

**PERSISTENT ILLUSIONS**  
Book Two of the Matthew and Epp Stories

By

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*For Masha, my most persistent illusion*

## **A Recap of Book One: Probability Angels**

(available wherever fine electronic fiction is sold...also probably in some bookstores)

Hi. My name's Matthew. I think we'd better sit down here for a minute. I need to fill you in on some stuff.

We'll get the weirdest thing out of the way first: I'm dead. Have been for decades now. I was actually killed by a mugger in Queens back in the 80's. The thing is, I didn't quite die all the way. I stayed here in this world. And I'm not alone. It turns out that since the dawn of time people like me have been sticking around after death to pitch in with the whole "progress of humanity" thing. In fact, we may have helped bring about the dawn of time in the first place...but we'll get to that.

Basically anyone who dies in a specific way, sacrificing themselves for not one but two loved ones, ends up with the choice of remaining in this world after death and doing some good. See, when that mugger in Queens fired that gun my wife was standing next to me and there was only one thought that went through my head: "Take me not her. Take me not her. Take me not her." Then I woke up at my own funeral. Turns out, though, that it wasn't her I was protecting. Turns out she was carrying my unborn daughter at the time. I had no idea. I didn't figure out that little secret until twenty years later. In fact, figuring that out was what triggered my choice: either stick around and help push humanity forward, or pass over to...well to whatever the hell happens next.

Everything up until that moment when I had to choose, all the years between my death and when I learned about my daughter, had been child's play. I look back at that time as sort of an

incubation period. We call the ones who are still waiting to make their choice "newbies." They're basically imps. They fuck around in your lives and they get cash for it. I thought it was awesome, but on the day of my choice Epp explained how much more was going on.

Epp is short for Epictetus. He's kind of my mentor. If the name Epp sounds funny to you, it should. It's ancient Greek. Epp died about two-thousand years ago and has been pushing humanity ever since, so I sort of have some big footsteps to follow in.

Which brings me to the work. The act of pushing, or testing, is...well it sucks. Basically, I take your worst moments and try to make them into your best. There's as many different methods of doing this as there are testers, but the basic method is to take your raw emotions and tweak them so that you maybe grow after a bad patch. You know? I sort of force you to make lemonade out of your lemons. Rather than letting you dwell on shit, I try to make you rise above it. Shakespeare, Helen Keller, Beethoven, Newton (Newton was actually Epp's biggest push to date), they all had one of us working in the background. Hell, if someone is famous enough for you to have heard about them then odds are there was one of us behind the scenes making sure they didn't become complacent, or quit, or fail to live up to their potential. And those are the big guns. It works on the small scale too. My first push was a little grade school girl who had been dumped by her little grade school boyfriend that day. Together we took all her hurt and made her soul run a little deeper. We wound up writing a poem.

The methods of doing this range from tester to tester. We aren't quite ghosts. I should point that out. I can take physical form and you'll see me standing next to you like anyone else. But...well...we can do other tricks too. I mean, if I concentrate I can cause enough friction in the air to light my cigar into a perfect red ember. Pretty cool, right? And I've only been dead a few decades. Some of the older testers have been studying the universe for so long they can really do some crazy stuff. Of course, the more you humans learn about the world the more tools we have to play with. So it's mutually beneficial. Not that you have any idea we're around. Humans have a way of explaining us away in whatever terms they need to. I guess some call us ghosts, some call us angels, some call us the house settling. But if I appeared and then

disappeared in front of you, your brain would come up with some easier to understand explanation than an apparition human.

But back to the work. If it sounds sort of rough for the human involved, that's nothing compared to what the tester goes through. I actually have to revisit the moment of my own death in order to push you. You think that's fun? It's not. And if it goes wrong I can be obliterated. But it's where we draw our energy from. It also wears us out like you wouldn't believe so after a push we get to head up to the mountaintops for a rest. The mountains are sort of sacred. Nobody is allowed up except testers who have recently pushed and anyone they invite up. Everest is sort of home base, that's the mountain most of us use. You should see it through my eyes. The place is littered with testers sleeping off their most recent pushes. Sometimes you go up and you nap for a week or two, but after a big push? Well a tester can go up there and not wake up for a century.

Of course, if the work sounds bad you should see what happens if you shrug it off. See, if you don't put in your work testing humans you start to rot. If a tester gives up and stops working, after a few decades they cease to really be a tester. They...well they turn into a zombie really. Though nobody uses that word. We call them rotted things. They change as they rot and they become hungry as hell and they can't push anymore so they have to feed on humans, other rotted things, or us testers to avoid the hunger. Luckily, they're also slow and stupid and so they tend to rot away in the graveyards. Or they used to. But we'll get to that.

First, let me run you through a few of the other testers I've gotten to know. Outside of Epp, there's Mary. She's a former nun and is quite beautiful. I mean like she's smoking hot, though a little short maybe. She was a little unsure of herself when we first met but she came into her own as a natural leader after the fall. There's Bartleby. He's kind of a blow-hard and a show off but he's an all right guy once you get to know him. Also, he got tossed to the far side of Mercury by Epp (long story) and when he made his way back he was a little messed up. The guy bursts into flames uncontrollably. Or he used to; he still gets smoky when he gets emotional but he's learned to control it pretty well. Good thing too, because he was a big part of our defenses during the bad times. Let's see...there's Gregor and Hector. Gregor worked for the Council, which is the closest thing we have to a governing body.

Gregor and Epp had a clash a few centuries ago, something about how Gregor went about creating the myth of vampires. I didn't really get all of it but the dude looks exactly like Count Dracula. Or what I always thought Dracula looked like from the book. It's freaky. But he and Epp had a falling out over something that happened back then and Gregor was punished by the Council. They starved him out, preventing him from pushing to draw energy for decades. There's a lot of different opinions on this little bit of our history, whether Gregor deserved it, whether the Council had the right to punish him, stuff like that. Everyone told me that this was ancient history and that Gregor was over it. Anyway, that's Gregor and then his second in command is Hector who is a dickhead. If you've ever met some hotshot bouncer at some douche bag club somewhere who gets off on being an asshole to you because he can then you've got a good idea of what Hector is like. He's this big dude who always wears these mirrored sunglasses. And, finally, there's Kyo.

We'll hop to a new paragraph for Kyo. His full name is Kyokutei and the guy used to be a samurai. And as if that wasn't cool enough, something went seriously wrong during Kyo's death so that he never quite made his second choice fully and was an aberration. I don't know the exact details of how he died but the result was sweet because he was indestructible, none of our rules applied to him. He also didn't need to push so he was never up on Everest taking naps. He's gruff and a loner and he and Epp have this crazy relationship. They're like brothers the way they fight sometimes but they also have a ton of respect for each other. If that makes sense.

Anyway, that was my life for maybe three months. I had made my second choice, was learning how to push, and was trying to learn how to harness the new powers I had since I was no longer a newbie when everything fell apart. See it turns out that Gregor wasn't as forgiving as most people thought. He had plans. Remember those rotted things I mentioned earlier, the zombie-ish things in the graveyards? The testers who had given up and rotted away? Well Gregor figured out that if you fed them healthy testers that they would grow back. And when they grew back, they grew back fast and strong. Thing is there was always one part of their body that stayed rotted away forever no matter how much they fed. Big reveal here...remember Hector and how he was always wearing

mirrored sunglasses? Yeah. Nothing under there but rotted out eye sockets. So Gregor had slowly been building this army of resurrected dead by feeding them testers and his second in command was one of them. Which is fucked up. I think he wanted them as a bargaining chip but it wasn't long before Hector turned on him, bashed his head in, and assumed control of his army. God, Hector is such a dickhead.

It was bad in the beginning when Hector first came after us. Nobody had any idea what was going on and we had to retreat to the mountaintops. There were plenty of casualties and we took some big hits. Kyo and Mary were surrounded at one point and she was knocked out and he couldn't figure out how to get them to safety so he pushed for the first time in his existence to get Mary up to Everest. They got out okay but Kyo was no longer an aberration nor indestructible. He's a normal tester now.

We lost Epp too in a manner of speaking. Hector had a bunch of us trapped in this cathedral, see we can't really travel around if we don't know where we are or where we're going. And the rooms at the top of this cathedral were basically a maze and nobody could get their bearings to jump in or out and there were like a hundred rotted things coming for us. So Epp sacrificed himself to get us out. He opened up a vein and they pounced on him, going for the easy meal, not to mention that Epp was so powerful he must have seemed like an all you can eat buffet to them. We got out but the cathedral collapsed and as Epp was falling and being devoured alive he...well I don't know what he did but he managed to leave his body right before he hit the ground. And he travelled around the world as pure energy before reentering his body. Yeah. I can light a cigar at will and he can do shit like that. Problem was, though, he lost so much of his energy while traveling that when he got back into his body he wasn't one of us. He had crossed over the line and wasn't a tester, he was a rotted thing himself. Not in personality, mind you. I mean he's still on our side, but he isn't one of us. Not anymore.

Things were bleak for a while but up on the mountaintops we learned to fight back. All the tools we used to use to interact with you humans were revisited to see what could be used as weapons. The ability to control atoms is powerful stuff and we have testers who can call down lightning, testers who can create solid walls of air, and testers who can whistle and break your neck with sound



waves. And we're always coming up with new ways to protect ourselves.

Then things all came to a head at this teenager's birthday party in some middle-American suburb. Katie Packer was her name. There was a fight, a big fight, and we managed to drive back Hector's army. A large part of that was that some of the rotted things decided that they weren't on Hector's side. One zombie in particular, Jonathan, who looks like a freaking jungle explorer, managed to gather a bunch of disgruntled ex-members of Hector's army together and with their help, we won the day at Katie Packer's eighteenth birthday party. The zombies broke and most fled. Kyo and Bartleby almost pinned down Hector too, but he got away. Not before they managed to blind him, though.

That was about six months ago. A lot has changed since then. A lot. I mean Bartleby is off...well you'll see. Frankly, I'm just happy to still be here. Most days I feel like a little kid who's been dropped into the middle of a war between immortals. It helps to try and keep a few things in mind. I chose to be here, that's a big one. I chose to stick around and do some good. I loved my wife and my daughter enough to give me this chance and I took it, and that was my choice, so I try not to complain. Remembering that helps during the bad times.

Mainly though? Mainly I try and keep my head down, learn what I can and not fuck things up too much for you humans.

It's your world, after all. I just died in it.

"Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one."  
--Albert Einstein

### **Part 1: They Meet**

Matthew stood on the corner of Central Park West and Seventieth Street. The Park loomed on the other side of the street, trees dark in the evening. It was August and the air was damp making the leaves limp as well as the fabric of Matthew's tuxedo.

Matthew was in the process of forcing himself to relax, a trying oxymoron but one he was growing accustomed to. The foot traffic marching and chattering down the sidewalk passed around and through him like the wind through the leaves. He closed his eyes, tilted his head back and tried to concentrate on taking deep rhythmic breaths as he had been taught. The pedestrians around him began to stop seeming like flesh and blood and began to seem more like dancing bits of energy, each one full of different potential and walking a different path. He continued breathing and tried to let himself find a new mark.

He had been doing this exercise nightly for a few weeks, sniffing out a potential meat bag to push. He was getting better at not over-thinking things and letting himself simply feel what was going on around him. The tiny glimpses he got of people as energy, though, made him wonder what the world must look like to a more accomplished tester when they decided to focus on things in this way.

His hands were loose at his sides but his fingertips were flickering up and down as if they were rifling through stacks of paper. He took deep breath after deep breath, slowly sinking down into himself, the smell of the city and the smell of the park mixing in the thick air.

He heard a crash in the underbrush across the street, like a tree branch falling in the park. Then, unmistakable, there was another smell on the wind and all Matthew could think about was rotting leaves.

He opened his eyes. All thoughts of his training were gone as he began to look, more and more anxiously, at the eyes of the people walking around him, his head moving, his feet spinning him in a quick circle around and around.

"Secure area my ass," he said. His feet made another circle and as he watched a group of tourists stroll past the wind kicked up, the smell of rotting leaves intensified, and he spotted it. A shambling body with one leg dragging behind it, clothes tattered to rags, was taking deliberate steps toward him. Matthew locked his eyes on the rotted thing.

The zombie was aware of him now and began to hurry to the best of its ability. Its head focused on Matthew as it took wobbly step after wobbly step, its rotted lips peeling back from its face in a hungry smile.

Matthew's hands fidgeted as he ran through a number of options in his head. The rotted thing was fifteen yards away and closing. "Okay," Matthew said nervously to himself. He raised his fingers to his mouth. He had received almost zero training in this area of his world, but the rotted body lumbering toward him was weak, a severely depleted example of the other side. He pinched his thumb and forefinger together and pressed them between his lips and blew out sharply, attempting to whistle. This produced nothing but a quick exhalation of air.

"Okay," he said again with more urgency. The rotted thing attempted to run toward him now, forward momentum hardly sustained as its bad leg lopped along behind it, and it only managed to gain ground in a painful limp.

Matthew took a deep breath and shook his hands out at his sides, flexed his fingers, then brought his hand up to his mouth again. He pursed his lips around his fingers, stared down the rotted thing and tried again.

A sharp whistle filled the air and a triple set of compacted air waves flew from his mouth. Rippling their way slowly along they collided with the thing's knees as it limped forward. At first, nothing seemed to happen as the thing continued to close the gap on pure inertia, but then its knees buckled, and its legs stopped supporting it and it collapsed onto the ground. Planting one palm on the pavement the immobile thing pushed up to look at Matthew, its face confused with pain as it struggled, stupidly, to get its now fractured leg under its body.

Matthew put his fingers to his lips again and stared at the thing on the ground, yards away. He breathed in, preparing to whistle, and then stopped. The thing pathetically continued trying to grope its way back to a standing position, failing each time. Matthew removed his hand from his mouth. "Just get out of here," he said softly to the rotted thing, knowing it wouldn't listen.

The thing started trying to drag its way forward. If it got close enough to lay its hands on him it could be dangerous, Matthew knew, but at the rate it was moving it would take a week to get anywhere near him. Matthew took out his phone, punched in a number, then held it up to his ear.

The sound of traffic on the street changed and Matthew turned as he listened to his phone ringing and noticed a new sight from his world appear across the street. He watched as a newly arrived tester walked across the hoods of a row of cars that were stopped at a traffic light. "Busy night," Matthew said to himself, watching the teenage tester in a belted raincoat stop on top of a yellow cab.

Matthew watched the teenager in the raincoat work and realized that he wasn't a tester, not yet. He was a newbie. There was an obvious juvenile air about him. None of the pain of knowing his choices was visible on his face as he glanced around with spastic energy, checking out all the people in the cars at his feet.

The sound of ringing continued faintly from the phone at Matthew's ear. "The hell is everyone?" Matthew asked, trying to seem casual as he took his still ringing phone from his ear and looked at it to check the number he was calling. He glanced back at the rotted thing on the ground and saw that it was still immobile. Then he turned and looked back at the newbie, now on the hood of a taxi cab.

The newbie was crouching down, looking through the windshield to assess the interior of the cab. He seemed to like what he saw as he nodded and brushed his hands on his raincoat. Then he got onto his stomach so his body was half hanging off the side of the cab. He reached a hand through the yellow painted metal and began to fidget with something under the hood.

Matthew felt an involuntary chill run down his spine. There was something so impish about newbies. It wasn't their fault, he had been a newbie himself and he knew from experience that everything was rather jumbled and nonsensical during that period, like you were being held back from fully understanding on purpose. Newbies lacked the bigger picture that testers' had, making their actions seem downright barbaric at times. Just smash, hurt and prank and collect your payouts.

The rotted thing in the street gave a groan and reached a hand out in a ridiculous attempt to snatch at Matthew's tuxedo pants despite the yards between them.

Matthew took another look at his cell phone, then turned back to the teenage newbie on the cab hood, reaching through the yellow metal to tinker with something in the engine. Newbies were an important part of this whole process, Matthew knew, creating gaps and scratches all across the surface of life that made his job as a tester easier. They kept things in flux, like a constant churning force deep under some dark lake. But watching was an odd process and it was hard for Matthew to believe that he had been a newbie himself not too long ago, almost two years now, back before his second choice.

Matthew watched the cab take off when the light changed, accelerating as the newbie on the hood looked up grinning. Then a panic took over the cab that was obvious even from outside on the street, and it swerved and honked as its brakes failed before it blew through the next light and into cross traffic. There was a horrible, glass-shattering crunch and the sound of rubber screaming across the pavement as another car ran into the cab. Then the whole mess skidded sideways into a street light.

From his vantage point Matthew watched the teenage newbie get thrown clear of the hood. He rolled over into a sitting position in the middle of the street and shook his head before looking around and, spotting what he was looking for, picked a packet of cash off of the pavement. He stood up and walked north, past Matthew, who watched as he fanned out the money he had picked up to reveal a large sheaf of twenty dollar bills. He waved it in the air as he walked past. "First round's on me," he said with a grin, making his way north. "No takers?" he asked again when Matthew didn't respond.

The teenager in the raincoat was about to ask again when he noticed the rotted thing lying on the road. "Whoa!" he shouted, skittering backwards instinctively.

"It's all right," Matthew said, "he's down and I'm calling it in."

The teenager nodded, happy to take Matthew's word for it, and quickly walked on, taking a wide berth around the zombie on the ground.

For the moment Matthew wasn't paying attention to the zombie, to the teenager, nor to the phone at his ear. He was momentarily distracted by something he had seen when the teenager had flashed his cash, fanning it out. At first there had been the expected sheaf of bills, but for a few seconds Matthew had seen...something else. He didn't know what. It hadn't looked normal.

He closed his eyes and blinked a few times, then looked down and pushed that train of thought out of his head, realizing that he had other things he needed to take care of. He took his phone from his ear one more time, sighed, hung up, redialed and went back to listening to it ring.

While he waited he turned and looked at the aftermath of the car accident down the street and at the slowly unfolding scene of people trying to recreate order. His eyebrows rose as, even standing there with his phone at his ear, he sensed a massive surge of potential from somewhere inside the car crash. "There's some very fresh meat down there for anyone who wants it," he muttered to himself.

In the right rear passenger seat of the cab David was sitting, body tense, hands splayed out as his fingertips pressed into the vinyl, still trying to brace himself even though the crash was over. His eyes blinked repeatedly and he began moving his body. David looked around, eerily aware of how loud his breath was. The driver was getting out of the car with his hand covering his forehead and David couldn't figure out which way he was facing. He was completely disoriented from the crash. Then he remembered his little sister and he turned away from the window to look at the other side of the car.

She was sitting perfectly still, her face in shock. As she began to move her actions became a near replication of David's from a few moments ago as she blinked and tried to un-tense her body and look around. Only when she began to move, the dead sound of crinkling glass rattled in the car as the remains of the cab's shattered window fell off of her lap.

"You okay?" David asked.

"I think so," she answered, then tried to shift around in her seat to look at him before crying out in pain. She started to look down at her arm but immediately turned away with a grimace, closing her eyes tightly and leaning back against the car seat.

"Okay," David said, looking at her arm, "that's broken." He lifted his head up as he heard the sound of sirens coming toward them. "But there's the ambulance," he went on. "Is it only your arm that's hurt?"

"I think so," she answered, the initial shock of the accident fading to be replaced by a steady, numb pain from her arm.

"Okay...okay," David said, stumbling over his words as he got a good look at the broken arm. "Okay," he said again, trying to get himself together. "They'll have that set in no time once the ambulance gets here. It's only your arm, right?"

"I think so," she said, neither one noticing that they were starting to repeat themselves.

"Okay," David said one last time as the ambulance sped into the intersection, the red flashing lights illuminating the inside of the car every few seconds. "Okay."

Matthew watched all this from where he was standing, then turned away when someone finally picked up at the other end of his phone. "Hello," Matthew shouted excitedly. "You guys take forever to pick up. Hello...hello! Pinta I know that's you I...no I can't be put on hold...no...no." Matthew held the phone away from his face as the sound of hold music began to come out of the earpiece. Matthew stared down the soothing musak. "God damn it!" he shouted at the instrumental version of Barry Manilow.

"I heard that," the earpiece crackled, the voice tinny and distant, the musak gone now.

"Pintar," Matthew said, bringing his phone back to his ear. "How do you know this isn't an emergency?"

On the other end of the line Pintar was seated at an overflowing desk. He swiveled in his chair, his hands-free headset perched atop his head as his fingers began flipping through a stack of papers. "Because I know you, Matthew," Pintar answered. His smooth caramel skin and Nehru jacket of deep burgundy thread were the brightest things in the office. Yet his colors seemed to bleed out of him and accent everything else in the room, from the pale tattered rug to the worn wood desk to the dusty slatted blinds. Even the glint of silver off of a tea service sitting, forgotten, on a side-table seemed complimented by the silver dusting in Pintar's head of black hair. "And I know this wasn't an emergency because I can quite perfectly read the tone and inflection of your voice."

Pintar smiled, letting himself enjoy teasing Matthew for a few moments, his smile breaking open into a chuckle as Matthew's voice on the other end of the line raised in volume and tone. "Matthew," Pintar broke in, "there is also the fact that had this been an actual emergency, you would have called one of the emergency lines. There is protocol to be followed, after all."

There was silence on the other end of the line and Pintar allowed himself one last chuckle as he pictured Matthew, all worked up, realizing finally that he himself had dictated that this wasn't an emergency.

"So what can I do for you, Matthew?" Pintar found the sheet of paper he was looking for. As he listened to Matthew talking he waved a hand and produced a manila envelope, into which went the sheet of paper he had found as well as a few others that he plucked off his desk. "Matthew, you're supposed to call Jonathan in this situation. I'm not joking about those protocols."

"Pintar, the freaking protocols change every two days," Matthew said from the other end of the phone. "Not to mention I don't exactly like calling the Guardathings, I'd much rather call my friends..."

Pintar continued to listen without listening, his hands and eyes maneuvering and reading the papers on his desk while Matthew went on. "Very well, Matthew," Pintar said during Matthew's next pause. "I'll get word out and someone will be around shortly. I have your location. And I'll let them know when I see them next that you miss them, but they're very busy. And, Matthew, do try to keep up with the proper protocols for this situation. I am not your secretary." There was more talking on the other end. "No, all joking aside now...yes...a good day to you as well, Matthew."

Pintar turned in his chair, an old creaky number with felt worn fuzzy on the arms, and leaned back in it in order to look up at a large map hanging on the wall. The map contained push pins, some tied off with bits of yarn, all intricately woven into a mess that Pintar seemed able to decipher into patterns and meaning. He nodded, squinted at one of the pins, noted the number next to it, picked up his own phone and made a quick call sending a Guardathing to Matthew's location.

Pintar sighed. Then an odd look came over his face. He ran a finger up to his high collar and rubbed his neck, distracted only for a second before the contents of his desk caught his eye and he turned around again to attend to the paperwork that seemed to constantly be on the verge of taking over his office. As he shuffled and read and clipped and filed his finger, a number of times, ran up to his neck to run around his collar which was growing damp.

His work distracted him enough so that he didn't quite realize how much he was sweating until, finally, a bead ran down from his hairline, over his crooked nose, and fell with a pat onto the paper he was reading. Suddenly aware of how hot he was, Pintar stood up and walked over to the window. He pulled the blinds open and was in the process of undoing the latch to let in some air when he stopped and realized what was going on.

Running the back of his wrist over his forehead to wipe some more sweat away he gave a sigh, acknowledging the inevitability of such problems. Then he walked over to the far door of his office. He straightened himself up and banged on the door a few times with the flat of his fist.

"Hello," he yelled. "Hello in there. Some of us are trying to work." Nothing happened for a few seconds and Pintar banged again. "*Hello!*" he yelled more loudly.

There was some noise behind the door before it flew open and a bewildered Bartleby, his all black outfit and his pin-straight black hair framing his pudgy face, stood in the doorway. Behind him was his own office, which was currently roiling in fire and smoke. Pintar winced as he turned away from the heat.

"Sorry," Bartleby said. "Sorry," he reached a hand behind him and with flexed fingers began to tame the room. Pintar stopped grimacing and opted to bear the remaining heat in order to watch the always

entertaining sight of fire following orders as Bartleby got the room under control, and then finally extinguished.

"Sorry," Bartleby said one last time. "I got in late last night. I was resting my eyes." He turned and looked back at his office. It was ordinary looking enough except for the metal flashing and the thick, protective layer of insulation that covered the walls and floor and the black scorch marks that streaked across everything.

"Guess I got a little too relaxed."

"Yes, well, whenever you're ready I have quite a juicy new one for you."

Bartleby, already rumbled looking from his nap, sagged further. "Don't I get a vacation or something sometime soon?"

Pintar smiled a firm, mirthless smile. "You just had one. And now your rest is over."

"Great," Bartleby answered, taking one last look back at his comfy desk chair before resigning himself to Pintar's words. "What've we got?"

"Harold Pinkerton," Pintar answered as he walked over to his desk and picked up the manila folder he had been preparing. He handed it over to Bartleby. "Our good man Harold has been living it up," he spoke these words carefully, the three word phrase new in his mouth and accented slightly wrong, "in the Florida panhandle. He has been making good use of the stretches of nothingness out there, as well as the migratory nature of many of those who pass his way."

Bartleby, his napping face mostly gone, managed to conjure up one last stubborn look of bewildered sleepiness. "I have basically no idea what that means."

"It means a lot of people drive through there on motor holidays or caravan trips on their way to somewhere else. And Harold knows this, and knows that a solitary traveler disappearing in the middle of such a trip might not be reported for weeks."

Bartleby took a deep breath, then walked over to a side-table and rested against it. "So he's eating humans."

"He is abducting them to be sure, what he is doing with them afterwards I can't say with certainty."

"And...you know...you can't maybe call the local authorities or something? Send in the Feds? Let me take the week off?"

"Of course," Pintar said, his voice immediately understanding to the point that Bartleby wanted to believe him, but was pretty sure that he had stepped into a trap.

"Right," Bartleby said. "So...okay?"

"Absolutely," Pintar wasn't looking at Bartleby anymore but was back at his desk sorting through papers. He didn't find what he was looking for and went to the side table before nodding and picking up a bound file. "We'll let the local authorities handle things."

Pintar smiled and his eye blinked innocently as he waited with perfect patience for Bartleby to either take the bait or push things further.

Bartleby, knowing he was being trapped but not quite seeing how yet, stood still, his face pretending to express emotions while he scrambled to sort things out. Finally he gave up. "What's in your hand, Pintar?"

"A little case file from a Chicago suburb, Bartleby. Some light reading. Seems the local authorities were on to one of our targets in the area. They began to build a case, then realized that state lines had been crossed so they, as you suggested earlier, brought the FBI in. The case was eventually shuffled to an Agent Makers and Agent Stone. It seems the killer's MO was familiar to them and they believed it to be linked to some unsolved murders from earlier in the year."

The end of the story was now obvious to Bartleby and he thought about interrupting Pintar and agreeing with him to shut him up, but knew that Pintar was enjoying himself and was going to finish his lecture no matter what.

"Agent Makers and Agent Stone..." Pintar continued as Bartleby, no longer listening, turned away and walked back to his office. "...built a larger Federal case against the suspect in the Chicago area. They had a fair number of people working the case and when they finally went to apprehend the suspect they moved in with an entire FBI strike team at their disposal, as well as nearly every available local law enforcement personnel who got sucked into the enormity of the raid as a matter of course." Pintar followed Bartleby into the adjoining room, the corrugated flashing on the wall a mash of shiny parts and scorched parts.

Bartleby pulled a canvas backpack out of nowhere and dropped it down onto the stainless steel desk. He unclasped the flap and opened it and began dropping things into it: flashlights, a first aid kit, a bull whip, a thick length of rope that was woven out of yellow, plastic caution tape.

"Agents Makers and Stone," Pintar continued, "were never seen again. The entire FBI strike team, an FBI strike team mind you, somehow became disoriented while entering the apartment complex the suspect resided in. Three of them were killed when the rearguard was attacked from a room that had already been cleared and secured. No suspect was apprehended. Two days later this was found in a local park." Pintar walked over to the table and placed a photograph down on the table, sliding it across the stainless steel to Bartleby.

Bartleby looked down, nodded, looked away.

"They think this is what is left of Makers and Stone. However the remains were difficult to identify." Pintar slid the photo closer to Bartleby who was back to packing his gear. The motion of the photo caught Bartleby's attention and his eyes flicked over it again, against his will, before returning to his pack. "See, what with all the teeth missing and all of the skin stripped away, only DNA tests could make a positive ID. And those are currently being finished up at the local Chicago hospital."

"I get it, Pintar. Very subtle."

"Bartleby, I want you to listen to me." When Pintar's voice, normally melodic, became pointed, it had the ability to force attention. "There are only two things that prevented this from being far worse. The first--"

"The first," Bartleby interrupted, his hands moving over the inside of his pack, touching all the items inside, one by one, in a last minute check, "is that the walking corpses don't seem able to use any of our tricks. They're fast and powerful but close-range only, no sonic blasts, no maneuvering atoms, no collecting electrons. So he had to brawl, and to do that with a human he had to be physical, and to do a lot of damage that way would be more trouble than it was worth."

"Correct," Pintar said. "Had this suspect wanted to, say, devour the entire SWAT team, then he would have needed to take them all by surprise or risk taking some damage. And had he taken damage then he would have needed to heal himself. And to heal himself he would have needed to feed on something more substantial than a human. And that, as you said, probably seemed like more trouble than it was worth. Though he did make a special exception and fixated on Agents Makers and Stone."

"Plus," Bartleby added, "even for testers, interacting directly with humans is weird stuff. We can manipulate matter around them but tapping a human on the shoulder...well we have to share reality to do that. They need to see us to believe us and if they can see us then we become more vulnerable."

"Or," Pintar went on, "you could go the other way and distress a human enough into seeing one of us as we truly are. That might drive them mad, though."

"Yeah. Whatever. Anyway there are limits to what a loner like this guy can do, so in the end I'm not needed and I can stop chasing weirdoes and maybe track down someone important like Hector, yes?"

Pintar breathed huffily out through his nose. "The *second* reason this wasn't made any worse, I truly believe, is because this suspect did not wish to attract too much attention. Because he knew that too much attention would result, eventually, in direct attention from you."

"Not attracting attention!" Bartleby blurted out. "Didn't you tell me that he skinned two FBI agents and left them in a park?"

"Yes. And what I'm telling you is that he might have done far worse. He could have collapsed the building or lord knows what. It is my belief that this, in fact, did not turn out nearly as bad as it could have if he didn't think you might be coming for him."

Bartleby stopped packing his bag for a moment and took a weary look up at the ceiling. His eyes squinted shut and there was a momentary quiver on his face, these little actions conveying his exhaustion more effectively than any of his complaining had done thus far. "But they don't make any sense, Pintar. That might be the most annoying part. It's not like feeding on humans gives these things any great amount of energy. They need to feed on us: nice, big, healthy, robust testers. Humans give them so little. These things I'm chasing are basically playing elaborate games. It doesn't make any sense," he repeated.

"Ah," Pintar said, "well if they don't make any sense then never mind." His voice was overly melodic again and Bartleby knew he was about to get an earful of sarcasm. "I'll send out a general announcement that all such activities don't make sense and I'm sure they'll stop. For that matter we can send a general

announcement to everyone, human and tester alike, who is not engaged in a healthy, positive existence, and we'll tell them that they don't make sense. Heroin addicts and alcoholics and pornaholics and the whole lot. We'll pass on the information that the coping rituals they've come to depend on to manage their own personal demons, why, they don't make sense, and everyone the world over will simply stop acting poorly and will be happy. Especially the monsters that I have you tracking down, surely they'll see that the quick rush and boost they get from their kills is actually part of a larger pattern of decay and--"

"Enjoying yourself?"

"Very much so, yes," Pintar said, switching off his rant instantly.

"Look, I get it, I really do. It's not like I don't think something should be done to stop guys like," Bartleby glanced down at the file, "Mr. Pinkerton in the Florida panhandle. But it's not like I can do this forever. I'm like everyone else. If they get a handle on me they rip right through me."

"Yes. They also happen to burst into flames while doing so, but yes."

"I'm not an anomaly. I'm not like Kyo was. I'm just normally very very hot. My energy had to acclimate to life on Mercury or I would have died, but otherwise I'm a normal tester, like everyone else."

"Perfectly normal," Pintar said, smiling.

Bartleby rolled his eyes then went back to packing. "But underneath all that I'm the same, they can rip into me. Plus if I don't push here soon I'll start rotting away myself. Granted I have some time, it takes years to really start rotting away, but I'm not Kyo, is my point. Even Kyo isn't Kyo anymore and speaking of which, did he call in by any chance?"

Pintar shook his head. "No, but Matthew did. He's got a small clean-up in Manhattan."

Bartleby's eyes perked up.

"I sent his request through the proper channels and assured him that you had more important things to do than hang out with him while the Guardathings picked up a mostly rotted stray."

Bartleby deflated. "Yes. It's freaking awesome being this important." He continued packing. "And no word from Kyo?" he asked.

"No."

"Well, never mind. I don't need to talk to him really. I wanted a quick opinion on something," Bartleby said. This wasn't true, Pintar knew. Bartleby was constantly trying to get a hold of Kyo for advice and guidance, though Kyo was not known for promptly returning phone calls. Kyo and Bartleby were, supposedly, working as a team. There was even a desk set up for Kyo in Pintar's office. But Kyo's notion of working as a team differed from the average definition of the term and it was anyone's guess when Kyo would be at his desk next.

Bartleby's hands finished packing and he looked down at his bag a little sadly. "So Florida it is, I guess."

"Bartleby," Pintar said, consolation in his voice, "this is important work you're doing. I assure you it is."

"I know," Bartleby continued. "But time's a wasting, Pintar, that's my point. And I'd rather use my time to track down Hector."

"We have no leads on Hector, he's gone completely to ground," Pintar said evenly. "Things have really been quite quiet these past few months. And I'll be honest, I don't think this Pinkerton fellow in Florida is associated with Hector in any way, but currently he is the noisiest lead we have."

Pintar held out the folder that he had reassembled. Bartleby reached a hand out for it, but Pintar drew it back. "Your report on the last assignment?" Pintar asked.

"Yeah I thought that up before I drifted off. It's right..." Bartleby looked down at the desk and caught sight of a small pile of ash on the corner. "I hate paperwork," he muttered. "Hold on, let me rethink it." He stared off to the corner of the room, remembering where he had been the past few weeks, what he had done, and slowly pieces of paper and photographs began appearing on the desk. He bobbed his head back and forth, debating whether he had everything, then nodded and gathered it up and handed it to Pintar.

Pintar in turn flipped slowly and deliberately through Bartleby's report, scanning every page, a duplicate of each sheet and photo appearing on the desk while Bartleby waited patiently.

"Got it?" Bartleby asked when Pintar was done.

"It is in my mind, yes. I only need to file it so I can retrieve it quickly." Pintar said, picking up his own copy and setting Bartleby's down on the desk where it started to fade as Bartleby stopped dwelling on it.

"I don't know how you and Filip do it," Bartleby said, giving a shake of his head in honest appreciation.



"It helps that this is all we do," Pintar said.

"Yeah," Bartleby said, throwing his pack over his shoulder. "Okay, so who's the new guy?"

Pintar once again extended his hand with the manila folder in it. Bartleby took it and began to read as they walked out the door. Back in Pintar's room Bartleby sat down on the desk and reread everything while Pintar filed Bartleby's old report in one of the cabinets. When Pintar looked up Bartleby was rereading the briefing on the killer in the Florida panhandle for a third time, occasionally squinting his eyes together in an effort to memorize some detail or another.

"Phoning me is always an option if you forget something," Pintar said.

"I know," Bartleby said. "But...you put a lot of effort into keeping all this stuff straight, I figure it's the least I can do."

"You do your job, Bartleby, and let me do mine."

"Sounds good," Bartleby answered, giving up on memorizing the entire folder, taking away a few sheets of the most important information instead, and hopping off the desk. "You'll call my last week up to Filip?"

"Of course," Pintar answered.

"Okay. Then I'm going to stop in at the Fortress of Solitude before going down to Florida. See if there are any new toys worth learning."

"Be safe in Florida. Come back in one piece," Pintar said with genuine, if not understated, concern.

"Okay," Bartleby said, now one friend to another.

Bartleby turned and left the room. Pintar sat down, his eyes grew distant, and as he began to think more and more sheets of paper began to accumulate in neat piles on the desk in front of him. After a few minutes he picked up his phone and dialed.

The halogen bulb at the top of the fifty foot A-frame tower flashed intermittently. In a steady pattern it strobed searing white light over the dark Himalayan mountaintop. With every burst of the bulb the scene at the tower's feet was frozen in a moment of time. The strobe light effect illuminated only split seconds of the snow, swirling over the bodies that rested at odd angles all over the cliffs and rocky landings.

The only area of the mountaintop where the blinding flashes of light didn't result in the illusion of time freezing every few seconds was in a corner up against a rock wall where a tester named Filip was sitting with his feet up on a desk watching a small television.

Filip was wearing a thick black sweater with a roll neck and thick ribs that sat comfortably on his thin frame. The small television on the desk was playing an episode of I Love Lucy and as he watched he occasionally reached down into a large bag of Cheetos that rested on his lap. All around him were rows and piles of filing cabinets as well as a vast array of monitors and televisions, their cables and stands all intermingling and snaking over the rocky floor. All of that, combined with a number of phones scattered all across his desk, made his little corner of the mountaintop look like an over grown nurse's station. It was this constant source of light from his huge array of televisions and monitors that kept his little corner free from the strobe light effect of the massive light tower.

Filip reached a hand into his bag of Cheetos and popped another orange treat into his mouth before he began chuckling with laughter, along with the television audience, as things took a turn for the worse in Lucy's world.

Filip's laughter died down and then, over the wind and the television and the beeping from the monitors, there was the jangle of a phone. He took his feet off of the desk and settled back in his chair, glancing at the television for a few seconds before swiveling around to one of his phones.

He snatched up the receiver and punched down a clear plastic button and shouted a, "Yeah?" over the wind and Lucy. Reaching another hand out, as an afterthought, he turned down the television. "Pintar?" he shouted. "Ha! How's it going? Haven't heard from you in a while."

Filip swiveled and threw his feet back up on the desk, leaning back and nodding. "Yeah, yeah I'm listening," he said, and with his hand absently out to the side Bartleby's report, having been memorized by Pintar and now being repeated to Filip, began to appear in Filip's hand. There were a few more, "Uh huh," sounds as Filip listened, the folder bulging thicker, then he nodded one last time and flipped the folder onto the desk where the cover blew back and forth in the mountaintop wind.

"I got it, don't worry," Filip said with the easy confidence of someone who could do their job so well they rarely had to think about it. "So how are things down below?" Filip leaned back, listening and smiling.

"Bartleby still a pain in the ass?" Filip laughed. "I know, I know, but you're more interesting when you're complaining." Filip laughed again, this time his head moving back enough to notice someone standing behind him. He partially turned, still listening to Pintar on the phone, to see Janice, dressed in brightly colored cold weather gear, zippers and Velcro, hood and clasps. Janice's emerald green eyes shone out of her hood, eclipsing the Technicolor thermal gear she was bundled in.

Filip looked up at Janice, then leaned toward the desk, cradling the phone in his shoulder. He scribbled a quick, "Important?" onto a sheet of paper and held it up for Janice to read while he went back to chatting with Pintar.

Janice placed a high powered LED lantern on the desk, then held up her hands, shaking them in a back and forth in a, "Not really," gesture, causing Filip to swivel away from her and go back to talking to Pintar.

Janice sat down on the desk, waiting for Filip to finish, flipping through Bartleby's report as well as some other sheets of paper.

Filip, still paying most of his attention to chatting on the phone, reached out and snatched the papers out of Janice's hands, annoyed at having his workplace messed with by someone else. Janice tapped her wrist where a watch might be under her jacket, holding it out to Filip, trying to get him to move things along. Filip held up a finger in reply.

Janice sighed and resigned herself to waiting out Filip's chat with Pintar, settling back on the desk and slipping her hands into her pockets. The massive light tower in the distance continued to pulse, the television flickered, Filip laughed, the wind howled and the snow went swirling off into the night. Finally Janice was pulled out of a daydream by the sound of the phone being hung up.

"Okay then," Filip said. "What's so important?"

"It's rounds, Filip," Janice answered.

"Sure, sure," Filip said, already losing interest and swiveling to face the television screen.

"Well?" Janice said. Her tone was one of someone who expects the other person in the conversation to not need so much prompting.

Filip turned back to her with startled integrity. "I'm listening."

"I'm not going to talk you through the status report on every sleeper we've got up here, Filip," Janice argued.

"It'll be fine," Filip said.

"It won't be fine, every time we try and talk through this it takes too long and then you get all grumpy on me."

"I do *not*..." Filip started to answer with righteous indignation that quickly crumbled into acceptance of fact, "...okay yes I do." He reached a hand out behind him, still not turning fully away from the television. "Gimme."

Janice reached under her coat and handed Filip a clipboard. Filip took it and began flipping through it. Janice watched him, glancing with the corners of her eyes to the monitors all around that began to change and alter according to the new information.

"Great," Filip said, "so nobody's going to wake up soon."

"Not according to my best guess, although who knows how reliable that is."

"Ah," Filip said, waving off her insecurity, "you do a great job." The compliment was quick and, Janice could tell by looking at him, forgotten by the time it had left Filip's mouth.

Janice sat back down on the desk. Now that the work aspect of things was over, small as it was, Filip was more than happy to chat with Janice. He nudged the television with his foot so she could see it better and held out his bag of Cheetos. "Cold out there?" he asked.

Janice nodded in her hood, waving away the Cheetos bag.

"Wanna trade jobs?" Filip asked.

"Never," Janice responded with more energy than she had yet replied to anything.

Filip laughed. The ending credits rolled for the I Love Lucy episode and Filip reached up to switch off the television. Then he picked up Bartleby's report and walked over to one of the filing cabinets.

"I don't get how you do this."

Filip shrugged as he found a place for the report. "Good memory I guess."

Janice smiled at Filip's back at this comment, knowing how absurdly understated it was. She watched Filip file Bartleby's report away. "Why not use a computer?"

Filip laughed. "I'm not technically using anything. This is all an extension of what's inside of my head. Using a computer as the physical representation would confuse me, I think. There'd be no," he hip checked the cabinet drawer shut, "no tactile response to me retrieving information. It helps to have a logical line of memories to walk down. It reinforces what's already stored and makes retrieval easier. I mean, you do it too. You need to remember someone's name, you come up with a mnemonic device or something, you link it up with other memories so it sticks. This is the same thing only it's on a larger scale."

"And I'm not constantly having my memory tested."

"Yeah, and you might not need to retrieve someone's name you memorized six months ago at a moment's notice. But it's basically the same." Filip sat back down and picked up his Cheetos bag again.

"And you can't, you know, move around?"

Filip shrugged. "If I start wandering around *and* trying to keep all this stuff straight in my head it gets a little confusing. I can walk off for a little while, but if I'm gone for too long this all starts to disappear. Plus," he waggled his eyebrows and tossed another Cheetos into his mouth, crunching down and talking around it, "if one of those zombies down there makes me go away forever then we lose all this. Nah, it's best if I stay up here on the mountaintops where I'm safe."

Janice watched Filip lean back in his chair, fingers lacing behind his head as he propped his feet up on the desk and smiled at her.

She continued looking, and a pert smile appeared on her face. "I think this is very noble of you," she said, partly with genuine respect and partly out of a desire to watch Filip's aversion to attention flare up.

"It's nothing," Filip said, seeming to shrink down into the rolled collar of his sweater. Avoiding her emerald eyes he turned to flick the television back on. The DVD start up menu for I Love Lucy was sitting there. Filip turned away to the side of the desk where a DVD player was sitting. He pressed the button and plucked the I Love Lucy DVD out and then began rifling through a stack of envelopes. "It's not even for that long," he said. "By our best estimates on my rate of decay I'll need to start training my replacement in, like, only a decade or so." He found the envelope he was looking for and, taking the DVD out, he yanked his jeans up, rubbed the DVD against his sock a few times, then put it into the DVD player. "At that rate I won't even be through all the X-Files before I'm done."

With Bartleby's report filed and Janice's rounds logged there was now no more paperwork on the desk and Janice couldn't resist. "Hey, Filip?" she asked. He turned to look at her and she held her gloved hand out in front of his face. There were three or four coins laying in it. Filip glanced down at them, then started to say something when Janice pulled her hand back. "In a street there are five houses," Janice said, "painted five different colors. In each house lives a person of different nationality. These five homeowners each drink a different kind of beverage, smoke a different brand of cigar and keep a different pet."

Filip stared up at her with a point blank face.

"The Brit lives in a red house," Janice said. "The Swede keeps dogs as pets. The Dane drinks tea. The Green house is next to, and on the left of, the White house. The owner of the Green house drinks coffee. The person who smokes Pall Malls rears birds. The owner of the Yellow house smokes Dunhills. The man living in the center house drinks milk."

Filip yawned and turned back to the television.

"The Norwegian lives in the first house," Janice went on. "The man who smokes Blends lives next to the one who keeps cats. The man who keeps horses lives next to the man who smokes Dunhills. The man who smokes Blue Masters drinks beer."

Janice was smiling now as one of Filip's feet, still resting on the desk, began to bob up and down as he assimilated information.

"The German," Janice continued, "smokes Princes. The Norwegian lives next to the blue house. The man who smokes Blends has a neighbor who drinks water. Now," Janice said with a flourish, "who owns the fish?"

Filip sighed, then stared down at his bag of Cheetos blankly for a few seconds as he pondered. "The German," he said dismissively, then started to navigate the DVD menu.

"Yup," Janice said chipperly. "But what I really wanted to ask you is," and she glanced down at her gloved hand, "what are the dates on these coins?"

This got an appreciative grunt out of Filip, who smiled up at her. "Very nice," he said. Then his eyes flicked down to the corner of his desk and went blank again as he rewound his memories. "The quarter was 1982, the loony was 1994 and I think that was a Belgian Euro in there from 2008."

Janice laughed and threw down the coins, shaking her head. Filip swept them off the desk into his hand and looked them. "Yup," he said. Then he held one up. "That's Belgium, right?"

Janice nodded.

Filip turned back to the television and casually slid the coins away from him. He began navigating the DVD's start menu.

Janice watched him for a little while before she drifted off. Her face turned to the massive light tower in the distance. She watched it flash a few times. "Do you notice it anymore?" she asked.

"What?" Filip looked up and followed Janice's gaze. "Oh, that? No, not really."

"Some of the testers that have woken up say they knew it was there. Like they could see it in their sleep." The light pulsed again and the entire mountaintop lit up in stark white light.

"Yeah well, a lot of things have changed. A little blip in their minds while they're resting is hardly the worst thing they have to look forward to."

"Waking up used to be my favorite part," Janice said, her voice growing sad and her face growing distant.

Filip studied the situation briefly, noted that attention was no longer focused directly at him, then relaxed back in his chair again and set the DVD remote on his lap. "I know, I used to like it too."

"I'd open my eyes and look out over the mountains rolling away into the distance and who I was and my role in the universe would come back to me and I'd feel so good."

Filip smiled and watched Janice, holding himself very still so as not to interrupt.

"And you'd stretch and you'd get up and you'd just go. Anywhere, everywhere, there was a whole world out there to reacquaint yourself with. And you got to see all that had been accomplished while you were gone and..." she shook her head. "For me it was one of the few times when the pain of my choices almost left me, there was so much to see and do. It made how I got here fade just the slightest bit into the background. And I'd play with the new toys and shop for new clothes, you know, if you were all full of energy from your last push if it had gone well. And if it hadn't gone well then you'd feel all healed up and everything would be new again."

"That part about things being new is still true."

"Different isn't the same as new," Janice said, coming back down from her reverie. "Now we have to keep an eye on anyone who might be waking up soon because if they get up and go without us noticing them..."

"And if they happen to miss the gigantic light tower."

"...then they could very easily go bouncing off down below and run into a rotted cannibal happy to tackle them to the ground and devour them whole. I have to pull them aside and give them this horrible tutorial about everything that's happened in the past year and how there are all these rules now and...ugh...it's awful." Her emerald green eyes stared sadly up at the light tower.

Filip didn't bother replying, instead he sat back and stared at the light tower himself, his own gaze drifting off into memory. "You know what I really enjoyed? There was this one push where I was out for, like, five or six decades. And when I woke up I was completely lost. Even after doing everything you talked about, I was still a little out of it. And you know what I did?"

"You bought a bottle of good rice wine."

"I bought a bottle of good rice wine. And I tracked him down. And he brushed me off the first time I asked, and the second, and the third, but finally there came a night where Kyo felt like having some sake and telling some stories and I sat with him in some dingy hut in...I think it was the South Pacific that he dragged me to. And we drank all night and he told me what I had missed. By the end word had gotten around and there was a whole group of us who were sitting around listening to his stories." Filip shook his head and refocused on the television set. "It was nice, it really was," he finished, moving the cursor through the menu on the screen.

"Even that's gone. Kyo was up here himself a few months ago to sleep for a few weeks. He's like us now. There's no continuity anymore. Everyone has gaps."

Filip cleared his throat in an exaggerated, "Ahem!"

"What?"

"Me. *I'm* our continuity," Filip said, not hiding his pride very well. "Well, me, and then whoever we scare up to replace me, and then the tester that replaces them and so on. I mean, technically if you didn't want to go through Kyo you could bounce around to hundreds of other testers and get filled in on what you had missed. I'm guessing that's what they did before Kyo was around. So now instead of bouncing around you can come to me because those hundreds of testers now feed info to me to be stored. I'm our continuity."

"It's not the same," Janice said without even thinking about it. "And there was something nice about us not needing someone like you before. Kyo did what he did because he was Kyo. You do what you do for hundreds of reasons, some of which are very nasty. Like if someone goes missing and we need a last location on them so we can try to track them, or what's left of them, down. It's not the same." She sank sadly into her thermal coat and gave a little shiver.

"Cold?" Filip asked.

"A little," she said.

Filip smiled at her and suddenly the monitors and screens all around him erupted in images of sunrises and warm beaches and sunflowers blooming and Janice laughed in spite of herself, her emerald eyes twinkling. Filip smiled again, happy at the reaction, and then the screens all around settled back to their normal images of data. Filip focused on the television again.

"You ever wish you could go back to before?"

Filip's demeanor shifted and although he tried to remain detached and withdrawn, there were clear signs of him being uncomfortable with Janice's line of thought. He remained silent.

"What's the status on her?" Janice asked.

Filip shook his head, a motion so slight that it would have gone unnoticed if Janice hadn't been staring right at him, trying to eke out information.

"Shouldn't she be waking up soon?"

Filip chose to remain still this time, his eyes fixed hard on the television in an attempt to get Janice to stop looking at him.

"Fine, don't answer," Janice said.

Filip remained rigid, trying not to give any indication of even knowing there was an attempt at conversation taking place next to him.

Janice shook her head and sighed through her nose. "Fine," she said again, this time with real acceptance. "Well what about Kyo, you heard from him recently?"

As if some unspoken ban had been lifted, Filip let his body relax. "Getting a bead on Kyo is one of the more interesting parts of this whole thing. I think he got it into my head to either make my job more interesting or test me out to see how good I am at filtering information. I never get anything real from him but for some reason a lot of people feel the need to shoot me a text when they see him. It's like a celebrity watch." Filip smiled. "I think he truly hates it," he said, his grin broadening. He was turned to a computer station now, fingers clicking over keys as he scrolled through and pulled up a variety of emails. "Of course, once he figures out that I've figured this out, he'll figure out a way to change all the patterns so I'll have to start from scratch."

Janice came around to stand behind Filip and scanned over the information on the monitor herself. An email or two from testers mentioning that they'd seen Kyo, a bunch of Twitter blasts saying he'd been in the area, some info synced in from Filip's phone, then more and more information began to pile up in window after window on the monitor until Janice gave up trying to follow Filip's thoughts and backed away.

"So where is he?"

"Huh," Filip said, arriving at an answer. "He hangs out in the strangest places." He pulled up a satellite image of a town somewhere and zoomed in further and further until he was centered on a construction site.

Kyo stood in the darkness of the half-finished office building. Spread out before him was an entire floor's worth of space as the walls had yet to be built. At the far end, with his eyes squinted, he could make out a few

stars framed by the floor and ceiling where they ended and the open air started, bisected here and there by floor to ceiling columns.

Kyo scanned the area slowly, then began walking, his plain sneakers moving quietly across the floor. He came to the edge of the floor and looked out over the construction site that was at his feet. He looked down at the ground six stories below, then to the edge of the lot marked by a chain link fence. Two figures were walking along the fence on the other side. They stopped and chatted briefly, only their heads moving, nothing audible from Kyo's height and distance. Then one of them reached out and grabbed the chain link fence and pulled, the fence doubling, one fence staying put while the other peeled back enough for both of the figures to slip through.

Kyo leaned up against a column and waited, watching. There was some noise as the two figures debated the elevator versus the stairs. The wind shifted and a breeze tousled Kyo's hair as the unmistakable scent of rotting leaves filled his nostrils.

Kyo watched as they disappeared under his feet into the ground floor of the skeletal building and he waited, listening to the muffled sound of their footsteps echoing from the stairwell nearby.

Kyo debated, then decided he didn't want them passing his floor. He grabbed a piece of discarded metal and tossed it toward the far side of the big open space. It clanged and rattled along and Kyo stepped back against a column as the two rotted things stepped out of the stairwell onto his floor, looking around like nervous animals.

The first figure spun in a slow circle and Kyo knew he was trying to get his bearings. The second figure, barely a silhouette against the stars, walked over to the edge of the floor and peeked over the side.

Kyo began moving, fast, his sneakers touching the floor barely long enough to shove off, pushing his body forward in powerful strides that closed the gap between him and the two rotted things. He knew that he was coming out of the darkness, that they would be confused, that they wouldn't see him until he was on top of them. And then he was, silence being sacrificed so his feet could grip firmly for their last push before he opened his mouth and screamed, a deep guttural yell that caused both figures to jump and turn toward him, both freezing. He tackled one of them, the pungent odor of dead leaves filling his face as he propelled the rotted thing and himself forward to the edge of the building, his scream never letting up as they both flew out into space. Kyo could hear the quick snapping ruffle of their clothes as they fell and Kyo felt the thing trying to dig into his shoulder with his fingers. Kyo knew he had this one done, there was no way he was going to get his bearings enough to do anything but fall.

Kyo, on the other hand, had spent the last few hours studying the site and knew exactly where he was. His eyes managed to count the passing of each floor as they fell and he was able to mark where he was in all three dimensions. Before the rotted thing's fingers managed to dig into his skin and get a grip, Kyo wavered and disappeared, appearing almost back where he had started. The column was against his back and the stars were framed by the ceiling and floor in the distance. Only now his breathing was loud and there was blood beginning to soak into his crisp, white button-down shirt where the rotted thing's fingers had managed to scratch him.

From far away Kyo heard the first one's body crunch as it finally hit the ground.

The second one was keyed up now, turning and searching. Kyo could hear him mutter under his breath, although it was impossible to distinguish actual words. Kyo debated whether to wait and attempt to rebuild stealth or to charge again, every second ticking away giving the thing more of a chance to calm down and figure out where he was. And while Kyo knew that charging from the same place wasn't an ideal option, he also knew he was running out of time and, dropping all conscious thought, he retread his previous footsteps, breaking into a run, the soles of his sneakers slapping on the concrete as he built up speed.

He closed distance, screamed, leapt, all in perfect form. Only the element of surprise was lost and as he tried to grapple with the second thing and push him toward the edge he felt his momentum changing as his opponent's arms, rock hard, caught him and redirected him. Kyo felt his body shunted off to the side so that his leap sent him out of control, flipping past his target. He landed with an awkward roll, feeling one of his pinkies snap, before sliding into a neatly stacked pile of nickel-plated piping.

"Kyo, god damn it!" the thing screamed incredulously as Kyo popped up, a six foot length of pipe in his hands.

Kyo moved forward while the rotted thing swore at him. The pipe rolled over the backs of Kyo's hands and up around his shoulders. Cold nickel glinted in what little light there was as the pipe whirled and flipped in a distracting dance. Kyo grabbed his opponent's attention with a half feint to the right before he turned and swung around in a complete circle in the opposite direction, coming in low as he finished his turn so that while the thing was still looking to the right the pipe crashed into his ankles from the left, hard enough to knock his feet up over his waist before he collapsed to the ground.

"*KYO!*" the thing yelled, scrambling to his feet. A broken ankle made the process wobbly and the rotted thing began to back away from Kyo, who was now advancing in a confusing and terrifying blur of darkness and glinting metal. "Kyo...woah woah woah," the thing was backed up to the edge of the floor now, one heel actually slipping over before he swiveled to retreat sideways.

As Kyo closed for an attack, the zombie managed to pause, regroup and rethink. Then he managed a counter-attack, ducking under the pipe as Kyo swung and getting a grip on Kyo. His fingers ripped into flesh as he pulled Kyo's arm up at a sickly angle. For a moment the rotted thing seemed to have the upper hand as Kyo froze in pain. He and Kyo stared at each other eye to eye.

Then, out of nowhere, Kyo's nose began to run red, blood pouring out of it and down his face, his reoccurring nose bleed catching them both by surprise. Kyo didn't hesitate, he only pursed his lips and blew, sending a spray of bloody mist out from his face that caused his opponent to jump back and then Kyo was on the attack again and the pipe connected with the thing's shoulder.

The rotted thing winced away and took quick running steps backwards, still trying to blink Kyo's blood out of its eyes. "Nononono same team same team same teamsameteam--" The zombie began babbling as he closed his eyes and felt the wind rippling on his face and heard the dull hollow whistle of the pipe as Kyo swung...and then there was nothing.

The thing opened his eyes and, without moving his head, looked down and to the right to see the pipe, perfectly still, sitting barely a quarter of an inch from his collarbone. His eyes moved away from his shoulder and down the pipe until it was focusing on Kyo, arms tense and braced as he held the pipe, yet his face happy, almost boyish looking with a pleased smile on it.

The thing began to relax, shoulders slumping and breath getting under control and he almost sounded like he was about to break into sobbing when he whispered, "God damn it, Kyo, we're supposed to be protecting you."

"And you're doing a terrible job of it, Memphis," Kyo said, his smile breaking into a toothy grin. "Your approach was sloppy; you came in here like you were walking into a mall. You and your partner took the same approach, did zero reconnoitering and didn't bother to check for possible exits." Kyo dropped the pipe and it clanged on the ground in a thick reverberating melody.

"We're here to protect *you!*" Memphis screamed back, incredulous.

"And what if I had been under attack? You two would have been zombie food."

"What do you do?" Memphis asked. "Hire Guardathings to protect you and then spend all your time beating the hell out of them?"

"Hey, it's my dime," Kyo answered. Then he relented some. "On the other hand, your partner did almost get his fingers into me during our fall. And I have to give you credit for regrouping like you did and counter-attacking. I'll let Jonathan know my thoughts." Kyo gave a quick little salute with two fingers off of his forehead before turning and walking away.

When he knew he was out of sight Kyo allowed himself to jump, the feel of wind rippling over his form always enjoyable to him, and when he stopped he was standing next to the chain link fence on the other side of the construction site. He walked forward a few paces, the poise he had carried himself with inside the building still clinging to his frame. Then it broke and with a wince he stopped, one hand reaching out to hold onto the chain link fence, fingers entwining around the thin wiring as he bent over in pain. Holding his other hand up to his face he watched as his broken finger healed itself, a breathy groan coming out of his mouth as it snapped back into place. An uneasy roll of his shoulders accompanied the slash in his side healing up. He took a deep breath, then another, letting his lungs empty in long hitching sighs between as he regrouped from the fight and took stock of his body. Something caught in his throat and he worked his larynx until the something rose into his mouth, and then he spat a great bloody gob onto the ground.

With a tired nod, as if to indicate that this was all acceptable, he released his grip on the fence and walked off into the night.

Back in the half-finished building, Memphis was sitting on the floor wiping blood off of his cowboy boots and shaking his head in disbelief. "I can't believe I asked for this assignment," he said. Then his head popped up. "Oh shit!" Memphis said, remembering his partner, Gary, that Kyo had tackled off of the building.

Jumping to his feet Memphis ran to the edge, looked around, and disappeared. As he reappeared down on the ground he ran over the gravel to where Gary was sitting. Memphis slowed down as he approached, a little worried. Gary was sitting, knees hugged to the chest of his hooded sweatshirt, rocking back and forth, shaking his head and muttering to himself.

"Gary?" Memphis asked, approaching with hesitation.

Gary heard him and glared up. "Does he think that's funny?" he asked. A pair of broken headphones was dangling from around Gary's neck, bouncing like yo-yos off of his maroon sweatshirt.

"He likes to keep himself sharp," Memphis answered, feeling guilty that all he had gotten was a few knocks with a pipe and not a crash landing after a six story fall.

"This is fucking ridiculous," Gary said. "Absolutely fucking ridiculous. He has *no* right to pull that shit on us."

Memphis nodded, hoping to calm Gary down, but knowing he had to disagree with him. "We did ask for this. Kyo's detail is the toughest thing going, we both knew that coming in and we both--"

"*Fuck* all that," Gary waved an angry hand at Memphis. "Stuff that shit in a sock and *fuck it!*"

"Okay, you're a little upset, but you need to cut this out because we did ask for this--"

"Screw it. Fuck this and fuck him and fuck Jonathan I've got other options and the next fucking time I see that bastard I'm going to rip his *goddamn* head off and eat it..."

Memphis was about to interrupt but he held himself in check. He could tell even Gary was uncomfortable with his own outburst and he waited, watching his partner get a hold of himself.

"You don't mean that," Memphis said. "Now here's what we're going to do," he continued before Gary could wonder whether or not he did actually mean it. "We're going to report in to Jonathan, then we'll punch out and you and I will go grab a pint. Yeah?"

Memphis didn't give Gary a chance to think about this either. "All right then, let's get a move on," he said, reaching a hand out to help Gary up. "Come on."

Gary closed his eyes, nodded, then stood up by himself. "Yeah, all right."

Without waiting for a reply Gary turned and walked off. Memphis watched him disappear, then followed after.

Memphis felt his form ripple and the construction site disappeared. He felt wind ripping past him as he travelled after Gary. His feet touched ground and he opened his eyes and immediately squinted as an arctic blast of wind drove snow through his eyelashes. He dropped his hand to his side and a pair of snow goggles appeared in them. Still wincing from the wind he managed to get the goggles up to his face. He blinked hard a few times before finally opening his eyes for real to look at the miles of ice in front of him, snow eddies whirling and dancing all around.

Ahead of him he could see Gary's blood-red sweatshirt walking off into a snow drift.

"Oh, it's so good to be back here," Memphis muttered, and began trudging his cowboy boots forward, struggling to navigate through the pure white landscape. Eventually he noticed that things had died down around his goggles and with relief he reached up and pulled them up to his forehead to look around. Rising up on one side of him was an ice wall providing some defense against the wind.

Gary was huddled a few feet further along where the wall was highest.

"You call in, yet?" Memphis asked.

Gary shook his head. "Was waiting on you."

Memphis nodded, then reached into his jacket and took out his cell phone. He dialed and waited, cowboy boot tapping on the ice. "Hello," he said when Filip answered. "Filip?"

Gary heard Filip's voice on the other end of the line say something.

"Yeah, this is Memphis and Gary, can you give us a ping on the Fortress of Solitude?"



More talking, Memphis nodding. Memphis put a hand over the phone and looked at Gary. "Give him a ring, he needs to verify you," Memphis said.

Gary took his phone out and dialed, sending his own information up to Filip.

"Thanks," Memphis said, listening to Filip some more. "Yup...take care."

He hung up and they both waited for a few moments before both their phones beeped as they both got a text message with the Fortress's current location.

Gary glanced at his phone, studied the text message, nodded, then turned back to the wall of ice.

"This..." Gary said, "...is...always tricky." His forehead wrinkled in knots as he stared.

Jonathan's bunker never failed to impress Memphis, but he felt an extra shot of admiration as he glanced over at Gary and noticed that the concentration required to get in had managed to wipe all of the irritation and anger off of Gary's face. Then Gary's form wavered and disappeared.

Memphis turned to the ice himself and began to concentrate.

Jonathan had dug up thousands of oceanic surveys and maps from around the world when he first decided to set up the Fortress. Then had come weeks of work by Jonathan, with days straight spent under the surface of the arctic water, probing and searching the massive undersides of ice caps whose tops floated in the ocean above. He had discovered a pocket of air, a tiny bubble inside of a floating iceberg. But, when compared to the size of an iceberg, a tiny bubble actually represented a space the size of a football field. Centuries of freezing and thawing and refreezing had produced it and months of exploration by Jonathan, mentally hopping from crack to tiny fissure, had allowed him to get close enough to get a mental map allowing him to enter.

But that wasn't the real beauty of the place. The real beauty was that it was constantly moving in the water, so the path in was constantly being rewritten. Jonathan had almost been trapped inside when he first arrived but had managed to get a phone call out which had then set up a continuous chain of phone calls out periodically that had lasted to this day. It was all very disciplined now. There was a Guardathing inside the ice whose dedicated task was to send a location up to Filip every fifteen minutes. Then whenever someone needed to get in they could get Filip to ping them the information and...

Memphis glanced over the text message from Filip and then concentrated on the ice wall. He could feel the shifting, hollow space deep inside the ice and with a little mental shove he flickered and disappeared for a nervous trip through solid ice before he reappeared miles below the surface.

He was standing on an ice ledge next to Gary. There was a subterranean pool behind them. Ahead of them the floor of ice went on and on while the ceiling of ice rose higher and higher so that they stood at the tapered end of a room hundreds of yards long somewhere under the Arctic Ocean. Sunlight was nonexistent; everything was lit up by lamps strung out along cables running the length of the ceiling.

It had been necessary for them to set up a home base like this as their kind weren't able to get to the mountaintops. There was only one record of a rotted thing getting to Everest, but there was a phrase that had popped up in the past year as their world started to figure itself out that was used to explain such anomalies. The phrase that was so often repeated was: "Sure that happened once, but that was back when Kyo was Kyo." Maybe Kyo had gotten a rotted thing to the mountaintops and maybe Kyo had done a lot of other things, but that Kyo wasn't around anymore and the mountaintops now rejected all zombies without recourse. Embracing this, Jonathan had set them up here. Testers in the mountaintops, Guardathings under the sea.

As Memphis and Gary stood on the ice they heard Jonathan shouting, loud and piercing. His voice seemed to be filling the entire room to the point where Memphis actually turned to look over his shoulder as the noise echoed from the wall behind them.

Memphis and Gary started walking, a path of sorts in front of them where thousands of footfalls had worn the ice dark and dirty. The giant empty bunker had slowly been broken into different sections, as need arose, with paths to all of them forking away from that main worn track. A section to practice hand to hand combat had been marked off, then a desk or two for the communications bullpen. Tracking and receiving had sectioned off a corner away from the pool and the desks in charge of bookkeeping were squared off neatly at the far end.

Memphis and Gary continued walking, Jonathan's roaring still bouncing off of every wall. They came up on a small group of trainees, rotted like them, standing in childish fear. Jonathan was tromping up and down

in front of all of them, his boots clomping hard on the ice and his khaki shorts and shirt standing out in odd contrast to the ice all around. His normally ruddy face was beet-red as he yelled and Memphis didn't need to be told that someone was getting dressed down for an infraction or slip up during training.

"And what," Jonathan turned to face a particular rotted thing that the crowd instinctively inched away from, "exactly did you find too *difficult* about how the current obstacle course is set up!?" Jonathan was in the trainee's face now, all sense of personal boundaries ignored as Jonathan hit his stride and started screaming. "Was it too much of a challenge for you? Pushed you too hard? Perhaps you'd like to set up a different course, maybe one where your mommy serves you tea and you watch your favorite stories on the telly?"

Memphis smiled and laughed quietly, then quickly shut his mouth and looked around to make sure nobody had heard him. Laughing in front of Jonathan when he was like this could result in blowback, even though Memphis's training days were well behind him. Jonathan was a tyrant in his bunker, but he was a tyrant with purpose. It was still a dangerous world up top.

Jonathan's roaring was reaching maximum volume as he wound his speech up and Memphis hid another grin, having heard this rant delivered a few times now.

"Perhaps you'd like it," Jonathan screamed, right in the trainee's face, "if you could contribute by, say, bouncing this ball!" And Jonathan pulled a big red, rubber kickball out of the air. "You could bounce it over and over again in the corner of the room, maybe? You could clap and laugh and play. Would you like that?"

Jonathan shoved the ball into the trainee's chest. "You run that course until you get it right," he said, much more calmly now, then he turned and walked away from the group.

Jonathan caught sight of Memphis and Gary immediately upon turning around and he didn't break stride as he motioned for them to follow him. "I take it Kyo gave you the run around?" Jonathan asked.

Memphis glanced briefly at Gary, who looked like he had taken Jonathan's shouting a few seconds earlier personally. Gary looked dangerously worn, Memphis decided. He definitely needed a pint. "He kicked the ever loving crap out of us, yes, then disappeared," Memphis said, answering Jonathan's question.

Jonathan laughed. "Ah, so I'm assuming I'll be getting one of his reports on you two soon enough?" Then something occurred to him and he shook his head, stopping his walk momentarily to turn and face Memphis. "Kyo's been doing some off-beat training as part of his partnership with Bartleby. Did he close with you in hand-to-hand combat?"

Memphis nodded.

"And even though he's basically a pile of clotted cream to you..."

"I don't know what to say," Memphis said. "You try to grab him and he's not there. You get slightly off balance and suddenly you're not upright anymore. You make a tiny error in your motions and he manages to turn it into a fall or a trip. And then he's wailing on you."

Jonathan was smiling more now, with even a silent laugh bubbling out of him as he reached a hand up and ran a knuckle over his mustache. "When he told me he was going to study up on fighting styles I didn't exactly think he'd take it this far."

"In retrospect," Memphis added, "it's Kyo. If anyone was going to learn enough Kung Fu to do what he does, it'd be him."

"I wish we could get him to join us permanently." Jonathan said. He glanced up at the wall of ice over their heads where someone had painted, "The Guardathings," in bright red. Underneath that was written, "If you had hired us to begin with, you never would have died in the first place."

The sign always made Memphis smile, though it also made him wonder if it had been painted in blood.

"But he says he doesn't want to set up a desk here full time. Been trying to poach him from Bartleby and Pintar for months now," Jonathan said. "Though from what I've heard he still doesn't exactly call their shack home."

Memphis laughed quietly. Jonathan glanced over at him, wondering what was humorous. "Oh, sorry," Memphis answered. "It's just funny trying to picture Kyo at home anywhere."

Jonathan nodded, his face back to its normal ruddy complexion as he stared up at the Guardathings sign, hands clasped behind his back. "He had a family once," he said, his voice a little strange. "He had a wife, and a son. I don't know the full story but you would do well to remember that, Memphis. Kyo had a family once and I think it was his devotion to them that drove him to become what he did."

Memphis didn't know how to answer, he only stared up at the sign as well. Even Gary was less fidgety as they looked up in silence.

"Do any of the testers who work down here ever get upset by that?" Memphis asked, finally breaking the quiet.

"At what?" Jonathan asked, taking his eyes off the giant red writing on the wall.

"I don't know, the name *Guardathing*. You know. It doesn't acknowledge the testers who help us train and the ones down here working on attacks and new use of technologies...you know...we're not all rotted. I always wondered if any of the testers felt like the name didn't include them."

"We're all Guardathings and that's that." Jonathan stated. "Doesn't matter whether you're rotted or not. Now as for Kyo, did you both file your time sheets?"

"Not yet. We'll get on that," Memphis answered, getting rattled as Jonathan glared at him about his paperwork. "Are we still to report to Kyo?"

"Well if he's still asking for Guardathings," Jonathan replied, "I told myself that I'd send my happy soldiers off to wherever they were requested. But I'm not sure how I feel about sending them off just so Kyo can test his strength."

"It's okay," Memphis said. "I'd like to stick with it if it's all the same with you. I'm learning a lot and I think Kyo is too. And if he's sharing his thoughts with you it seems like a win-win-win."

Jonathan pulled thoughtfully at his lower lip. "Well, we'll see if he puts in another request and then I'll give you first crack. You have my go-ahead, which means your time will be honored by the Council. What about you?" he asked, turning to Gary.

Gary seemed at a loss and Memphis knew that his outbursts, cursing Kyo out from earlier at the construction site, weren't buried very deeply under the surface.

"Gary," Memphis said, getting his partner's attention, not wanting him to go blurting out anything in anger to Jonathan. Jonathan turned to Memphis when he spoke and Memphis managed to turn everything into one long sentence, tacking on a, "...feels the same way."

There was a brief moment where it looked like Gary was going to correct Memphis, Jonathan was about to inquire further, or Gary was going to have to explain something, but then a woman's voice came from over by the pool of water.

"Jonathan, do you have a minute?"

All three of them turned to see Mary standing at the water's edge. Her little body was bundled up in a winter coat, cheeks and nose and bright eyes peeping out from the fur-lined hood that was still up around her head. She smiled and the room felt warmer.

"Mary," Jonathan said, greeting her with a nod. "What do we owe the pleasure?"

Mary smiled again, and while it was friendly, there was none of the unguarded warmth that had emanated from her a moment ago as she focused on business. "Some of the testers who have signed up for your services have lodged complaints. I'm here as an official Council delegate to discuss this, though as of now there is no official stance."

"Complaints? I'm not sure what anybody has to complain about. To the best of my knowledge we haven't lost a tester under our care yet."

"That's actually the biggest complaint."

Jonathan squinted his eyes, not understanding. "Come on in," he said, waving Mary forward, away from the pool, and settling into the conversation. "Now," he started as they began walking, "please do explain. A tester needs our protection, they come to us, we do the work, they sign off on our hours, the Council approves and we get paid out in the clinics. Right? I don't see the problem."

Mary continued walking, looking around at the vast ice walls all around her as she moved. "There's nothing wrong with the arrangement. It's the focus on your end. Testers come to you for protection from the cannibals. Testing is hard work and it's impossible to focus on it, relive the moment of your own death, push a human and avoid being eaten alive by a hungry corpse."

Jonathan smiled, broad and friendly. "Exactly why we offered up our services. The Guardathings are here to take down any passing zombie that goes after one of your testers."

"But the rotted things aren't the only danger your people have been protecting testers from."

"I'm not sure I..."

"A Guardathing pulled a tester off of a mark the other day."

Jonathan held his hands up and shook his head, puzzled, not entirely sure of what he was being accused of.

"The tester misjudged her human and got in too deep, too fast. She was getting torn apart revisiting her own death and the Guardathing on duty managed to sever the tester's ties with the human and get her out of there."

"Well..." Jonathan spoke slowly, still unsure of what was being said, "...yes. If someone under a Guardathing's care is in danger of dying, the Guardathing will protect that tester. It's what we do."

"But only from the outside attacks," Mary said. "You're only supposed to protect us from the...rotted things."

Jonathan did a small double take, his face getting confused again as it sounded to him like they had gone in a circle.

"Jonathan," Mary said, managing to stare him down despite being far shorter, "you are not to interfere with what happens between a tester and their human."

"You're saying my Guardathing should have let that tester die?"

"Yes," Mary said.

"Oh, come off it," Jonathan said dismissively. "That's ridiculous. We saved her life. You can't possibly believe we were in the wrong."

Mary's eyes held Jonathan, her cheeks rosy from the cold. With a slow, fluid motion she reached up and pushed her hood off of her head, blond hair in thick curls pooling out. And, using this act to rearrange herself, her whole posture ratcheted up a notch. Whatever warmth had still clung to her fell away as if the ice had leached it out of her. "Do *not*," Mary said, and nearly every head within ear shot turned to focus on her, "tell me, or any other tester for that matter, what we believe."

Her blue eyes held Jonathan, and he stared back, but he didn't say anything and for a long while their eyes stayed locked.

"Every single one of us," Mary said, "knows the risks involved with pushing a human. Those risks are ours to run. You cannot interfere with that. You will not interfere with that. It is a sacred pact that runs to the very meaning of our existence. Those rotted, hungry things roaming around are a real danger and we need, and appreciate, you protecting us from them while we do our work. But you can't go trundling in between a tester and her mark, Jonathan."

"Trundling?" Jonathan's conviction was less strong now, "...we saved her life."

"It wasn't yours to save, Jonathan," Mary said. "We all know the risks, we take them very seriously. And all of us are willing to end our existence for the sake of a human's potential. If you get it into your head that you should be pulling us off of a mark when things look bad you're going to get a lot more complaints. For one thing you never know when a bad push can be saved, but more importantly you can't go deciding for us what risks to run. Doing what we do, we have to be able to put our all into it. We have to be free to fail."

Jonathan didn't answer, he seemed to be thinking things over. "We saved her life," he finally said.

"Her life ended three hundred years ago," Mary responded.

Jonathan, burly in khaki, stared. Then there was an uproar from over by the obstacle course. Jonathan looked back and gave a sigh.

"Go do your job," Mary said, threat and strength melting easily into friendliness. "I'm merely here to schedule a block of time with you to discuss this further."

Jonathan gave a wave of his hand and began walking. "Come along then, I'll mention it to my secretary and you can work it out with him."

Mary, putting her hands into her coat pockets, stepped forward and fell into pace alongside him.

Memphis turned and looked at Gary. His partner's ragged looks were becoming worrisome and, as Memphis watched, Gary wiped the back of his hand across his mouth leaving a trail of saliva along his skin.

"Hey," Memphis said, and Gary turned to him. "Let's go get that pint. Jonathan's gonna be busy for a while anyway and we don't know what Kyo's going to decide about our detail so--"

Gary turned away. Hearing Kyo's name seemed to cause him real physical pain. "I don't want to do this," Gary said in a quiet voice. Gary's headphones were back together now, still dangling from his neck, and his hood was down sitting in a maroon lump at the back of his head.

"Look," Memphis said, undeterred but stepping around so he was between Gary and the rest of the Guardathings. Most everyone was out of ear shot but Memphis didn't want to risk anyone looking over. "We'll get that pint, okay? And then you can relax and regroup and then we'll talk this out, all right? Good," Memphis said, not waiting for a response, "now here we go."

"Right," Gary said, looking like someone who had recently thrown up.

"Okay, I'll just grab the path out of here and I'll be right back." Memphis wandered over to the location desk and spoke with the Guardathing there. He took the new route and texted it over to Gary after memorizing it himself.

As Memphis walked back over to the pool he watched Gary glance at his phone, then step up to the edge of the pool, waver and disappear.

Memphis shook his head after he was gone. "This is bad," he said to himself, then he stepped forward and concentrated. The terrifying sensation of walls of ice rushing past him made him flinch before he felt himself in open air. With the snow and wind pelting him he quickly got his bearings and moved on again, opening his eyes to feel his feet on nice normal pavement. He looked to his right to make sure Gary was still with him, then looked up at the hospital looming in front of them.

Memphis had barely gotten his footing when there was the blare of an ambulance siren off to their right. Gary and Memphis instinctively jumped to the side as the ambulance came wailing up under the canopy of the emergency entrance. Then there were doors banging and people shouting and the clatter of gurneys unfolding as a young girl was taken out of the back of the ambulance.

"That's my sister!" Memphis heard someone yell in the tone of someone who had, not long ago, lost all sense of control over their life and had taken to blurting stupid things to the medical professionals all around him.

Memphis watched as David got out of the ambulance, following after his sister who was now on a gurney. "That's my sister," he said again. "We were in a taxi cab up by the park, it's her arm. Her arm is broken--"

And then David was walking through Memphis, whose eyes popped open as his body went rigid. "Wow!" Memphis said, every muscle in his body tense, his stomach flexing so hard he was practically bent over. He managed to straighten up and turned to watch David follow his sister inside, still shouting things at the EMT's. "That guy is ripe," he said, catching his breath. "Holy shit," Memphis said again, his voice cracking. "Some newbie out there is getting *dee-runk* tonight and is paying in cash."

He was still breathing hard when he turned back to Gary, who didn't seem to be noticing much of what was going on, nor caring.

"All right," Memphis said. "Come on." And he led his friend inside.

They walked through doctors and patients and past chaos and boredom as they made their way into the hospital, finally reaching the far wing. They ducked into a stairwell and walked into a sub-basement that looked, at first glance, like it was shut down and out of use.

Standing in the darkness Memphis heard a soft rustling and the sound of a chair being shifted back. Then a light bobbed toward them and a starched looking woman holding a lantern in front of her came over to them.

"Hello," she said, looking at Memphis with clinical eyes. After her eyes had studied Memphis they turned to Gary. She stared at his sunken, sickly form and her eyes disapproved.

"We're down about a pint," Memphis said, trying to act jovial.

The starched woman smiled a prim smile at them both. "Well our services are open to all in need. However free use of our system does require a short but informative review of additional programs we offer here for those who are incapable of energy--"

"Lady, I'm already in your fucking program," Gary blurted out, holding his hand out for her to examine.

"I see," she said, her tight smile never wavering. Even with Memphis's general dislike of her attitude he still found himself siding with her over Gary at the moment. And, to her credit, despite whatever underlying opinions she had, she did quickly and professionally take Gary's hand, give the ball of his thumb a prick with a needle, remove a few drops of him to a glass slide, insert that slide into her modified data station, and send off his imprint to be analyzed.

She turned, her plastic smile already flawlessly back in place, and took Memphis's hand, repeating the process.

"We're Guardathings," Memphis said, feeling the need to offer some explanation of himself.

"We should have confirmation shortly," the lady smiled. "Filip is usually very prompt in responding to our requests."

Memphis smiled back and nodded. He was half-expecting another outburst from Gary but instead there was only awkward silence. The darkness of the hospital halls offered little but the noise of rustling sheets and quiet, muted, talking.

"While we wait you might be interested in reviewing some of our literature. We have a number of--"

"Thank you," Memphis said quickly, "we'll be sure to do that." He put an arm around Gary's shoulder, his stomach giving a lurch of alarm at how wobbly his partner's weight felt. Memphis walked them over to a set of plastic chairs shrouded in darkness.

As they sat, waiting, Memphis glanced over at Gary. He was starting to look clammy around the face and he occasionally shut his eyes, letting his head loll about on his neck.

Memphis sat back and waited, an occasional form walking past them toward the exit. After what seemed like hours he heard the sound of footsteps and looked up to see the starched lady coming toward them.

"Gary," she said, "come with me please."

Her attitude was changed entirely. Memphis hesitated to call it friendly, but it was a close facsimile. She led them down the dark hall by the light of her lantern. They passed room after room, the things inside them shrouded in silence and stillness. Even the light sound of Memphis's cowboy boots sounded loud in the hallway.

Memphis paused at one open door, looking in at the form lying there in a hospital bed hooked up to plastic tubes. The other form in the room, the bedridden thing's partner most likely, looked up from the nearby chair and moved to the door, shutting it in Memphis's face.

"I hate how quiet this place is," Memphis said, trying to be loud and bold, but some part of him only let him say it in a low voice.

"We try not to draw attention to ourselves," the starched lady said.

"Yeah, but, it's not like anyone's going to hear us. This all seems so...I don't know."

"The darkness is necessary and the silence follows that. Plus a lot of people come here only under dire circumstances. This isn't a very happy place for a lot of our visitors."

"No kidding," Memphis said, shuffling past another open door.

"Here we are," the lady said, and she led Memphis and Gary into an empty room.

Gary walked straight to the hospital bed, sitting down heavily before rolling over to lie on his back. Memphis walked around to the other side and picked up the gray plastic box that controlled the bed, hitting some buttons to bring Gary up to a sitting position.

"Be back in a moment," the lady said, disappearing out the door. Memphis and Gary waited in silence until she returned, wheeling a cart into the room with a few needles and a tray with an IV bag on it. She went to the corner of the room and wheeled the IV pole over, her hands moving with the bored surety of repetition as she hooked the IV bag onto the pole and began hooking up the plastic tubing.

Memphis watched until it became time for her to insert the small catheter into Gary's arm, at which point he opted to turn away, instead letting his eyes fix on the IV bag. He stared at the deep red liquid inside of it, the energy of some tester either given as a donation or taken as payment.

With a soft, "There we are," from the starched lady, the deep red liquid began to flow out of the bottom of the bag and into the clear plastic tube attached, making its way down until it finally met up with the catheter and then Gary's arm as the bag began to empty into his body.

Gary's initial reaction was quick. His eyes lost some of their mistiness, the sweat seemed less prominent on his forehead and the wincing pain and fear that had been on his face in one form or another since their meeting with Kyo melted away into something that might not be happiness, but was most certainly absent of hurt. Then his eyelids dropped and his head swung to one side as he drifted off to sleep.

"Are you ready?" the lady asked.

Memphis took his eyes off of Gary and turned to look at her. "Oh, I'm not sure I need any. I was mainly bringing him in."

"Well you're here," the lady said. "We should top you off. Maybe not a full pint but we can give you a smaller portion."

"Yeah, okay," Memphis said, her frank and open tone making him feel self-conscious. He didn't like his hunger dissected in such cold terms or treated as something so easily fixed. "Maybe a...top off...like you said."

"Come over here and roll up your sleeve please," she said, all business. "Let me get a gauge how low your reserves are."

Memphis walked over to her, rolling up his right sleeve without thinking. He held out his arm, almost bored as he submitted to her clinical nature.

She looked down and gave a prim sniff. "Very funny. Other arm please?"

Memphis glanced down. "Oh god, sorry, that wasn't...I just forget sometimes." He stared down at his right forearm, the skin and muscle all rotted away and the two bones there bare and white. He rolled up his other sleeve and held it out.

The lady took his pulse and while staring at her watch, then prodded his arm some. "Right this way, then," she said, and then she walked off.

Memphis followed her, the shuffling walk down the hallway starting to seem depressingly repetitive. There was one brief moment of respite when another rotted thing, a big hulking man in his thirties, walked past them. He was wearing a linen shirt, thin against his torso which revealed a landscape of rotted and decayed muscle beneath. He was flush with energy, his face strong and healthy, and Memphis could tell that he had just come from a treatment. The man glanced over at Memphis and gave him a knowing nod.

"Fountain of youth, isn't it?" he said.

"Something like that," Memphis responded.

"Be sure and check out with the nurse at the entrance station, Fatboy," the starved lady said to him.

"Sure thing," the hulking man answered, and Memphis was sure for a second he was going to give her ass a quick slap as she walked past, but he stood there smiling at them as they walked by.

"Fatboy?" Memphis asked, turning to the nurse.

"He won't respond to anything but his nickname," she responded.

Fatboy continued watching until Memphis and the lady turned a corner and were out of site before shaking his head. "I hope I don't look like that when I come in here," he said to himself. Then he made his way down the hallway, stopping off at the entrance to sign out as requested. He made his way back out into the used area of the hospital, the hallways always so confusing to him, before he was finally out on the pavement.

The heat of the summer night made a greasy lock of black hair drop into his face and as he walked a comb whipped out of nowhere into his hands. With quick, tempered strokes he sculpted his hair back into place before the comb disappeared.

Smiling, he walked away from the hospital entrance, linen shirt clinging to his body, hands slipping into his worn jean pockets. Halfway down the block Fatboy's form began to waver, then he disappeared.

He continued walking as he reappeared in the scrub brush of northern Mexico. He ducked under some branches, his feet leading him forward through the hard scabble with the stars sparkling overhead.

He came up on a stone road and walked toward a small grouping of abandoned cabins in the distance. He crossed over a cow tripper and over a small bridge spanning a dry riverbed. He entered a cluster of cabins forming an abandoned ranch. Walking past some of the smaller structures he came up on the main cabin, its main beams and columns good and strong but everything else on it withered and worn.

One of his hands came out of his jeans and a quick palm smoothed down his hair before he glanced around, looking to see if anyone was nearby. Sure that he was alone he walked around the main cabin to the chimney in the rear. He shifted aside some of the bricks and dug out a cooler. He looked around again, then opened the cooler and lifted out a full IV bag. Squirming some he hid the IV bag in his pants, then he replaced the cooler and reset the bricks. He looked around one last time to make sure no one had seen, then his hand flattened his hair out again and he stood up straight. He walked around to the front of the main cabin and bounded up the steps onto the porch, then walked through the door.

Inside it was hot and dark, a disgusting combination, and the broken windows had allowed in a thick layer of powdery dust from the desert rock outside.

"Hello?" Fatboy said. He walked through the cabin's front room and started down the back hallway where rooms split off from either side. Fatboy poked his head into one room, then another, then another. In each one there were more of his kind, some playing card games, some sitting and chatting. Those in the first few rooms were mostly whole but as he continued down the hall there were some of his own in pretty bad need of a feeding.

He poked his head into one of the latter rooms off of the hallway and saw a couple sitting around the body of what Fatboy assumed to be a human, though some residents of the cabins were desperate enough to eat their own. Fatboy watched as one of the things dipped a finger into a ragged open wound on the body sitting on the floor before dipping the fingers into his mouth, like a kid eating peanut butter. The thing raised its head, its eyes glassy and hungry. The rotted face looked Fatboy up and down and a soft pink tongue lapped out to run over its lips.

"Don't even fucking think about it," Fatboy said, slamming the door.

Fatboy backed out of the room and continued down the hall. All the other cabins on the deserted ranch were filled with more of the same. After the fight at Katie Packer's house everything had become unstrung for his kind in every sort of way. Existing took energy and since the testers had managed to fight back and organize, they were harder and harder to take down. Not to mention every wallop one of Fatboy's kind took drained away what little juice they had stored inside of them. You didn't get struck by lightning and survive and not spend some energy doing so. And then there were the traitors, the Guardathings they were called, happy to kill their own kind. It was getting harder and harder to keep fed, and if he didn't keep feeding he would rot until he wound up like the less stable residents of this cabin: starved and stupid and ready to die.

He reached the door at the end of the hall and walked into the final room of the cabin. The room was larger than the others. It occupied the top end of the t-shaped layout and, with three walls available for windows, some degree of light managed to make it through the grimy glass to fill up the room during the daytime. Currently, though, it was pitch black out and old oil lanterns were the only brightness to be had.

It was quiet, a few more rotted things were scattered around. A few were lifting weights, some were leaned against the wall having low conversations.

"Oiga," Fatboy shouted at the nearest one, getting its attention. "Hector?" he asked, and the thing pointed.

Fatboy made his way through the room to where Hector was sitting at a folding table. Hector's chair was tilted back, a slight creak coming from the legs as he imperceptibly rocked, his mirrored sunglasses reflecting the entire room in distorted proportions. Hector remained unmoving as Fatboy stood in front of him, only his ragged sinus breathing and the creak from his chair indicated that he wasn't asleep. Leaning against the wall to his side was a long, thin, white cane.

"Hey, boss," Fatboy said, reaching a hand inside of his pants and fidgeting awkwardly.

Hector's head turned to look at him, his face revealing no emotions, his head searching, trying to lock onto where Fatboy's voice had come from.

Fatboy was attracting some attention and some of the other things were gathering around. With a grunt or two Fatboy pulled an IV bag full of deep red liquid out of his pants. He tossed it onto the table then went about smoothing down his shirt, adjusting his pants, and then giving his hair a quick comb.

As more attention focused on the table and Fatboy, one of the smaller things took advantage of an opening at the weight set and sat down. It was a thin boy, somehow out of place in this backroom. He was wearing a leather rancher's jacket, the leather worn to a buttery smoothness from years of use. Cotton fleece piping showed at the seams. Bulky and thick, it seemed out of place on his little frame and served to make him look like a young boy attempting to pass as an adult.

At the table Hector's hand was reaching out. Slowly it brushed over the empty table, tapping and padding methodically until it hit against the corner of the IV bag. Hector lifted it up, hefting it.

"Trouble?"

"Nah," Fatboy said. "They don't know what's going on. I listen to their preaching, I read the pamphlets, I talk to them and give my earnest act and they eventually give me a bag no matter what their paperwork says. Getting it out's the hard part."

A lot of the gathered crowd was muttering happily, some giving Fatboy slaps on the back and most expressing congratulations and approval.



The boy in the back, as if unable to handle the attention being given to Fatboy, laughed as he sat at one of the weight benches.

Some of the thuggish things looked at him, casting annoyed eyes on him from half rotted faces. Most stayed looking at Fatboy and Hector.

Hector was hefting the IV bag in his hand, absently judging its weight.

"You should get to that," Fatboy said, "it won't exactly keep well."

"You did it clean?" Hector asked, still holding the sagging IV bag in one hand.

"Clean like you wouldn't believe," Fatboy said, trying so hard to be earnest that he couldn't even pull a decent comparison out of his head. "You say no bloodshed, you get no bloodshed. Only some sleight of hand is all. But, if you ask me, we get a couple of us together. You know, we plan it real well? We break one of those clinics no problem."

This drew a shift in Hector's mood as Hector turned to face his mirrored sunglasses at approximately where Fatboy was. Fatboy saw himself in Hector's sunglasses and his face was confused and scared as Hector's displeasure filled the room. "No one asked you," Hector said, "to plan anything."

A few moments ago Fatboy had been at the heart of a small celebration ceremony for getting the IV bag to Hector. Now he felt like he had failed and he wanted to punish himself for opening his stupid mouth. Fatboy glanced around to deflect the anger filling him up and his eyes fell on the scrawny little runt in the oversized rancher's jacket trying to figure out the shoulder press. "The fuck let him in?" Fatboy said, forcing volume into his voice and seizing control with one angry thrust of his chin, getting all eyes in the room to turn and look at the kid.

The kid noticed all this attention. "What? I'm allowed in here," he shot back, his voice an irritating repetition of the rules. Technically anyone was invited to train unless Hector was holding a private meeting. Technically. However that notion completely disregarded the unspoken rules of the backroom, the pecking order, the rituals, all of which screamed at the little uninvited thing in the rancher's jacket to never come back here.

"Get the fuck out of here and get your fucking hands off the god damned *fucking weights*," Fatboy yelled at him, starting slow but screaming as he started walking toward him.

"Oh, like you're in charge," the scrawny thing said, earning some points with some of the bystanders for having the balls to taunt Fatboy.

Hector had stopped paying attention and was focused on the IV bag in his hand, but everyone else was now waiting to see how Fatboy was going to react.

"You think you're doing so great," the kid was saying. "I mean all you do is pick off a bag or two every few weeks. Aren't we better than that? You guys seem happy to be pickpockets--"

This was enough and Fatboy covered the ground between them instantly. The kid's next words were lost as Fatboy grabbed his hair, yanking back and slamming the back of the kid's head against a steel bar on the weight set. "The fuck you think you're doing in here talking to us like that. You ever pinch a bag? You ever taken down a tester? Huh?!" The kid didn't answer immediately, earning him a hard slap on the face. "The fuck is your name again? You're always back here, getting up in our shit and nobody fucking wants you here."

"Linus," the kid answered, frozen now as Fatboy grabbed him by the front of his shirt and half carried, half dragged him, toward the door. Linus's flimsy body bounced and stumbled along as some laughter started up in the group.

"Linus, you're a fucking joke, you know that, fucking sitting here," Fatboy trailed off in a few more curses as he dragged Linus out into the hallway, the laughter dying down as they left the room. Linus, for the first time, became worried that this was going to end in more than a little humiliation.

Fatboy opened up the nearest door and the couple of near-corpses he had looked in on earlier raised their heads slowly to look at him. The body at their feet was stripped to the bone now. "Fucking prick," Fatboy said and tossed Linus inside before slamming the door shut. There was some screaming from inside and the door began to rattle as Fatboy held it shut. He heard Linus banging on the other side. Fatboy debated hooking the latch and locking Linus in, but he had vented all the steam he needed and had stopped caring what happened. He let go and walked back into the rear room.

The door flew open and Linus fell out into the hallway, spinning around and slamming the door shut in a panic. He glimpsed the things inside before the door slammed and that only made him feel more foolish as

they had barely turned themselves toward the door and weren't, as he had imagined while still trapped inside, inches away from devouring him whole. He was flushed, embarrassed, pissed off and scared and he stormed back out through the cabin and onto the front porch. There was some more storming, infantile self-berating, up and down the porch before he slowly wound himself down.

He stopped and looked out over the Mexican desert. The rising sun was turning the sky pink, illuminating short stunted trees and pale river beds run dry for the summer. His fingers dipped into his breast jacket pocket and plucked out his cigarettes. One was tapped out, the pack disappeared, his Zippo flicked and sparked and clicked shut and then he stood quietly smoking as he sank deeper and deeper into thought.

A form flickered into place, hard to see in the dim light, and Linus heard footsteps rattling toward him. Linus squinted and recognized Lun-Yi.

"Oh, hey, Linus," Lun-Yi said merrily as she walked up the steps. She was a mousy woman with a way of dressing that always seemed frumpy. Her hair was drawn back in a ponytail, revealing thick eyes that seemed in need of glasses. On her head was an odd high-billed hat, completing an ensemble that looked very much as if each piece had been chosen independently of anything else she was wearing. A band of rotted flesh ran up her neck and wound around her face.

"Hello, Lun-Yi," Linus answered. He pronounced the name quickly in one mouthful, combining syllables into something that sounded like a nickname.

Lun-Yi looked at the cigarette in Linus's hand. "You know those things will kill you."

"Hardy har har."

Linus continued to smoke and went back to thinking about his fight with Fatboy and he started getting himself worked up again with the recent memory.

Lun-Yi stood, quietly waiting, her unnoticed eyes on him, her face happy in the rising sun.

"I don't understand why they think they're doing so great," Linus said out of nowhere.

The way Lun-Yi barely reacted made it clear that this was a common conversation between them.

"And Hector lets them bounce around doing stupid odd jobs," Linus went on, "and they come back and practically preen themselves in front of him." His face flushed anew as he let himself relive Fatboy dragging him out of the backroom by his hair.

"He's in a bit of a rut," Lun-Yi said. "He'll turn a corner soon enough, you'll see."

"Back before Bartleby burnt out his eyes...he was different," Linus said, his voice warm as he started talking about better times. "I look at him now and I worry about who's leading us. We've been saying for months that he'll get back on his feet, and we keep moving from dilapidated hideout to dilapidated hideout...for months. But there's been nothing. I swore loyalty to him a long time ago, but this...this isn't what I swore an oath to.

"Meanwhile they're out there, and they're...they're *doing* things. Kyo's getting stronger somehow and Bartleby is chasing down stragglers and Jonathan's got all the scum-of-the-earth traitors training to protect them from us and they've set up the clinics and...and what are we doing?" Linus's voice nearly broke and he turned away from Lun-Yi, boyish again and frustrated, not wanting to be seen whining.

"Linus..." Lun-Yi said, but she didn't say anything else and her silence sounded like agreement.

"This doesn't feel right anymore," Linus said sadly.

"He's blind," Lun-Yi answered. "That sort of change, that kind of blow to someone, can put them in a rut for a good long time."

Linus flicked his cigarette thoughtfully into the brush. "I'm not sure I believe that anymore." He looked different whenever he sank into thought. No longer trying to strut and fit in with the boys in the backroom and comfortable talking with Lun-Yi, he somehow filled out his large coat better and looked more like a young man than a lost little boy. And as his face became contemplative it was easy to see that he was more mature than his looks let on.

"Well," Lun-Yi said, "either way I've got to get this to him quickly or it'll spoil." She pulled a plastic bag of red liquid out of her pocket.

Linus looked, then looked again and grimaced. "Did you get that from a clinic?"

"The clinic doesn't store their energy in zip-top bags, Linus."

"I would hope not. Where did you get that?"

"You know how I've been playing around with ways of draining testers, trying to figure out how they do it and keep it stored? Running my experiments?"

"Yeah?"

"I think I'm getting close."

"So that's from a living tester?"

"Not anymore," Lun-Yi said, as if this should have been obvious.

Linus winced, scared. "Lun-Yi you know he doesn't want anyone taking down healthy testers! He just chewed out Fatboy himself for even suggesting that."

"He doesn't want any attention, Linus. And I'm very careful. And I'm also not going near the clinics or any other hot spots. And it's only me and..."

"And what?" Linus asked. He leaned on the railing and looked over at her. He could see that the rest of that sentence was something interesting she was dying to tell him, but she held off. "And what?" Linus prompted again. Lun-Yi only gave a shake of her head in reply, her ponytail wagging under her high-billed hat as she did so.

Linus turned away from her and shook his head, fishing another cigarette out.

Lun-Yi relented finally. "And he asked me to do this," she said. "I was talking to him one day about how I have some theories on energy extraction and the various sources and how certain types of energy can be isolated into the primal components of the function it has been carrying out for..."

Linus nodded, listening as he lit his cigarette. He had heard his friend's theories plenty over the past year and he tried to avoid eye contact as she talked. He liked Lun-Yi a lot and didn't want to let on that she sounded somewhat crazy when she explained her ideas. Plus he was guessing that her response was mostly a smoke-screen, a long winded description of what she was doing that in no way answered the larger question of what Hector had asked her to do. Whenever he had questioned her about this in the past it had always been the same response.

"Yeah, well," Linus said, looking at his watch, "good luck with that."

Lun-Yi could see that he was about to excuse himself. "I could use your help," she blurted out. There was something else in her voice, something like longing, but Linus didn't notice. He only looked at her, surprised. "I don't like you hanging out in that back-room, Linus," Lun-Yi went on. Then, as her thoughts solidified, her face solidified as well into a set of hard lines. "And I don't like watching smart play dumb," she admonished, suddenly serious.

Linus shirked this off with some effort. "I'm with Hector," he said vaguely.

"I am too," she said. "And I know you understand most of what I'm talking about. You don't belong in that back room. But what I really need, though, is your hands." This came out awkwardly and she flushed a little. "I've seen you carve up a human before," she went on quickly. "Those rancher's hands. They're used to shearing and slaughtering precisely. I need someone with surgeon's hands who actually understands what I'm doing at a level that I *know* you could."

"You're talking about help with," Linus eyed the zip-top baggie in her hands, "this secret project of yours."

Lun-Yi nodded.

"I don't think that's...that's not where I need to be, Lun-Yi. I need to be in that back room with him. With Hector." He stared down at the porch boards for a few seconds. "You remember what it was like the day he raised you? Do you remember what it was like when he brought you back from the dead? Made you whole again? Or at least mostly so," he added, eying the rotted strip of flesh around Lun-Yi's face. "I swore loyalty to him then and I think he needs to know he has our loyalty now more than ever."

"But what I'm doing can help too," Lun-Yi insisted. "I...I can't really talk about it. Not yet."

Linus smiled. "Sorry," he shook his head. "Ask me again later maybe. But right now," he glanced at his watch, "I'm going to go take in a seminar."

"Why?" Lun-Yi asked.

"To brush up on some things, you know? This is what we're supposed to be doing: worrying about what's going on in the outside world. Plus, I want to keep an eye on someone."

Lun-Yi shook her head, scared. "You shouldn't be traveling in their circles, Linus."

"I'll be fine," he said, small body in his large jacket saying big words into the air, his boyishness returning with his bravado. He walked off the deck and through space as he disappeared, air whipping past him as he came back into existence on a college campus. He took a pamphlet out of his jacket pocket and studied it, then studied the map on the back and then he made a few more jumps until he got to one of the science buildings. He walked inside through empty hallways and stepped into a large lecture hall.

Rows of chairs bolted to the floor arced back and up from a dais at the front of the room. The unoccupied seats were folded up, hiding their fabric faces. The room was dark and an overhead projector hooked up to a laptop was running a series of slides on a large white screen behind the dais. Linus was at one corner of the room, and with four sections of chairs of two tiers each he was barely able to see the end of even the closest section in the semi-darkness.

"Now," the speaker was saying, pausing as the laptop flipped to a new slide displaying fractal mathematics. "Did the EFR paradox truly refute quantum mechanics? Or did it merely refute quantum mechanics' ability to be intuitively grasped?"

Linus tuned out the speaker and focused on the audience. The lecture hall was too large for the number of people attending and plenty of empty seats were available in each row. Linus walked up the shallow steps, hugging the wall as much as possible, his eyes searching through seats.

Most of the people in attendance were students, young people focusing their attention toward the front of the room with varying degrees of comprehension. Linus's eyes picked through them, bit by bit, his feet moving slowly as he walked toward the top of the auditorium.

Then Linus spotted him. The impeccable suit was easy to pick out among the shorts and t-shirts. Moving quietly to a section nearby, Linus found an empty seat and sat down before dedicating himself to studying Epp.

Linus was far enough back that in the darkness of the room he had to squint to catch every little move Epp made; and Linus was intent on catching every little move. He watched as Epp shifted in his seat. He noticed that Epp was, in fact, taking notes, the sleeve of his charcoal suit moving like captured liquid over his arm as he adjusted his weight. Linus debated lighting up a smoke, but he didn't want to be noticed, not yet.

A lot of his people, especially those back at the ranch, would have sat here in Linus's position and done nothing but sweat. Linus never understood that. If Epp happened to notice him, Linus was more than happy to walk over and say, "Hi." What was the guy going to do? Freak out and start tearing him limb from limb? Most of the zombies Linus knew, though, believed something very close to that might happen.

It was odd. Especially because it wasn't like Epp knew who Linus was or where Linus spent his time. Maybe if Linus had been higher up in Hector's ranks, sure, but as it was it might not even be clear that Linus was one of the partially rotted. And even if Epp did know what Linus was, Linus was still just another zombie. Maybe he was on Jonathan's team, maybe he was freelance, maybe he was a killer. The bottom line was that nobody knew anything.

No, if Epp glanced over this way then Epp glanced over this way. They were two guys watching one of the premier theoretical quantum physicists of the day give a beginner's lecture on his subject to some university students. And that was all.

Linus also disagreed with the overriding belief that Epp should be avoided. Epp's leg was rotted, just like Linus's. No matter where Epp claimed his allegiances lay, Linus knew that the decayed flesh above Epp's knee made them far closer than Epp and any tester out there. That was something Linus tried hard to never forget.

There was also the fact, and Linus was perhaps in a unique position to know this, having taken to popping in on Epp regularly, that Epp was a bit of a non-entity recently. Most of the reactions people had to Epp were in their gut and based on his reputation. Since Linus had started studying Epp he had found the reality to be less than the image; following Epp consisted of a lot of watching a well dressed man read, or sit and think.

Epp's phone buzzed and Linus leaned forward, squinting. Epp stared at the shifting slide show while his hand moved very slowly into his jacket, a move performed entirely with muscle memory so that Epp was still concentrating on the presentation even as he answered the phone. He held it up to his ear and said nothing. There was a pause while the person on the other end most likely started asking questions. And then Epp swapped instantly away from the lecture and to the phone, speaking short and to the point, minimizing

movement and brain power until the conversation ended and he effortlessly moved his eyes back to the slide show, his hand robotically replacing his phone in his suit jacket.

Linus was unknowingly mimicking Epp. His own body was slowing down, extraneous movements were being curtailed as his concentration grew and his focus on Epp became more complete.

Then Epp closed his eyes, turning his head to one side as if a sneeze were coming. Only the look on Epp's face wasn't expectant of a sneeze, it was pained, confused. The smooth darkness of Epp's skin seemed to grow weak as Linus watched. It was subtle, only lasting a few seconds, and anyone else watching Epp might not have noticed. But Linus had unwittingly become an Epp expert in the past few months and he saw it clearly.

Epp glanced at his notes, adjusted his suit jacket, looked around, then looked up at the screen. Again, nothing that anyone else might have drawn conclusions from, but Linus had seen this pattern before and he knew that what Epp was doing was trying to gather the threads of his recent thoughts. Whatever had passed through Epp's head had shattered his concentration and now he was scrambling to catch up to the parts of the lecture he had missed while his head was elsewhere. That, Linus recognized, was the hunger kicking in.

Linus sat back, his hands moving up to the collar of his rancher's jacket, flipping the white fleece lining up before folding his arms and settling into his seat, eyes fixed on Epp and lost in thought.

Then all thoughts of calm and bravery emptied out of Linus's head as Kyo wavered into existence in the row next to Epp.

Eyes wide, body shrinking as much as possible into his seat, Linus wavered himself and left the auditorium.

"Hey," Epp said, glancing up at Kyo.

"Hey," Kyo said. Epp was seated on the aisle so Kyo entered one row behind, then climbed over the seats to plop down in an empty chair next to Epp.

They didn't say anything else for a few minutes. Kyo sprawled out in his seat and occasionally glanced down at Epp's notes while the presentation went on. Epp, having acknowledged Kyo's entrance, went back to listening.

"Bell's refutation of the EFR paradox?" Kyo asked after a few minutes. "Isn't this a little rudimentary?" He sat up in his seat and looked around the auditorium. "This is an intro class, isn't it?"

"Some of this stuff needed brushing up on," Epp said, doing his best to ignore Kyo and focus on the current slide.

Kyo kept silent for a moment, watching Epp from the corner of his eye. Epp shook his head and looked down at his notes, then back up at the slide. Kyo went back to looking around the auditorium. "You know, this isn't you," Kyo said.

"What isn't me?"

"This. Theory. Lectures. This isn't your element, Epp. You don't exist here. You exist out in the world where the line gets drawn between this and what happens in reality. You don't work in a laboratory setting."

Epp sighed, annoyed. The back of his hand went up to his eye and he pressed there, warding off some fatigue. "I wanted to do some brushing up," he said, repeating himself from a moment ago.

Again Kyo fell silent, or tried to, his body shifting uncomfortably as he fought the urge to drop this topic.

"You know it could be years before she wakes up," he said, taking a different tack.

"She's due. She'll be up soon. And I have some questions for her."

"Epp..." Kyo said, care in his voice as well as an undercurrent of concern.

"Kyo..." Epp said, mimicking Kyo's tone exactly with annoyance.

"It's not good to get fixated like this."

"Oh really?" Epp said. "And when you decided to go learn every form of jujitsu to be learned, how many days straight did you remain fixated?"

And Kyo sat back, a boyish smile on his face, the playfully combative tone of Epp's response satisfying some worry about how far gone Epp might be. "Well," Kyo said still smiling, "I moved with the sun while I learned so technically it was one really long day."

"And you're going to lecture me for sitting in on a few seminars?"

"Yup," Kyo said, happily sticking to his objections.

Kyo leaned to look over Epp's notes again. He reached a hand out and gripped the edge of one of the sheets, causing it to double before he sat back again with his own copy and started reading. After a few minutes he crumpled it up and tossed it over his shoulder. Then he slung a leg over the seat in front of him. His foot started bobbing at the ankle as he listened until finally he sat up with agitation. "Oh, come on!" he said turning to Epp. "This is beginner's stuff. You do more cutting edge physics than this with every use of time tape. What are you doing here?"

"I need," Epp said, and something in his voice made Kyo stop fidgeting, "to brush up on this." There was worry on Epp's face, a forced concentration that Kyo had never seen before and a host of other emotions ranging from fear to panic that Kyo wasn't sure anybody had seen cross Epp's face, ever. What was more worrisome was that with all of Epp's squinting and blinking and looking over his notes and then back at the slides, it looked an awful lot like this was nowhere near beginner's stuff for Epp. It looked like he was struggling. In a lot of ways. "I just wanted a refresher course," Epp said, calm again.

"Epp..." Kyo said, feeling his way toward a question, "..are you-"

There was a squeak and a rustle and a late coming student sat down in Kyo's seat, his body passing through Kyo's unnoticed form as the student began to dig around in a backpack for some paper. "Oh, splendid," Kyo said, and even Epp was laughing.

"That's why I usually break my seat before I sit down," Epp said.

With a grunt Kyo stood up, turned to face his seat as well as the student now sitting in it, lifted a foot up and smashed down. There was a loud noise and a ripple of turning heads spread out in all directions as the student suddenly lurched and the seat broke. Embarrassed, the student stood up and hunched over and moved down the row.

"Now I was..." Kyo started again, sitting down again only to lurch as well himself. Kyo looked around. "Well that didn't work, now my seat is all tilty."

"I said break the seat," Epp said, "not destroy it."

Kyo stood up, moved to the next seat, ran his finger over the fabric so a tear formed and a spring popped out, then sat down. He nodded as he got comfortable, his head bobbing in appreciation. "Like that?" he asked.

"Yes, Kyo," Epp answered. "You're a master of subtlety."

"Whatever, I hate you," Kyo said easily, the familiar back and forth replacing the tension that had been growing before the student had sat down.

Epp laughed him off and brought his attention to face the lecture again. The two sat in silence for a few minutes, then Kyo leaned over to whisper. "You know I was never with Einstein on all of this. Not the first part, mind you, where he ripped down everything you and Newton had built, but the second part where he tried to rip down everything *he* had built."

"Once she left him," Epp said, "Einstein had some real problems reconciling the sheer weirdness of what they had come up with."

"Yeah, but..." Kyo stopped, listened to the speaker for a few beats, allowed his thoughts to reform, then started talking again.

Epp struggled to listen.

Kyo was talking about the history of science over the past century, going into a brief history of the double slit experiment, a turning point in physics that Epp used to be able to visualize in real time with no problem. And as Kyo started talking Epp tried, he really tried, to remember how it went, to grasp on a fundamental level what Kyo was talking about the way he always had, with his gut, wholly and completely so that he could mentally wander around inside the theory and play with it and tweak it and learn from it and possibly push it forward. The double slit experiment dealt with the nature of light, something he himself had helped Newton formulate an early theory of.

Only as Kyo spoke, and Epp tried to picture a massless particle, his mind kept drifting. He would be able to focus on Kyo, but then the lecture would get his attention, and then someone shifting in their seat sounded too loud. And Epp nodded along as Kyo spoke and set his eyes as hard as he could but it wouldn't come, the idea wouldn't come and sit at the front of his mind with any clarity like he was used to, and instead there was humming and blurriness and a constant gnawing hunger deep in the pit of his stomach that was hijacking all cranial space in order to send the constant signal that he needed to eat, he needed to feed. And

now Epp realized that he wasn't even trying to concentrate anymore but was concentrating only on the thing inside of him that was clawing at the walls of his stomach and soul to the point where his mouth was salivating. Epp closed his eyes, closed them tight, so tight that tiny bits of moisture started to well up deep in the corners and he was furious and pissed and couldn't concentrate or think or anything and the loud, bone crunching god-damned noises filled his head and then he opened his eyes.

"You all right?" Kyo asked.

"Oh, I'm fine," Epp said, wondering how much of what was roaring in his head was visible on his face. "Absolutely fine." And the rotted part of his leg was throbbing now as well.

Kyo looked him over, then shrugged and turned back to the lecture while Epp sat next to him in silence, dying inside.

"This stuff is child's play at this point." Kyo grew bored listening to the lecture and took out his phone. "You know I can play Tetris on this thing?" he said sitting back, slinging his leg once again over the seat in front of him.

Epp went back to listening to the lecture, struggling to get a grip on the most basic equations at the very top of his notes. Only he couldn't, and every failed attempt to walk through something he once knew created more panic inside of him until he was quietly reduced to rubbing his forehead with his fingertips, letting himself enjoy the feel of that at least while Kyo's phone beeped and played Russian music next to him. Then Epp managed to convince himself that the beeping phone was what was distracting him in the first place, instead of being the only thing his fragmented mind could actually focus on.

"Do you mind?" he said, staring with irritation at Kyo.

Kyo gave him a funny look. "You sure you're all right?"

Just then the lights went up and a great soft noise filled the room as hundreds of students began packing their bags and chatting while the professor shouted a few last thoughts over the growing din.

Kyo stretched, yawning, none of the last few minutes seeming to have had much of an impact on him. He turned toward Epp, his face conversational, only to stop when he noticed the determination bordering on franticness with which Epp was gathering up his notes, folding them sloppily into quarters and jamming them into his suit pockets.

Now that the lights were on Epp's appearance was less impressive. The silkiness of his suit was betrayed by the number of frayed edges and his crisp cuffs had a faint green tint of growing mold. Kyo sniffed and caught the smell of rotted leaves.

"Do you want to maybe grab a--"

"I've gotta run," Epp said, half mumbling, before he limped into the aisle, wavered and disappeared.

Kyo sat still, looking at the place where his friend had disappeared as students milled around him and stepped through him to exit the row.

Epp appeared on a New York City street, his hands still trying to contain his notes in his jacket pocket while bobbling his cane. One sheet of paper came undone from the mess and drifted into the street to get picked up by a small gust of wind and blown away. It flickered and began disappearing. Epp watched, helpless, not even sure why he was bothering to remember his notes when he knew he hadn't written anything coherent down in the first place. They would merely disappear into his pocket, slowly receding into the memory banks of his brain to be recalled later, just as useless as they were when he wrote them down the first time.

He breathed deep and stared down at the tip of his cane which he tapped over and over again on the sidewalk. One hand reached up to grab the back of his neck and give a squeeze while inside of him the anxious hunger seemed ready to rise up and swallow him whole.

Epp began walking, noticing that the sole of one of his shoes was loose and flapping with every step he took. He came upon a large building looming over the East River. He shut his eyes and tried to concentrate, focusing on the hallways inside and their layout, and the paths he had taken and what he knew about the inside of the structure. Only it wouldn't come. He had known it wouldn't come.

No longer trying he took the long way through, walking each hallway on foot, limping onto the elevator, riding down into the unused basement.

The elevator doors opened and Epp winced as he glanced into the darkness, hating the idea of someone seeing him here. He walked to the front desk and the starched lady working the counter greeted him. She

started with the normal formulaic boredom but her face broke into ill-concealed astonishment as she took in who he was.

They went through the routine. She took a pin prick from his thumb and she checked up on him. He waited, though not very long, and Epp could imagine Filip up on Everest immediately noticing a request for a background check on Epp and replying quickly due to the novelty factor.

He was waved back over to the desk and as the starched lady was about to lead him to his room a somewhat familiar face came out of the hallway, a Guardathing on his way out of a treatment.

Epp stared at his face as he approached and struggled to remember his name. "Memphis, right?" Epp said.

"That's right," Memphis answered with far more composure than the starched lady was able to muster in Epp's presence.

Memphis stepped up to the desk and rapped his knuckles on it in a little drum beat, his eyebrows popping up when the starched lady looked at him. "I'm all set to go?"

"You can wait your turn," she answered.

Epp insisted that she take care of Memphis and this seemed reasonable to her coming from Epp. Memphis had a hard time not being annoyed at her fawning. He held out his hand and she pricked his thumb and placed it between slides and uplinked it to Filip on the mountaintop and then they waited, but not long, and Memphis knew that she had dropped Epp's name somewhere in her message.

"You're low," she said.

"I *was* low," Memphis answered, "that's why I came here."

"No, the latest report on you plus your consumption puts the team of Memphis and Gary at a near deficiency as far as expected output versus withdrawals."

"Output?" Memphis asked. "What am I outputting?"

This earned him a glib look. "Jonathan's status reports on all his crew are used to determine a salary of sorts, you know this. Or you're supposed to," the starched lady said with a superior air. "I'm sure you can't be bothered to do your paperwork correctly, but the team of Memphis and Gary need to put in some more work, and quick, or you'll be back on probationary status."

"We've been doing pretty good work."

"Have all your protectees been sending in your information properly to Jonathan's bookkeepers?"

"Well I was recently assigned to Kyo. So no."

Epp laughed next to him, and the lady seemed torn between her enjoyment of being snooty to Memphis and her desire to agree with whatever she thought Epp might be thinking.

"Well, you should be aware that--"

Memphis held up a hand. "I got it. I'll get Kyo to get some paperwork in to Jonathan, or at least get someone to send something along to Filip."

"See that you do," she said to Memphis's back as he walked away toward the elevator.

"Right this way," the starched lady said to Epp once Memphis had gone, and she led him with delighted formality down the hall.

They arrived at an empty room and the IV stand was brought over and set up. She wheeled a tray over containing a catheter and tubing, and then she left for a little while, returning with an IV bag full of viscous red fluid.

"Roll up your sleeve, please?" she asked.

"I can do this on my own." Epp said, removing his suit jacket and removing one of his cuff links.

"We're supposed to make sure that every one of our patients--"

"Please," Epp said, not making eye contact with her as he began rolling his sleeve up to bare his arm.

The lady thought this over, her head making quick decisive bounces as she sucked on her lower lip before she agreed. "Of course," she said. "You know how to reach me if you have any trouble and when you're done you know what to do."

"Thank you," Epp said, as she turned and left the room.

He finished rolling his sleeve up, then sat down on the cot. He remained still for a minute, maybe more, his eyes losing focus as he stared tiredly off into space. Then, as if called back from somewhere far away, his eyes moved to look at the metal tray. He reached out with his cane and pulled it within arm's reach. After



hanging the IV bag and arranging the tubing he took a quick survey of his arm. Then he reached for the small catheter. He held it delicately in his left hand, his face unchanging as he found a vein with the needle. Then he turned, removed the stopper, attached the tubing and started his drip.

Epp sat back, the metal lattice under the cot creaking as the red fluid arrived at the catheter and began to move into his body. He closed his eyes tight and gritted his teeth as the sensation of being adrift in a high sea washed over him. The energy from the donor tester entering his system was causing a complete shift inside of him, the hunger, so painful and gnawing and ever present, began to recede causing a flux of elation and euphoria to temporarily fill the void. The feeling was so intense that Epp found it impossible not to visualize thousands of dirty objects lifting simultaneously up out of a vast field, or spurts of dark dingy liquid being sucked out of a tank of now clean water. It caused his head to spin and become dizzy and he sat back as his vision blurred and he gritted his teeth harder, hating the feeling, hating what was inside of him, hating the euphoria of dumb unconnected happiness that was pumping up falsely into his arm, hating that it took a trip to this room to make happiness visit him anymore, hating the fact that even now he was wishing he could stay hooked up forever and never let the drip stop, hating what was coming when he began to run low again, hating what he had become, hating himself.

The initial dizziness was wearing off and Epp sat up and pulled one of his pant legs up above his knee. His rotted leg sat there on the cot and as he watched the wound began to recede, his skin healing. He stared and willed with childlike hope for the wound to keep healing and make him whole again. But it didn't. His leg stopped regenerating at the exact same point every time. And, as he watched full of deluded hope that this time it would be different, he saw his leg stop changing right on cue as the rest of his wound went unhealed.

His body was adjusting now and the original thump to his system was receding to leave confusion and exhaustion but, mostly, blessed release from his life. He closed his eyes and let himself drift off into what he knew would be the only decent rest he'd get until the next time he came back here. Deep inside of him, muddled over by the dump of energy into his system and his system's subsequent reaction, cloudy with fatigue and euphoria, deep down he could just barely hear the sounds of bones breaking and wooden timbers snapping and stone crumbling.

The last thing that Epp thought before his mind rested, the last thing to drift through with clarity, was a deadening fear that nothing could ever change this.

Three floors up, Memphis was walking through a hallway in the part of the hospital used by humans. There were beeps and phones ringing and shoes moving over tile, but it was all distant and clinical, as if even noise recognized that this place could never be a home. He passed a row of dark rooms lit only with the orange glow of monitors and then walked through a set of double fire doors into a waiting room.

"Ah," he said, spotting what he had been looking for. On the other side of the waiting room, pacing back and forth with a cell phone pressed to his ear, was David, the meat bag he had seen coming into the hospital earlier. David's sister with the broken arm was no doubt resting in one of the rooms in the hallway behind him.

Memphis walked past the only other person in the waiting room, a young girl sitting alone, and got within earshot of David.

"No," David was saying. "No, mom, she's fine. She's...no it's a broken arm and some scrapes...no we weren't on drugs, mom..." David looked tired and he had some scratches from flying glass but otherwise seemed to have been unharmed in the accident. From the tone of his voice his mother wasn't helping things. "Mom...mom the cab's brakes failed. It had nothing to do with anything it was a freak accident...no...for the *eighth* time she's fine it's just a broken arm and they want to keep her...yes of course you're coming out...I...yes..."

Memphis stepped away from David and turned around. He saw a tester come in through the double doors at the other end of the hall. The tester was staring at David and Memphis could tell what he was thinking.

The tester blinked hard as he circled slowly around David, only noticing Memphis after a few moments had passed. "Is this guy for real?" the tester asked, and Memphis nodded.

Wafting off of David like some mathematical pheromone was a sense of unimaginable potential the likes of which Memphis had never once come across in his centuries of existence.

"This guy's so ripe he could feed an army," the tester said.

"I'd imagine he's going to have some big pushes in his future."

The tester nodded, still staring at David before glancing at Memphis. "You a Guardathing?" he asked. Memphis nodded.

"You looking for some work?"

"That's exactly what I'm looking for."

"What's your name?" the tester asked, reaching out to shake Memphis's hand. Memphis took his hand and shook it, being careful not to squeeze at all lest he rip through the poor guy's skin. They exchanged information and the tester put a call in to Filip, giving him some details so when he arrived at the mountaintops they'd be able to log Memphis's work.

"So," the tester said, "I'd like to dive right in. Nothing too fancy, there's tons here to work with. I don't really know how big a push I'll be going for, that's not how I work really. I like to get into things and see where I'm at."

Memphis nodded. "Up to you," he said. "Quick question, though, how did you die? It helps me to know what to expect."

"I drowned," the tester answered.

Memphis nodded, thinking this over. "Okay, then."

"Well, all right."

The tester was nervous, Memphis could tell. He was flexing his fingers and there was a jittery bounce to his steps that was starting to make Memphis nervous as well.

Then the tester seemed to get a grip on himself, or at least managed to focus enough to shut out his anxiety, and his body calmed down and he merely stood and stared at David, who was still chatting with his parents on his cell phone.

Memphis watched. He had come to enjoy this moment and liked to see the change come over the testers face when they finally closed with their mark and began pushing, the surreal concentration and then the pain and hurt washing over them. The pure emotions involved always made Memphis feel human again.

The tester's eyes began to glaze over and Memphis knew the tester was engaged and was fully concentrating on feeling out whatever was going on inside of David. But, just as Memphis was about to do a quick check around to make sure there were no rotted things in the area that might come after the tester, everything went wrong.

It was horrible in its immediacy; the tester's skin pruned and his clothes became soaking wet and then he was bent over vomiting up great gouts of water. The change happened in seconds. Memphis jumped back as the entire waiting room flooded, torrents crashing through all the doors and filling everything up and he was struggling against the pressure of a room full of ocean as he was lifted off the ground and churning, rushing water knocked him into the wall. And then Memphis was standing on his own feet, perfectly dry. He retained his footing for a moment before collapsing onto one knee, his palm slapping onto the wet tile floor to keep him from falling flat onto his face.

David said goodbye to his mom, then he hung up his cell phone and walked through Memphis toward the couches further back in the waiting area.

"What the fuck--" Memphis said through deep breaths. He ignored David for the moment and ran over to where the tester's body was, sprawled out on the floor over by the doors. Memphis rolled him over, feeling how waterlogged the tester's skin was. Memphis tried to examine the tester, but the ferocity and intensity of what should have been the first moments of a low-key push had Memphis terrified and he noticed his hands were shaking.

It didn't matter, though. Shaking hands or no shaking hands the tester was obviously gone. The push had been too much. But that wasn't entirely why Memphis's hands were still shaking. Whatever had happened had been intense enough for Memphis himself to get sucked into the tester revisiting his death. It wasn't supposed to work like that.

Body still jittery, Memphis stood up and walked fast and scared over to the waiting area.

David was sitting down next to the girl, who, apparently, had been listening in on David's conversation with his parents.

"Rough night, huh?" she said, smiling. She was the same age as David, putting both of them in their mid-twenties, and when she smiled at David he smiled back.

"My cab got into a car crash," David answered, "although really it was not as bad as it could have been. Only a broken bone or two." David was tired and he laced his fingers behind his neck and stretched. Then he pulled at his ear, which was sore from having a cell phone pressed against it for most of the night. "How about you?"

"I came down here to get some quiet. I have a friend convalescing in another wing from a burst appendix." She looked around. "To be honest I'm not even sure I know how to get back. I started walking and stopped at the first empty waiting room."

David laughed, a quiet laugh, and he realized that he'd had his serious face on for hours straight now and, as he had just mentioned, everything really was all right. Things could have been worse and it felt good to smile even if his parents were freaking out. But he couldn't blame them for that and the girl sitting next to him was sort of cute and after he was done laughing he kept his smile on his face and looked at her. "Convalescing?" he asked.

"I think her doctor is a crossword freak," she said, smiling. "He used that word and now I can't stop using it."

"Well," David said, "my sister is *resting* in a room down that hall." This drew a little laugh from the girl. "My name's David, by the way," he said, and he reached a hand across to her.

She smiled and unconsciously tucked a lock of hair that had fallen, brown and straight, back over her ear. And she suddenly realized that she was wearing sweat pants and that she was nervous in a good way with this guy whose name she stupidly had already forgotten and who was still looking at her. "I'm Calliope...though most people call me Cal," and she reached her hand out. "Also I've already forgotten your name."

David laughed again and they shook hands and both held on for a little longer than might have been expected.

"So, are you from around here?" David asked.

"I live here now, yes," Calliope answered. "Though I moved here recently from Saint Louis. My family is from Hawaii, though. But that really only goes back to my grandfather. He was stationed there with the navy. Now there's only one aunt still living there. Crazy Aunt Jeanne." Calliope shut her mouth as she realized that her sleep deprived brain was causing her to ramble. "Aaaaaand that's my family tree on my mom's side..."

David laughed. "Hawaii, huh?" he said, looking Calliope over.

"I know," Calliope said, nodding. "You were expecting a grass skirt and a coconut bikini."

"Well, more hoping for than expecting," David answered.

Memphis stood up against the wall unseen, his eyes still wide, the dead tester still sprawled out on the tiled floor, water still pooled up in places. And Memphis watched the source of the most powerful thing he'd ever experienced in his entire existence flirt with a girl named Calliope.

"What the hell are you?" Memphis asked.