childress flinched at the sound of stringed firecrackers the size of cherry bombs. The cops had fired from all directions.

Not one bullet hit a live target.

Childress saw it, his eyes wide in disbelief. He shook his head and squeezed his eyes closed before opening them again to re-check the impossible.

The bullets, a shitload of them, hung in mid-air, black little hovering bees. Then, with the gracelessness of pebbles, they dropped, clattering to the pavement.

"Shee-it!" Childress hissed.

The goddamned bullets had stopped in mid-air!

The cat rushed under the fat man's open car door, up his leg, and pounced on his face. The man screeched, dropped his pistol, and fell against his car while beating at his face. He only hit his face, because the cat had jumped to the Ford's rusted top.

Dust, trash, and pebbles burst through the panicked crowd. The jet or drone or whatever it was had halted overhead, fifteen feet off the ground. It looked as wide as a limo is long, with a fanjet under each manta-like wing. A kind of iris opened in its belly and *he* fell out, the guy, the one Street wanted.

There he was, big as life, and in his case life was pretty damned big. He wore a super suit like you'd find at a sports clothing store, one of those form-fitting things only Olympic athletes could really pull off. It was black, matte, minus only an Under Armor logo, and with it he wore combat boots and a weird-assed bicyclist's helmet with a gold visor. Around his tight waist wrapped, umm, a utility belt? Like Batman? Childress paused only a microsecond on that one, then his brain saw the holsters and went red alert.

The brother -- and yes, the mofo was black -- was a walking -- or rather falling -- armory, with big guns strapped to each thigh and a shoulder holster across one pec.

He fell out of the plane, landed on his feet, then slammed himself into two nearby policemen. He hit them like a bag of bricks; they didn't fall down so much as get driven there.

"Federal agents!" Tejada shouted. Childress slipped his weapon from his shoulder holster and aimed it at the ... the ... what the *fuck*?

The man -- *him* -- ignored the announcement. He treated another cop to a one-punch KO then extended both arms and closed his fists. Each forearm wore a bracelet of metal tubes, brassy things, maybe half a dozen tubes to a bracelet, each tube the size of an aerosol can. In the second it took Childress to log that detail, all the tubes spouted smoke and, well, rockets. He had RPGs at his wrists, about a dozen, and they had all gone off at the cops.

Policemen staggered away coughing or sneezing, the luckier ones, that is. The others found the pavement exploding at their feet, sending them reeling backward through the air.

The fat man, the ignorant asshole who'd triggered it all, struggled back to his feet. His face glistened red. The cat crouched on the car, ready to give him some more, but it turned out not to be necessary.

Supernigger snapped a hand to his Batman belt and flung a little something at Mr. Gun For Cops.

And electrocuted the bastard.

Shee-*it!*

Childress snapped out of it. Honestly, the whole thing had spanned no more than two, three seconds. "Stand down!" he called. "Federal agents!"

The man hesitated only a moment, cocking his head as if thinking about it. His back was turned to Childress, and it was a bulging landscape like steel chords and iron plating.

Then the guy slapped at something on his belt and the rules of the world freaked out.

A booming, metallic clang pained Childress's ears, then came back with plenty of reverb. The ammo in his gun cooked off, just exploded in place, whooshing flames through the handgrip. Childress dropped the weapon to save his palms. At the same time, half the cars in the intersection jumped in place as they maybe threw rods, exploded their radiators, or blew up their catalytic converters and therefore half their undercarriages. All the cell phones burst into flames.

"Shit!" Childress roared. "Shit, fuck, and *shit!*" He charged the big man, at the same time willing his numbed hands to close into fists.

Tejada was already there. The big guy in the bike helmet blocked his first and last punch, stepped around behind the agent, and pinched him on one shoulder. Tejada went down quivering.

Well, here goes.

Childress threw himself at the man from behind. He locked one arm about the guy's neck and gave him a coward's rabbit punch in the ribs. It felt like hitting a file cabinet. A file cabinet filled with Donald Trump's tax audits. And poured over with concrete. Childress thought maybe his hand was broken.

Then he thought maybe his arm was broken, too, as Black Batman wrenched that limb from around his neck, twisted it violently, and caused Childress to flip over it, over *his own arm*, and land on his back in the street. For the cherry on top, the big guy stomped Childress's gut. The air and Childress's will to live wheezed out of him like a squeezed balloon.

He lay there while D took his licking. It didn't take long, Superdude was nothing if not efficient. Happy in his work, the guy was. A fucking artist.

But D lasted long enough for Ponce to make an ass of himself. That Puerto Rican looked dumb, but there were gears behind those dull eyes. He figured out the silliness of toe-to-toeing that big bastard and, while D got his ass whipped, Ponce went for the ship instead. Big Guy wasn't going anywhere if Ponce could fuck up his ride.

So Ponce snatched a flash-bang from the vest of a fallen cop, ran up below the ship, and hurled that bomb right through the iris hole into the cramped cockpit.

Or that's what he might have wished he did. He threw the grenade, yes, but the iris, by some weird and awesomely cool means, snapped shut before the grenade went through. The canister bounced off, fell, blew in a scream of light and sound, and sent Ponce watery-legged and onto his ass.

Then the iris slid open again.

*Shee-it!*

They were all down, Uncle Sam's finest. Most of the cops were down. The fat gunman was down. About the only one standing was the Big Guy. And the cat.

Childress tried to get up, but barely lifted his shoulders from the pavement before white-hot pain stopped him.

The Big Guy, who hadn't been bothered by the flash-bang, marched to below his ship and reached for his belt. He was getting away. He'd kicked in everyone's heads. Again.

"Yeah," Childress croaked. "Yeah, you better run. 'Cause ... when I get outta the hospital ... I'm gonna take you down." He lay back onto the road. "Motherfucker."

The Big Guy paused at that outburst. He didn't frown. He didn't smile. Probably, he didn't care. He returned his attention to his belt.

He looked like he might tap his buckle -- maybe it doubled as a big button -- but his hand halted short of touching the matte black surface, then jerked sideways in time for a knife to embed itself into one of his brassy rocket launcher tubes.

"No," Captain Street said from thirty feet away. "We need to talk first, buddy."

## ***Chapter Two***

She knew she didn't look like much, and that was often their undoing. The big, strong, ultimate fighting types usually showed a smirk when faced with a slim little redhead with paper white skin and freckles. Her black leggings emphasized her clearly girly-girl failings, that and her Sketchers, and especially the fuzzy, loose, sky blue pullover sweater. Fuzzy sweaters about never spelled Threat. What could she possibly call fighting? A little tai chi? Some yoga? Miss Minifield's Self-defense Class for Upwardly Mobile Secretaries? Be chivalrous, the big bruisers always thought. Give her a chance to back out. Go easy on her. Spank her bottom and send her home. That's what they thought when they stood like tall rock walls before her. They adopted a different view once they were moaning on the ground, trying to protect their privates.

"You've been a bad boy," Fiona said. She flipped the other knife in her hand and took a few modest steps toward him. "Fifteen assaults in Chicago. Gangbangers, mostly, but a few cops, a taxi driver, and bullies on the L."

The Big Guy yanked the knife from his wrist weapon and dropped it to the pavement. He might have been staring her down, but how could she tell? That helmet and visor covered his eyes. But she could see the lower part of his face. He didn't offer the usual smirk. "I know about you," he said, his voice a booming baritone. "Washington, DC, two years ago. I saw you on television."

"Fifteen minutes of fame." Fiona took another step forward. She glanced at the cat, still on the Ford, and flicked her chin to the right. Oz leaped down from the car and skulked in the indicated direction. That's it. Teamwork. Set 'em up and knock 'em down. Or in this man-mountain's case, plant a flag on top. "So you've beaten up half the police force and nearly all my men. How about you and me talk instead."

"We have nothing to talk about." He looked up at his ship, ready to leave.

"What's your name?" Fiona angled closer in pretended nonchalance. Oz had a good read on the man. The Big Guy wasn't concerned. He was, however, curious. "Come on, if we're gonna talk, it should at least be on a name basis."

"You are Fiona Street," the booming voice said. "You already know me. They call me ... the Voice of the City."

Wow. Nice touch, the pause and all that. "So, umm, Mister City, what's up with the move?"

"Move?" His right hand hovered near his Batman utility belt.

Fiona instructed Oz to watch that hand. It was up to something. "Yeah. You know, you were scaring the crap out of the Windy City, then you turn up in little ol' Indianapolis. Kind of a step down, don't ya think?"

"I'm the Voice of the City. This..." He waved his left hand around. "...is the city."

"I doubt Chicago considers this a city." She wasn't five steps from him. The guy's arms bulged nearly as big around as her waist. And, apparently, he caused firearms to fail. "Okay, I gotta ask. Why haven't you run? It isn't like I can trip up your exit." What could she do with the knife that could make a difference in the next few seconds?

"I am the Voice of the City," the Big Guy rumbled. "And the city wants to know about you."

He was quick, but Oz had a sharp eye, so Fiona saw it coming. He flicked something off his belt. Two somethings. Three, each a flat, star-shaped razor of metal that stank of poison.

Fiona jerked her head to one side to avoid the first projectile. She heard it whistle past her ear. The second whizzed between her chest and upper arm. She was too slow for the third, which embedded in the loose knitting of her top, near her waist.

"Hey!" She flicked the knife at him. It struck between bicep and tricep, making the man grunt. "This sweater cost me fifty bucks!"

He swung at her, a fist like a sledgehammer, but Fiona had done her thing, had lost herself in the mental space part way between her and Oz. She could see the man from two angles, and in that parallax could measure his movements to the millimeter. His attack sailed by within a hair's breadth of her face.

He didn't exactly fall off balance, but he presented his flank as his strike followed through. Fiona hammered his ribs with a scissors kick, then spun on one heel to send her other leg hard into his jewels.

The man didn't even bend over. He grabbed the knife in his arm, threw it to the ground, and jackhammered the sole of one combat boot toward Fiona's face.

Fiona backed out of that one, but she smelled asphalt and rubber from his sole. Then he was after her again, a rapid delivery of driving fists. She dodged them sideways, ducking under the strikes. Then she took the attacking arm in a two-handed grip, changed its momentum, and tossed the man after it into the side of the Ford.

Fiona could have sworn he dented the car, but Oz's angle revealed otherwise. Hitting the car must have winded him, though, for the man paused a second, supporting himself at the doorframe and straddling the unconscious gunman.

Lots of options, Fiona decided, and chose to kick in the Big Guy's head. That was Oz talking, always the pragmatist. Fiona thumped her sneaker into the man's skull before she could stop herself.

The crunching sound against the car's metal both sickened and excited her.

But the guy didn't go down.

"Jesus, you're a brick!" Fiona shouted. "Fall down, why don't you!"

Instead, he stood up. And when he stood up, he gripped something in one hand.

SKUNK! Fiona heard in her head, then Oz was on the man's back, scrabbling over his craggy shoulder to scratch at the exposed bottom half of his face. The Big Guy dropped the contents of his hand, several metallic cylinders that jittered and hummed on the pavement.

Fiona ran at the man. Like the cat, she scrambled up his muscled mass, then rolled across the top of the car. Oz was in her arms -- how he had gotten there, she had no clue -- and they landed as one on the other side of the car.

Then smoke, stink, and watery eyes, but Fiona had tumbled past the worst of it.

The cloud from the exploded grenades dissipated. When it did, and Fiona wiped her eyes enough to see, the man had disappeared. So had his jet.

"Well, shit."

Oz squirmed out of her grip and stalked several feet away. He sneezed, growled, and flicked his ruffled tail.

"Hey!" Fiona huffed. "It wasn't my fault. I wasn't the one who forgot to watch his hands."

Oz had a differing opinion, and it smelled of piss and coppery blood. Sometimes, there just weren't words.

Fiona needed distance when he got in those moods. She climbed to her feet and dragged her mind back into her head. She looked around at the wreckage of the last few minutes, and sighed. She had filtered out all the screaming and running, the sirens and the yelling cops. She had managed to forestall a second wave of police, though her credentials and harsh glares could only go so far. Well, it was over. The locals could have the scene. In a second.

She trudged around the Ford for her knife, the one that had bitten Batman.

The cops the big guy had slapped to the street struggled to sitting positions or coughed and wheezed on their knees. Miraculously, none seemed seriously hurt. Or maybe it wasn't so much a miracle. Perhaps that result had been calculated.

Well, not by her. She'd stabbed the guy, after all.

And tried to kick in his head.

Bad kitty. Bad, *bad* kitty.

An odor of cat box entered her brain. If a shower had been available, Fiona would have stepped right into it. That would teach the little uppity predator.

"Shee-it..." she heard from a few feet away. She stooped to collect the bloody knife, careful to take it by thumb and forefinger as far from the blood--

She found no blood on the blade.

But that was impossible. It had bitten deep in the muscle.

Oh, well, the lab guys could puzzle it. At least they'd coax out some fingerprints. She turned toward Childress and gave him a raised eyebrow.

He didn't manage to sit up, but made it to one elbow, panting.

"You all right, Childress?"

"Somebody drove a fence post through my belly button."

"It happens. You carrying an evidence bag?"

"We didn't come for no evidence."

"Yeah... Hey! Any of you cops have an evidence bag?"

Someone murmured an affirmative, tried to get up to go find the bag, and sat back down. He decided to call on his radio instead.

"You Wonder Woman, or what?" Childress asked.

"Me?" Fiona raised both eyebrows. "Hell, no. Why do you ask?"

He mugged her a look of rank stupefaction, but gave it up with a wince. "Nigguh put down all these cops and all four of us." He gestured to his team members, DeBoy and Ponce of which just then started moving, each rubbing the back of his neck. "But he never touched you."

"I don't know. I thought he was a challenge. The guy's built like a battleship."

"Boss, I was watchin'. He never laid a glove on you."

Fiona offered a grin. "Experience and practice. It happens when you think with your head and not your testosterone."

Tejada, right at Street's ankle, groaned and lifted his head off the asphalt.

Childress raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Now we talkin' boys versus girls? That's bullshit, Cap. You looked like a psychic, is what you looked like. Like you was readin' his mind."

"No, just his angles. Ah, here's my evidence bag."

A patrolman weaved through the unconscious cops, stalled cars, blown-out weapons and fussy civilians to hold out the bag to Fiona. She dropped the knife inside, folded the sack closed, and sealed it with the proffered red tape.

"Thank you," she said. "We'll be signing out this item for rapid processing at the federal labs."

"The crime lab boys'll be here in a minute, ma'am. They can handle the paperwork."

"Good. Now, that guy at the car is your gunman. He might need medical aid for electrocution. Some of these officers took shock from RPG explosions. Get the EMTs in here as soon as possible."

"Yes, ma'am, it's being handled. How about your men?"

"Oh, they're all right, I guess. Fellas! You good, or do you need to see the doctor? Hey, somebody nudge Ponce."



By the time they returned to the abandoned office they'd commandeered behind the Walgreens, Sergeant Grace had data. He looked relaxed in his golf shirt and Dockers, even amid his spread of tablets, laptops, and humming printers. The harsh light of an electric camp lantern tried to rob the scene of any sense of ease, but Grace always looked relaxed. It came from fifteen years of NCO training.

The team trundled in holding blue cold packs to various bodily regions, then collapsed onto the chairs and couches scattered about the defunct attorney's waiting room. Of the six, only Grace and Fiona were one hundred percent, and their men were among the best the NSA had to offer.

"Mothuhfuckuh had somethin' under that shit, that's all I got to say," Childress insisted as he stretched out along the length of one ratty couch.

"You *sure* that's all you got to say?" Tejada asked hopefully while pressing his cold pack over half his face.

"Because you've been saying an awful lot."

"Fuck you, man. He got some kinda Kevlar, or that shit in the dragon movies, the knight in shinin' armor shit. What they call that shit?"

"Plate mail," Ponce volunteered.

"Yeah, that's the shit. He had that shit on his ribs, man."

"He wasn't wearing plate mail," Fiona said. She helped Ponce into a chair. The man looked zapped, like he didn't know where he was. "I doubt he wore *any* armor, just a compression suit from Dick's Sporting Goods."

"Nah." Childress shook his head. "I punched armor."

"We don't care." Grace stepped to the center of the room, his arms laden with papers and a tablet computer, a Bic pen dangling from his mouth like a cigarette. He commanded attention despite his admin assistant props. Sergeant First Class Alexander Grace stood six-four if an inch, all of it honed muscle, with a chiseled face and ice blue eyes. "I prefer we stick to facts, not conjecture. And the fact is this guy, the Voice of the City, kicked the asses of four NSA special agents."

"And about a thousand cop asses, too!" Childress complained.

"At last official count, it was fifteen." Grace glanced at his watch.

"Then it was fifteen kicked ten times each."

"That would still only be--"

"Nobody cares!" Fiona yelled. Ponce winced and held his head. "Sorry. Grace, continue. Childress, shut up for just one minute, okay?"

"Shuttin' up, Cap."

Grace hunched over his papers and readouts. "He employed some sort of electro-magnetic weapon. That's how he initially stopped all the bullets, then rendered your weapons non-op."

"Non-op?" Childress looked amazed. "Fuckin' gun blew up in my hand!"

"Childress..." Fiona's warning was a low growl. She knew the diode on her neck glowed red, growing more so with each second. She didn't consciously call on Oz, but the cat jumped onto the back of Childress's couch nonetheless. Oz sat there, staring at the agent and growling, his own diode looking like fire. Childress went very still.

"First info from the scene is that your ammo cooked off, lithium-ion batteries caught fire, radiators burst, and catalytic converters exploded." Grace looked at his watch again. Did he have a favorite TV show coming on? "All of these except the radiator fluid contain metallics that can be a combustible hazard in the right circumstances. That's what our tech boys online said. They weren't sure about radiator fluid, but think maybe the device acted on the radiator grid itself?"

"No." Fiona had made a circuit of her men, checking their immediate health. That done, she paced the back of the room. "I didn't notice any other metallic bodies being stressed. It either affected something metallic in the liquid or the liquid itself."

"Lots of rust in radiators," Tejada muttered, bent over in a chair. "And radiator fluid is flammable."

"Note that," Fiona said. "We need the reports from the crime lab here."

"Already ordered," Grace said. "Then there's the jet. I was able to send the video I took through the agency aircraft recognition database. It came up empty. Our tech support also came up goose eggs. In fact, all the guys said, based on their short observation of its form and obvious power configuration, that the thing shouldn't be able to fly."

"It flew," Tejada said. He rubbed his shoulder.

"Of course," Grace said, "but it *shouldn't* have. We can't know for sure till we get another look."

A round of tired, cynical laughter.

"Send the video to the UFO boys," Fiona said. "They're used to ... non-conventional thinking."

"Wilco," Grace said, and glanced once more at his watch.

"Is there a time-sensitive something going on?" Fiona asked.

"No, ma'am. What about the knife? You said you'd bring back a piece of him."

Fiona gestured toward a coffee table in front of the couch where DeBoy lay, a cold pack between his shoulder blades. "At the time, I meant it somewhat more ... figuratively. But there he is, wrapped up and ready for forensic identification."

"Mind if I peek?" Grace asked.

"You do that, and it's your personal, inseparable baby all the way back to DC. Chain of custody, top." She shrugged. "I wouldn't bother. Weirdly, there's no blood on the blade. I hold out hope for fingerprints, though."

Grace frowned at the bag on the coffee table. "I don't. The way he has these impossible bits of tech, including a plane with questionable aerodynamics that threads over and under and between power lines, and the way he fought you, Captain Street. I think he's one of *them* for sure. One of those improbable beings we've been tasked to assemble, not just an adept vigilante. I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't have fingerprints."

"If not fingerprints, he at least has DNA."

"Are we sure about that, ma'am?"

"What?" Childress looked askance at Street. "He a fucking ghost or somethin'?"

"You've been briefed," Fiona told him. "If you didn't believe the briefings, I can't help that."



"I don't think this guy has Batman tech," Grace said, straightening. "I also don't think he's absent DNA or dry of blood. I think he has a ... a reality distortion field, or something. That's the only way I know to answer impossible tech that works."

"Maybe we're jumping the gun here," Fiona said, "maybe even the shark. He could just be smarter than us."

"And our tech guys back in DC?"

"Well," Tejada mused, "they *do* work for the government."

Grace shook his head. He wasn't giving up that easily. "I'm thinking about Clayton Hostetter," he said.

"Really." Fiona was surprised. "What on earth could that old cowboy have to do with this?"

"Clayton Hostetter ... isn't from around here." Grace put his gear on the coffee table and scratched the back of his head. "Okay, let's say it. He traveled N-space, or whatever it is. He came from another universe. Clayton Hostetter is a nineteenth century cowboy with advanced technology to travel between universes. He's a marshal of some inter-dimensional law enforcement initiative who fights monsters from hell dimensions."

Childress huffed. "Top. You even *look* stupid saying that shit."

Grace threw up his hands. "I'm just trying to think this stuff through. What if this guy is the same? He came from a universe with different physics, so his stuff works."

"Then his stuff *wouldn't* work because he's in *our* universe," Ponce offered, still rubbing his head.

"Stick to spy shit, top," Childress said.

"Table this," Fiona said. "We've worked too long on hope and suppositions. I really want to get something on this guy."

"Well, we have something," Grace said, turning toward the office door. "We have visitors."

Fiona already knew that. Rather, Oz had known it when the newcomers entered the floor. At least three, two of them heavy, none of them smelling like threats. Oz knew some of them.

The door opened and three Army uniforms crossed the threshold.

Fiona and Grace came smoothly to attention. The others gave the arrivals a variety of squints.

"Hiya, colonel," DeBoy said into his couch cushion.

LTC Sanders strode across the room, two others in his wake. One was male, blond, a captain, in the same blue business uniform as his superior. The other was female, African-American, a sergeant, in the corresponding female uniform with skirt and pumps. She gave Fiona a wide, quick grin.

"At ease," the colonel said, and Fiona and Grace relaxed. "Captain Street, you're hell to locate. I've been chasing you down for going on thirteen hours."

Fiona snapped her fingers, calling the cat to her feet. "Field conditions, sir. We've been chasing a prospective. Sergeant Grace thinks we hit pay dirt."

"Yes, I'm sure he's correct. Sergeant First Class Grace is an efficient, effective NCO. Speaking of which, did you get the goods, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir. In fact, I've been carrying them for weeks."

"Carrying what?" Fiona asked. She sensed smells of deception and conspiracy.

"A thing I couldn't get to a uniform store to purchase," Colonel Sanders said vaguely. He glanced around at the civilians. "Any of you men in condition to stand?"

With sideways glances, groans, and winces, all the men found their feet.

Grace rummaged around on the table. "Tejada, you're taking the picture. I only had this." He handed the agent a point-and-shoot camera. "Because all our cell phones burst into flames. This runs on triple-As."

"Guys, what am I missing here?" Fiona asked, but Oz had gone from suspicious to purring.

The colonel looked cross. "Captain Street, front and center!"

Fiona obeyed, snapping to an attitude of attention that felt peculiar in her leggings and sweater.

"Goodknight?" The colonel leaned slightly to his right. The female sergeant stepped into that space, a clipboard held so Sanders could read it.

"Attention to orders!" the colonel boomed. "Headquarters, Department of the Army, and the president of the United States have reposed special trust and confidence in the patriotism, valor, fidelity, and abilities of Fiona Street. In view of these qualities and her demonstrated potential for increased responsibility, Fiona Street is promoted to major with a date of rank of September 28, 2018. Congratulations, major, you're ahead of the curve for detached officers outside their field."

Fiona should have said something. A simple thank you would have sufficed. But, despite her want, no breath escaped her lips. She was like a fish breathing on the floor of a boat.

The Army personnel thought that funny, and laughed.

Oz rolled on the floor, an engine of purrs.

"Straps?" the colonel said, and held out a hand to Grace.

The sergeant handed Sanders two bent shoulder bars embroidered in gold braid and oak leaves. The colonel held these out to Fiona in his left hand. "In my day, these were brass and a friend, loved one, or superior officer would pin them to your shoulder to make it all real. Even if you were in civilian clothes. Well, times and uniforms change, though the sentiment remains. Congratulations, Major Street."

He stuck out his right hand. Fiona took it and shook.

Tejada snapped a picture. The camera flash flooded the room.

"Oww..." Ponce said, and shielded his eyes.

The bars changed hands between colonel and major, then Sanders took a step back. All the military did, Goodknight shuffling her tablet to her left hand.

"Present *arms!*" Sanders intoned, and the four soldiers saluted Fiona. She returned the salute, then quickly wiped tears from her eyes.

Everyone applauded.

Goodknight rushed in to embrace Fiona. The two women hugged and kissed cheeks. "Well done, ma'am," Goodknight said, wiping her own tears. "I'm happy for you. I've known for days, but I couldn't spoil the surprise."

"Thanks, Goodknight, you're a dear." Fiona turned to Grace, her mentor the past six years. She put out her arms. "Well, you old campaigner? Give a girl a hug."

"A superior officer, ma'am. Kind of irregular to hug officers."

Fiona stretched out her arms more and laid on a pouty face.

"Well. Maybe this once." Grace enfolded her in as tight a sibling hug as was proper.

Tejada raised the camera.

"Uh-uh-uh," Grace warned him to laughter all around.

"Well. So much for the good news," Sanders said, glancing about the room. "Street, is there someplace you and I can talk?"

Fiona only had to think for a second. The office proper, the lawyer's space. "Yes, sir, this way." She led him into the back, Oz trailing. This main office glowed brightly thanks to its two large windows. The plywood had been torn down from these to give a clear view past the Walgreens to the street intersection and the CVS drugstore. Two camp chairs flanked a tripod at one of the windows. Atop the tripod perched a set of long-range binoculars. The two officers lowered themselves into the chairs, Oz jumping into Fiona's lap.

Sanders leaned back in his seat, fingers interlaced over his flat stomach. "There's been a security breach at the Lawrence-Livermore facility, the trans-universal generator."

"Sir? I hope--"

"No, not what you're thinking. No terrorists, no covert foreign government exploits. The ... attack ... was two-pronged. What we know so far is that something came through the generator facility via an externally powered trans-universal event. As you know, we've experienced those before." He stopped, then narrowed his eyes. "You vouched for Hostetter. Are you still sure about him?"

"Absolutely. Why? Oh! You don't think he had anything to do--"

"No, I don't. We've sent agents to his place in Wyoming. They've interviewed him and checked around. But the man is who he is. He has a trans-universal attenuation device. He could have whisked from Wyoming to California and back in the time it takes us to get another beer from the fridge."

"But he wouldn't, sir. Hostetter is an honorable man. He's sworn to protect the multiverse."

The colonel's mouth bent up in half an acerbic grin. "Of course he is, Major Street. But do we even know what that means?" He put up a hand when Fiona sat straighter in her chair. "Don't worry. We don't suspect Hostetter. But we had to check him out. Frankly, I don't think he has the wherewithal to do what this entity did."

"What would that have been, sir? If I can know, that is."

"This entity, after entering the facility, sowed confusion by taking over part of our guard force, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* style." He leaned forward, elbows on knees, and rubbed his hands together. "It somehow got four of our men to wreak havoc, killing thirteen soldiers. While they slept." He watched Fiona, expecting something.

"Umm, killed them while they slept?" Fiona had seen some strange things as chief weirdo wrangler for the US government. "Which were sleeping, sir? The victims or the killers?"

"Both, for the most part. Four men tore our guard force apart with their eyes closed and, we later found out, while in REM sleep. And that was just the start. While this went on, our secure network got hacked, specifically the Nightwatch file system."

Fiona made a pained face. "That's bad. Lot of stuff in those files that would be hard to spin. But not fatal. All the asset files are referenced, but the actual asset data is stored on individual secured hard drives at NSA Headquarters."

"Yes. The asset file hard drives aren't on any network. They have to be signed out and plugged into authorized, controlled laptops on site. But our hacker got hold of more than just the surface data for Nightwatch. They found out about you, major."

*The city wants to know about you.*

The hairs rose on Fiona's arms. She tried to breathe evenly, to calm her reaction so that it wouldn't affect Oz.

"We think they were looking for Hostetter. Failing in that, they latched onto you. Your signature is all over those asset files."

"They latched onto me? But they're looking for Hostetter?" Fiona felt her brow tighten. "Why Hostetter?"

"We can't say." The colonel leaned an elbow on the flimsy arm of his camp chair. "I imagine it isn't too complicated. The good marshal put a monkey wrench to a bid to destroy eighteen universes. He beat down the bad guy's hand-picked lieutenant and sealed him away from the world with a nuke. I would guess he's made a good many enemies."

"Okay," Fiona said through a rising impression of twitching skin and bent-back ears. "Okay. But me? My file wouldn't do them any good. It's just as secure as the others."

"Yes, it is." Sanders rubbed a curled index finger across his upper lip. His eyes were trained on Fiona's Sketchers. "But you, major, are more public than your assets are. You're an Army officer and you've been in the news. Whoever this exploiter was, he viewed all hierarchical data on you, dropped into the deep web, and touched nearly every professional file that exists on you, including officer evaluation reports and all mission reports, all the way back to your Military Intelligence basic course. Hell, for all we know, he has your West Point records. Then, of course, there's that very public incident in DC..."

"But he couldn't get anything from that, sir. It's locked down."

"Yes, but it doesn't change the fact that this bastard is highly interested in you."

Okay, Fiona thought, so the obvious question was, indeed, the obvious question. "Umm, why me?"

Sanders sat back in the chair. With the worst of it out, he relaxed. He stared out one of the windows. "Well, obviously, there's you and the cat. That kind of information is bombshell worthy. The Russians have had suspicions regarding you ever since that incident in Washington. They've been struggling with their own awareness-enhancement program." He looked back at her. "But the Russians don't use Doctor Rodriguez's secure log-ins to bypass security. While she's asleep. At home."

"Was--"

"There was no security shortfall on Doctor Rodriguez's end, as far as we can tell just now."

"Then, how did they get her log-ins?"

He stared at her.

Fiona stared back, at least for a few seconds. Then his gaze became too much and she glanced around anywhere but at him. She thought. That's what he wanted, right? She thought about all the peculiar things she had witnessed or recorded in the last few years. Flying mountains, telekinesis, teleportation, prescience, people talking to God and God talking back--

*Holy crap, he thinks they read Rodriguez's mind as she slept.*

"It's early, major, but we think we've a serious new player. We postulated such mega-players, even superhuman ones, during the Hostetter incident two years back."

*He thinks they read her mind? That they took over the minds of his soldiers? Was that possible? Could minds be read?*

*Dumbass, you're electronically and wirelessly linked to the interpreted mind of a cat.*

Sanders made no expression. She wasn't surprising or disappointing him. "Well, consider this a heads up," he said. "We've analysts and agents on every aspect we can think of. It's the ones we can't think of that bother me. You'll be careful?"

"Always am, sir."

He stood and smoothed his uniform coat.

Fiona stood with him.

Sanders cleared his throat. "You're ordered to clean up here and report to head office in DC. I want you close while this is going on. You're as much an asset as those people you bring in."

"Yes, sir."

"There won't be much for you cooped up in the capital. Don't you have some technical refinements and evaluation due? Maybe you should schedule that in."

"Yes, sir." Maybe they could tone down the piss and cat box leavings in Oz's bad moods. And who calls gas grenades skunks?

Fiona opened the door for Sanders, who strode through to the outer office and proceeded to gladhand the nearest agents. He wasn't particularly good at the hail-brother-well-met routine, just as he looked more at home in ACUs than a dress uniform.

"Got one question about this whole officer promotion ceremony thing," Childress called from across the room, where he had sidled up to Goodknight. "So, major, you buyin' the drinks?"



She *did* buy the drinks. She opened a tab that night at a hole-in-the-wall Irish bar in the city center. They called it the Golden Ace or something close to that. On Tuesdays, they have live Irish folk music. But it wasn't Tuesday, it was Friday, and Fiona didn't care. She bought the drinks, the Guinness smooth and the Scotch biting, and once Fiona had a few in her, she sang her own Irish songs. It was a good outing. She only wished that Goodknight had stuck around instead of jetting off with the colonel. Fiona had known the sergeant three times as long as Childress, Tejada, and the others. She had only known Grace longer.

"Come on, you gotta tell us," Childress insisted once Fiona finished leading raucous, atonal harmonies of *Whiskey in the Jar* and *Fields of Athenry*. "I ain't never seen anybody move like that. That superdude couldn't lay a finger on you."

Fiona took a draught from her Guinness. "You never listen, Childress."

"Unless it's to his own voice," DeBoy said.

Everyone took a laugh from that.

"All right, all right, so just figure I don't listen." Childress, who hadn't drunk much, shoved aside his glass and leaned on one elbow. "So, I get they did some magic with you and the cat." That would be the cat in the carry bag on the bench next to Fiona. "The science lab freaks and all that shit. But, that just lets you *talk* to the cat. It don't give you, like, cat reflexes or nothin' like that. Do it?"

Fiona sighed, but with a grin on her lips. She pushed aside the hair from her right ear and showed her neck to the men. "This red jewel behind my ear. It's a diode that shows the works are in order. The works are a load of sensors and chips built into the unit beneath the diode. Surgically implanted. Brain surgery, guys."

"Holy shit, that's fucking amazing," Ponce said. His flash-bang daze had worn off over the day.

"Surprisingly, outpatient stuff," Fiona said. She straightened back up and flipped her hair. "The sensors are connected to the corpus callosum, the part of the brain that handles communication between the left and right hemispheres. It reads, translates, and broadcasts my thoughts, feelings, impressions, what have you. Straight to the unit embedded in Oz's brain. And his broadcasts to mine."

"So you see what he sees and know what he knows," Ponce said. "Like a Google Goggles connection."

Fiona wagged her head and enjoyed the sensation of it sloshing back and forth. "No. Way better. Hear, see, smell, touch, taste, whatever sensation either of us sends across the brain's divide, the other experiences to one degree or the other. It can be information or it can be me, all of me, depending on how deep I dive into the connection." She didn't mention what happened if one side of that shared link died. She wasn't one to tell the world her weaknesses.

"That still don't say how you moved like that. Maybe that little kitty could manage it, but you ain't no cat. You don't have them muscles or their reflexes." Childress looked around the bar for the umpteenth time. White people made him nervous, Fiona knew, and there were an awful lot of them crammed into that space. For all his bravado, Childress was not a predator.

"Eh, I don't know," Fiona said. "You'd be surprised how much of what you do is attitude. Oz knew I could do it, so I knew I could do it, so I did it. Not all cushions and chocolate, though. You should have been there early on, with me chasing laser lights and half terrified of showers."

"Glad that isn't now," Ponce said, holding his nose for sniggers. "What about the little guy now? If you share each other's experiences, how's he handle the experience of getting running blind drunk?"

"I am *not* running blind drunk! Tell 'em, top!"

Grace still nursed his original light beer. "Not running blind drunk, gentlemen. I doubt the major *could* run in her condition."

That got bawls of laughter. Fiona grumbled, went to take a snort of her Guinness, and put it back down, frowning.

"So, what about it?" D asked. "Is that cat in your bag ready to phone ex-boyfriends and former bosses?"

"See for yourself," Fiona said, unable to keep irritation from her voice. Was she drunk? She didn't think so. She could quit anytime she wanted to! Of course, any drunk would think that.

D, sitting next to the bag, pulled the top flap, which was only partly zipped. Inside nested a foam rubber pad, a stiff plastic frame that held the sides of the bag apart, and the cat. "Huh. He's, like, passed out."

Fiona grinned. "He never could hold my liquor. Falls asleep almost immediately. It's about the only time I get to be myself these days, this and the periodic upgrades and calibrations. I get a little mental tickle of mice and sunny windowsills, but otherwise it's all me. Huh." She took that taste of her beer. "Don't let them tell you cats don't dream."

"Well," Grace said as he scraped back his chair and stood. "On that note, I think it's time to cash in. They close in fifteen minutes and we deploy back to DC in the morning. Major?"

"Yeah. Right, top. Let's put all these boys to bed."

"I was referring to the tab. It's your promotion party. Pay up." He waved for a waitress. "Childress, it's you and me behind the wheels. Head 'em up, move 'em out. Don't take anything off the commanding officer. She's been incapacitated."

So they paid and wandered out to the parking lot, six special field agents of the NSA crawling into two rental cars. Well, five agents, at first. Ponce was busy throwing up at the curb. Fiona, riding shotgun with Childress, hardly noticed the trip to the airport hotel. Her mind drifted somewhere up and behind her, like a balloon on a string. Her body felt uncoiled and warm. As the street lamps zipped by, she stretched. It had been a good day. She was a major now!

And there was another feeling, something vague, like getting scratched behind the ears.



"You sure about this?" Grace stood at the corner of the car while Fiona loaded the last of her stuff in the trunk. He wore his usual golf shirt and khaki pants. The man practically advertised bachelorhood.

"It's a style choice, more or less," Fiona said. "By driving, I get to see America, understand why we fight, that kind of bullshit, and I get pie from waitresses rather than peanuts from airline attendants."

Grace didn't respond until the roar died away from a departing jet. "Oz doesn't like to fly, does he?"

Fiona grinned. "And there's that." She banged shut the trunk. "It scares him. The result is me gripping the armrests like a passenger in a crash-and-burn, which doesn't help Oz's disposition much, so he gets more nervous, and... Well, you can see the infinite loop there."

"You've taken him on airplanes at least a dozen times. You've *jumped out of* airplanes with him at least a dozen times."

"Yeah, but he still doesn't like it. I think it's a kind of subconscious stand on principle. You know, 'If God had intended cats to fly... And then something clever I can't think of right now.'"

She leaned against the car and crossed her arms. No leggings and sweater for her that morning. The sweater had found its way to the trash thanks to the ragged hole that throwing star had torn. Fiona felt comfortable that warm, humid morning in a cotton sundress and sandals. "Well, whaddaya think?"

"I think I haven't been prouder of a young lieutenant made good. Major. I imagine you'll be moving on now."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, major's a staff ranking. They'll be wanting you to get your admin training in. Maybe War College."

"Uh-uh, not for me. I'm happy where I am, saving the world one South American rebel kidnapper or ISIS terrorist at a time."

"And I've always found that strange about you. You really get a kick out of this work. It's play for you, isn't it, ma'am?"

"Yep. Wildest ride on earth." She thought a moment, looking out across the hotel parking lot. "They take it away from me, I might have to resign, maybe go into private security."

"That would be the Army's loss, major. But I'm not worried. You're addicted."

She grinned, unfolded her arms, and rattled her fingers playfully against the steel hide of her car. "I'm not worried, either. See, this is me not worried. Besides, they'd want to get their money's worth with the brain mod shit and everything." She tapped her temple. "You don't throw millions of dollars at a desk job, top."

"No, ma'am, I suppose you don't."

"Well, gotta get on the road. The boys all in control?"

"They're packing up the last of it, then it's off to the plane."

"And you'll get home a good eight hours before me."

He shrugged. "We have paperwork to do."

She pushed off from the car and made her way to the driver's door. "Oz, we're going. If you'd be so kind..."

Oz appeared seemingly out of nowhere though Fiona knew he had been lounging beneath the car. He circled her ankles and mewed.

"I don't know, guy. It's a Corolla. Doesn't have much of a dash to lie on, but knock yourself out." Fiona pulled open the door and Oz dived inside.

Fiona turned back to her sergeant before she dropped into the car. "I'm not going anywhere, top, except maybe Ohio and Pennsylvania. Want me to pick you up a souvenir?"

"If you're going through Wheeling, a lump of coal."

"That's for bad boys, so, you know, no," and she dropped into her seat and closed the door.

Grace offered her a crisp salute as he stepped away from the vehicle. Not regulation, him in civilian clothes and all, but it was the thought that counted sometimes. Fiona fastened her safety belt, pressed the ignition button, and returned his salute with a casual one of her own.

A few minutes later, Fiona left the airport behind. Half an hour at the most, and she'd do the same for Indianapolis. It wouldn't be the first time. She hadn't told the men, but she had grown up in that small town grown big. Grown up there, but still a stranger. The city never held still; it changed with each breath. And so did she.

Oz had draped himself across the dash in front of her, blocking the speedometer and almost every other indicator. He was there for the sun, not the view. He perched with his head up, eyes closed, purring like a rocket engine. His fur ruffled slightly in the air from the cracked open window.

She was a major, Fiona thought. The Army trusted her, had decided she could do more.

And she *would* do more. If they tried to move her, she'd bargain with the colonel. She had more value where she was, building the trans-universal initiative and recruiting its soldiers. Something was coming, Hostetter had told her, something potentially bad for the survival of mankind. Others had pushed it back, but that victory had been temporary. Earth -- and the universe Earth lived in -- had to be ready when the enemy returned.

It was gonna be a rush, that was sure.

So she hit I-70 and headed east, the sun in her eyes and the breeze whipping her hair. She felt glad for the time, glad for her opportunities in life, glad, for a while at least, to be alone.

Just the two of them.