

FATE STOLE HIS IDENTITY, DESTINY MADE HIM A WARRIOR, VENGEANCE WILL MAKE HIM...

BOOK 1: THE DARKFIRE BURNS

TALLEZAR



THOMAS MICHAEL LARROCCO

東京都港区青山ヒルズビル5F コミック

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For information contact;

www.DarkScape.com

Book and Cover design by Thomas Michael LaRocco

Character Illustration by Ryan Wardlow (ryanwardlow7@yahoo.com)

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AS DAWN APPROACHES THE WILDERNESS FOLDS AND SKITTERS
BACK AND BELOW, DEEP AND AWAY.

I AM, I SAID,
AS LOW AS I CAN GO.
I CANNOT RISE FROM THIS OCEAN OF SIN THAT SURROUNDS ME.

THIS MOMENT FEELS LIKE
TOMORROW'S NEVER COMING.
NO SUN BREAKS ACROSS THE HORIZON
AND I CRAVE THIS HOLLOW FEELING,
JUST AS MUCH AS I BEG FOR IT TO GO AWAY.

GUILT SEEMS TO BE MY SPINE THESE DAYS.
IT KEEPS ME FROM FALLING WHEN I WALK.
IT GIVES ME SOMETHING TO LEAN UPON.

LOSS IS OWNED AND WEARY GROWS THE MIND THAT ARGUES ITS SOLIDITY
AND THE WICKED WILL SEEK TO PROSPER
AND THE PROSPEROUS WILL SUPPORT THE WICKED
DEEP IN VALLEY SHADOWS LIES
FORGED IN SORROW
TEMPERED IN DESPAIR

HELPLESS IS THE HEART THAT TOWS ITS LOSS LIKE A TATTERED JOURNAL
HOPELESS IS THE SPIRIT THAT SQUANDERS RETRIBUTION FOR PETTY REVENGE
THE TONE IS OFF, ITS TASTE CURT

I'M A PAWN ON A BOARD FULL OF KINGS
A KNIGHT IN A ROOM FULL OF QUEENS
A STEP AWAY FROM THE TATTERED LEDGE
AN INCH AWAY FROM A SCATTERED EDGE

I'LL CLIMB OUT OF THIS SINKING HOLE ONE DAY.
I'LL ASCEND FROM MY OWN ASHES LIKE A DARK FIRE.

HELLOWEEN

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29 2127, BROOKLYN, N.Y.

A FORTY-FIVE CALIBER ROUND makes a distinctive sound. It rocks the room, reverberating off the walls, and whines past your ears as if it were in pain when it misses. Then the scent of sulfur kidnaps the air, cordite palpable along the line of your tongue. A magazine full of hollow-points taught Tyler the lesson as they ricocheted around his head.

Making the distinction between calibers was difficult enough for a normal man; a silencer would've made the feat impossible. But Tyler Haggerty was no normal man. His sensitive ears snatched the sound out of the air before the bullets met his chest and he dove behind the shambles of a couch aging in the middle of the seedy Brooklyn apartment.

"What the hell's wrong with your face?" said the shooter as he crouched defensively, frantically ejecting a spent cartridge from his machine pistol, eyes glued to the couch waiting for his target to make a move. The cartridge slid down his matte black leather sports coat until it hit the tip of his ebony snakeskin shoes, leaving a fresh brown nick at the toe.

The move would come too quickly for shooter to react as Tyler grabbed the remains of a cracked vase sitting at his feet and tossed it at the exposed bulb protruding from the ceiling. The porcelain met glass and a tiny puff of smoke could be seen for a split second before the room fell black.

The shooter swung his weapon wildly in the shadows weaving lines of bullet holes into the plasterboard. The darkness was his enemy, but for Tyler it was a friend. The only thing that shone within the sea of ebony was the ambience of his blue eyes glowing.

“What the hell are you!” the shooter shouted, watching the blue oblong lights swirl around into the air as Tyler flipped over him, catching his arm around his neck in midflight – landing with the shooter’s head pulled over his shoulder, the rest of his body hanging against his back as he fell unconscious.

“I’ll let you know when I figure it out,” he replied to his now silent inquisitor.

With his foe neutralized, Tyler made his way to the door and crept along the hallway silently. The unforgiving light of the hallway left a hint of yellow on everything it touched, stripping any hope of concealment from the torn wallpaper and scuffed plastic moldings. Tyler pulled up his sleeve and revealed a Takai X66 military communicator, a small liquid plastic display screen wrapped around his wrist. The luminous plastic was playing a set of video feeds, beaming in from paper-thin, quarter-sized plexicams mounted at every corner of the apartment building. With a tap on the face of his Takai and an intentional rapid succession of blinking, a liquid diode-coated contact lens in his left eye fluttered to life. His field of vision was now overlaid by video streaming from his wrist display. Six static red circles littered various rooms while four green squares slowly traveled across the remaining rooms. Tyler waited until the camera labeled *Second floor - east apartment appeared*, the red circle fluttering until it transformed into a green square.

“Seven down, three to go,” he whispered before pressing himself against the wall a foot away from the edge of the adjoining hallway. He brushed the dirt and dust from his black jeans and pulled the black hood covering his face lower to keep the glow of his sapphire eyes from giving away his position. He slid down, his

back pressed to the wallpaper, quietly crouching, ready to pounce. His chance would come quickly as another Russian enforcer, a muscled brute dressed in a black suit, thick gold chain swinging around his neck, turned the corner with a machine gun held high.

Tyler erupted upward, grabbing the thug around his midsection in a bear hug, and spun around, slamming him into the hard tile floor. The thug lost his breath along with his consciousness the minute his back and head met the linoleum. Tyler dragged the body farther down the hall to an alcove near a garbage chute, put his finger under the thug's nose to ensure he was still breathing, and left him propped up against the wall. He watched as the lens over his eye updated itself from three red threats to eight green squares. His next few steps led him to an open window facing the north side of Seabring Street. Powered by a few long strides, he jumped through the window and caught hold of a steel tension cable holding a steel drainage pipe steady. The speed of his flight, combined with his unnatural strength, was enough to snap the bottom of the cable away from the brick wall, sending him swinging around to the west side of the building. Dangling from the thick steel strand, he let his feet scrape across the building, allowing him to kick away, keeping himself in motion as he closed in on another window. This one was positioned perfectly in front of sentry number nine. Tyler extended his legs and let himself connect with the building one last time, shattering the glass and launching the bearded Russian thug into a coffee table headfirst.

Before the ninth light turned green on his wrist display, he was slipping through the window, climbing toward the roof.



Jason Masters clawed at the tight collar of his crisp white dress shirt and used it as a distraction to cover his mouth and speak through a microphone sewn into his collar.

“Stage two,” he whispered, dropping his hand along his lapel, fixing the imaginary wrinkles of the silky black material. Jason was taller than average but not a menacing height, with a tight frame that hid well-conditioned muscle. His face was an odd mixture of youth furrowed under the brow of experience as he rounded the curve to thirty. He sported swept-back chestnut brown hair parted in the middle, flowing past his ears and into a five o’clock shadow of darker hair that matched his dark brown eyes. Tiny scars nestled in along his jawline and over his eyes, telling the tale of a man who’d seen his share of fighting. His demeanor matched his attire like his tie did his shirt—all business.

He was flanked by two monstrous Russians decked out in cheap three-piece suits, muscles bulging through their sleeves. One was bald with a jagged scar climbing across his nose while the other had jet-black hair that hung freely to his neck. Both had the empty focused eyes of killers. Jason stared straight ahead as the two men reached for doorknobs and turned simultaneously, revealing a cramped but stylish restaurant, each silver-edged table occupied by another set of vicious looking thugs. The old Russian music was low and tinny, fiddles streaming from a set of ancient cardboard coated speakers hanging from steel hooks in each corner of the ceiling. Shimmering bloodred wallpaper decked the walls with low hanging baroque cut mirrors every few feet.

Jason checked his reflection, smoothing his hair, logging the

position of every armed man he could spot. A few steps farther and he was standing in front of an older, balding Russian in a gray suit, a thick gold chain clanking against a thinner strand which kept falling out of his white tank top every time he leaned forward to slurp his soup. His sense of style polarized against the old world charm of the restaurant.

The Russian looked up, soup running down his chin, and nodded for him to come closer. Jason obeyed, moving forward and folding his hands together at his belt.

“You’re very pretty. You sure you are gun for hire?” asked the Russian snidely, using his sleeve to wipe his mouth.

“I didn’t know being a slob was a prerequisite for the job.” Jason responded in kind.

The Russian looked up from his spoon and eyed Jason from top to toes before standing and positioning himself within inches of Jason’s tall frame.

“Your face is pretty, but your mouth is ugly. I can fix this.” The Russian snorted as he pulled a sharpened wood chisel from his pocket. The tool was covered with gouges on every edge, years of abuse and blood evident on the exposed handle. He put the chisel up against Jason’s face and slowly dragged it across his cheek till it was just beneath his eye. He waited for a response, to see if Jason would lose his temper or lose control of his bowels.

“Wood doesn’t fight back. Press that a lil’ harder and see what happens,” said Jason without moving a muscle, eyes set squarely against the Russian’s.

“I do not like dinner is interrupted. Is bad for digestion,” came a frail voice from behind Jason’s aggressor.

The mood of the room changed instantly. The music suddenly

played a bit louder and the angry Russian slowly removed the chisel from Jason's skin, sitting quietly, dropping it next to his fork like another dinner utensil. The frail voice chimed again and this time Jason spotted the man wearing a dark blue cardigan that enhanced the shine of his silver gray hair. His skin had lost all its elasticity years ago, leaving a man who looked as though the sorrow of the world rested on the bridge of his nose. His eyes were bloodshot and wide, the only color next to his pallid complexion.

"Come," he said simply, causing the two guards on either side of Jason to push him along toward the old man.

"You are Ryan? Anton's nephew?" he asked calmly, methodically cutting his steak into small, manageable pieces.

"Yes sir," Jason replied instinctively, years of military training leaving their mark on his speech.

"Yes sir, humph, respect for your elders is good thing. Too many young people these days lack respect."

"My father taught me respect the hard way," Jason replied, making a fist and punching his other hand symbolically.

"As did mine. Is necessary. Is the way it always was in my country. Now, why do you come to me for work?"

"I was working in Atlantic City. Things got too heated. My uncle told me to come see you, said you and your son Peter might have work for me."

"Humph. Your uncle is good man. But I don't have work. I'm honest businessman now. Maybe he's confused. I know people though, many here in Red Hook, maybe I find you work as mechanic or janitor."

"That's funny, my uncle told me you might have use for my *talents*."

“What talents? You sing? Maybe dance, yes?” said the old man, eliciting a string of laughter which broke out at each table in kind. One of the big guards next to Jason slapped his shoulder hard, sending him forward a few inches, giving him the opportunity he needed. He spun, grabbing the man’s hand, and twisted him around until he was bent over ninety degrees groaning in pain as Jason lashed out with his right foot and broke the ribs of the other huge guard on his right. Both men ended up on the floor nursing their wounds as Jason fixed his jacket and stood in front of the old man again.

“Maybe I made a mistake coming here. Obviously you don’t need my talents,” said Jason as he turned to leave.

Undaunted by Jason’s outburst, the old man simply dabbed his napkin to his lips. “Wait. Wait. Come,” said the old man, leaving his soup behind to grab Jason by the wrist and leading him to the kitchen. As they passed the swinging doors a group of Russian thugs stood up and followed, dutifully protecting their employer.

“We find my son, I tell him you could be useful, see if he wants to take on new man.”

“I thought your son wasn’t here?” Jason asked, waiting to see if the old man would lie again.

“For some he is here, for others . . .” The old Russian chuckled. “Peter, Peter. PETER!” he said, his last attempt blurted out loudly.

“WHAT? I’m busy here,” responded a younger man’s voice from the back of the kitchen. It echoed from behind a set of stainless steel racks where the night’s pots and pans lay waiting for some unlucky day laborer to begin scrubbing.

“Well get rid of her and stop being busy,” the old man ordered.

“Jesus Christ you’re a pain in my ass!” the younger voice cried.

A large Russian followed the profanity from the back, fixing his shirt as he appeared, pulling on the arm of a beautiful young girl, her blonde locks bouncing with each of her high-heeled steps. The young man was much larger than the security guards Jason had dropped moments ago. At least six foot four, and half as wide at the shoulders. He was portly with a belly that told the tale of too much food and vodka, but anyone could see the bulge of strong muscles hidden beneath the fat. He wore wrinkled black dress pants with a short sleeve white dress shirt opened at the chest, his arms covered in tattoos from the elbow down. A black goatee and black hair pulled into a ponytail framed his harsh features.

“What? What’s so damn important?” he asked the old man.

“Is Ryan McAvoy. Anton Nikita’s nephew. Very good with hands, he needs work,” replied the father.

“Ryan McAvoy. What the hell kinda Russian name is that?” asked the giant.

“Peter Illnavich?” Jason asked suddenly, interrupting the flow of communications.

“No, the lone goddamned ranger,” replied the big Russian.

“Sarcasm. Nice. Hope that works for you in Ossining,” replied Jason as he grabbed at his lapel, pulling the fabric close to his mouth before speaking. “Target acquired. Let’s finish this up.”

“Jesus, pop, he’s a goddamned pig!” shouted the mountain of a man as grabbed Jason by the collar and put a gun to his head.

“Anytime you’re ready, Tyler,” Jason whispered calmly. “He only has a gun to my head.”



Tyler stood on the roof of the Okroshka restaurant looking

down on the row of buildings lined up underneath the Gowanus Expressway. He watched a young couple walking south toward the waxing moon while a group of young kids pedaled their bikes along the piers that extended out from the river's edge. He smiled along with the children as they popped wheelies and jumped the curb between parked cars. He was drinking in the activity around him as if these were magical activities he'd never witnessed before. Then his earpiece clicked to life with the static of a new transmission.

"Tyler, goddammit, where are you!" he heard Jason scream through the tiny speaker.

Tyler pulled the hood tighter around his head and leapt from the rooftop. In midair he yanked at his left sleeve and hit a virtual button on his wrist display. Instantly the lights inside the restaurant flickered and evaporated, leaving it lifeless; only shouting patrons signaled any activity inside.

He continued his confident descent, shot out his right arm twenty feet before the old cracked sidewalk, and caught hold of a streetlight pipe jutting out of a lamppost. He swung around the pole like a gymnast and with his momentum doubled, flipped off the pole right into the front window of the restaurant. The glass exploded around him, sprinkling the patrons near him with shimmering powder. The glow from a few lighters and tiny tabletop candles created small patches of illumination, but it was Tyler's blue eyes that shone the brightest in the darkness. He moved, unnaturally swift, impossibly agile, as he raced through the crowd disarming Russian gangsters with ease. The lightless room blinded his enemies, but Tyler's world was one of azure hues and bright outlines allowing him to see every detail of the room. He left a trail of un-

conscious men lying on the ground between the window and the kitchen before he dropped to one knee and closed his eyes to hide his location.

“Jase, where are you?” he hissed into a microphone attached to his collar. The voice was human, but it reverberated with undertone that seemed almost like an electrical hum. His query returned nothing and he pulled the microphone closer.

“JASON! GIVE ME A LOCATION!” he shouted, unconcerned about giving away his location as he opened his eyes and scanned the area to see a few thugs closing in on his position. Finally he was rewarded with a groan and grunt through his earpiece as Jason responded.

“Kitchen . . .” was all he heard before the transmission ended.

Tyler directed his gaze past the circle of Russians tightening around him and looked for the kitchen until he spotted a set of swinging doors and took off running. He clipped the first Russian in the neck with his forearm, sending him flipping into the air and on his back like a child’s toy. The next two men fired wildly, unable to see anything but the erratic movement of his sapphire eyes. One of the two fell, with blood oozing from friendly fire that opened his chest; the next continued to shoot while Tyler swept forward kicking him in the chest, crushing his sternum, using the crumpled body as a step to launch himself over the last four men and land behind the bar. He kept himself down out of their line of fire and crept forward till he pushed his way through the swinging doors sealing the kitchen.

The scene was tense as he watched Jason struggling to keep the old Russian’s blade from piercing his eye while his two bodyguards tried to restrain him the darkness, making it difficult for

them to figure out which one they were holding.

“At your nine o’clock!” Tyler shouted.

Jason, an ex-soldier, digested the words and feigned to his right instinctively, knowing Tyler would be on his attacker in a split second. Tyler kept the bargain and grabbed the old Russian by his wrist, simultaneously breaking it and flipping him into the stainless steel shelving, leaving him unconscious. Jason freed himself from one thug while Tyler broke the jaw of the last man and the two ran toward the light of the rear exit.

The scene outside was just as intense as police units arrived on the scene and opened their doors to shield themselves from the stream of Russian mobsters oozing from every exit.

“What happened to Illnavich?” Tyler asked as the two sprinted away from the firefight.

“He used a girl as a shield and managed to get out when the lights went off. Where the hell were you, man?”

“Sorry, I moved in as fast as I could.”

“Bull, your ‘move in fast’ is lightning fast!”

“Let’s argue about this later, after we find Illnavich.”

“THERE! THE MONORAIL!” was Jason’s response as he spotted the huge man scrambling up the flight of short stairs under a sign that read *Hicks Street Station*. Built in 2097 when the city replaced its subway system with street level ground carts, the overhead monorail made life easier for the twenty million living in the five boroughs of New York City. The stairs were made of gray powder-coated aluminum which led to an all glass powerlift that brought Peter Illnavich up through the skeleton of the monorail’s pyramid shaped support system. He smiled and waved as he reached the top, feeling the vibration of the oncoming monorail

train, sensing his successful escape was at hand.

Tyler was a variable he couldn't predict, running and jumping on top of a parked car, sprinting along the roof of every vehicle until he was next to the support. He veered to the left suddenly, using a passing truck as a springboard to launch himself at the bottom of the monorail track. He could feel the rumble of the 8:07 train as it sped down the tracks only a block away from the section where he was hanging. Illnavich watched in shock at Tyler's miraculous climb and readied his gun to take him out as the doors to the lift hissed to life at the top of the shaftway. Tyler reached into his pocket, hanging from one hand, and threw a small metallic disc at the doors. It spiraled until it crashed into the seam between the lift's glass doors and detonated, spraying a web of acid over the metal framing, gluing the two doors together into one unit. The monorail powered over Tyler, almost shaking him free until his hand made it back to the pipe where he was hanging. The Russian screamed silently behind the doors that blocked his getaway and began shooting the glass repeatedly until he finally opened a small fracture in the center of the left door. It was all the huge man needed as he steamed forward, smashing through the glass, covering himself in a grid of small cuts against every edge of the crumbling edges. The monorail wouldn't wait for his powerful breakout and initiated its engines, slowly moving along the rails as its doors locked shut. A jostled, bleeding Illnavich stumbled to the monorail, smashing his fists at each car as it passed. Once it was flying down the tracks, it sucked the wind behind it, creating a vortex that forced his hands away. It also forced Tyler's hood back, revealing his face. When Illnavich turned around his eyes bulged, matching the shape of his mouth as it hung open at the

sight before him.

Tyler's skin was dark as night, almost black, with a hint of gray iridescence under the light of the platform. His glossy ebony hair hung to the nape of his neck and just above his eyes, whipped around by the funnel of air still following the monorail. He stood six foot one, taller in his heavy combat boots with a lean, agile frame that hid his true strength well. His face was taut with high cheekbones and upswept eyes set above a strong, straight nose. His features were perfectly symmetrical, his face had purity to it, not a line or wrinkle or scar to account for any adversity in life.

But it was his turquoise eyes that caused Illnavich the most alarm. Framed by a jet black brow, they began to glow slightly, painting the area around them light blue. If that wasn't frightening enough, the iris darkened slightly and split into two half-moon shapes that spread out against either side, flickering as Tyler spotted three of Illnavich's men running from the stairwell already firing at him. The big Russian used the distraction to wildly race down the stairs closest to his feet while his men continued to lay cover fire.

The distraction wouldn't last long as Tyler took a few steps back and bolted forward, leaping the distance of the fifteen foot wide titanium rail, and crashed into two of the shooters. He grabbed the first Russian's hand and turned his gun to shoot the third while he rolled off the first man and let his left foot connect with the face of the last man standing.

"Get down here, they're on the move!" Jason yelled into his ear. Tyler reacted without thought, bouncing to his feet and diving off the monorail platform onto the hood of the black Groundpounder Class-T all-terrain vehicle. He slithered over the windshield, flat-

tened himself to the roof and held on as Jason drove the vehicle down Shore Parkway, following three dark sedans harboring a mob of Russians, each with a hand out the window firing at them.

“Get in closer!” Tyler shouted.

Jason crushed the accelerator, sending radium fusion through the nuclear engine’s chamber, vaulting the heavy Groundpounder forward until he was only feet away from the rear car. He waited for Tyler to jump forward onto the truck, but he did the exact opposite, diving to the right as all four cars turned and slid along the metal awning of a deli until he was in grabbing distance of a fire escape. He climbed the ladder like a spider, going three floors in seconds until his fingers found the rooftop, where he sprinted along, then jumped from building to building until he reached the end of the line on the opposite side of Bowne Street. He spotted the lead car of the pack and kept running without any thought for life and limb, diving off the fourth story and crashing into the window of the sedan, leaving a huge dent in the hood and sending the vehicle careening into a storefront.

Police cars could be heard in the distance as Tyler pulled himself up and off the hood of the vehicle. He looked around at the broken brick and glass decorating the sidewalk and ran around to the passenger side of the car. Before Illnavich could pull his gun, Tyler grabbed the door handle with his right hand and the seam of the door with his left and ripped it free, tossing it to the asphalt where it slid to a halt. Illnavich was shaking in the car, unable to pull the gun upright. Tyler dipped his head and spoke.

“I’ll take you out before you raise that gun. Don’t do it.”

“Listen to him, Illnavich,” said Jason, reinforcing his statement by poking his own gun through the broken driver’s side window.

“*Demonio, demonio, demonio,*” was all Illnavich could repeat, eyes glazed over in fear.

“Let’s go,” said Jason, putting his gun away as he jogged back to their SUV.

Tyler nodded his head and reached in to grab the Russian by his t-shirt. He pulled out the three hundred pound man easily and carried him like a loaf of bread to the back of the Groundpounder where he dumped him, climbing in beside him as Jason tore away from the scene leaving the police in the dust, turbo engines breaching ninety miles an hour in seconds.

Illnavich continued to wrestle with Tyler in the back of the Groundpounder as Jason watched in the rearview mirror.

“*DEMONIO!*” the Russian screamed over and over. “WHAT KIND OF MONSTER ARE YOU?”

The last comment ignited something within Tyler. His eyes became slivers under his furrowed brow, their azure light swirling into a bright orange that caused Illnavich to scream.

“SHUT UP!” Tyler shouted. “SHUT YOUR MOUTH!” He yelled as he wrapped his hands around the Russian’s neck and squeezed slowly. The fire in his eyes spread to his face and Jason could tell he was on a course for murder. He whipped the car to the curb under a streetlight set in the sandy ground near the boardwalk. Illnavich had stopped breathing and Tyler was steadily losing control.

“ENOUGH!” Jason screamed as he grabbed at Tyler’s hands. “LET ’IM GO DAMMIT! YOU’RE GONNA KILL HIM!” Jason knew that Tyler’s strength was enough to ward off ten men, so his only hope was to get through to his mind.

“If you kill him, you *are* a monster,” Jason said without a hint of

anger, backing away to give Tyler berth.

The words were like a salve on Tyler's pain. They coated his emotions and quelled his rage. He couldn't look at Jason or look away. He simply released the Russian, whose lungs gasped for air desperately, and looked down. His eyes quickly returned to sapphire blue and faded.

"Get out." Jason's stern words left no other option but compliance. Tyler pulled the hood back over his head and hopped out of the car, shoulders hunched like a child chastised by a parent.

Jason took a breath and wiped his forehead, then reached inside and wrapped plastic red cables around Illnavich's wrists and ankles. After which he fastened the cables to a hook welded to the interior frame of the Groundpounder's trunk area. Once the Russian was secure, Jason shuffled over to the boardwalk and ran his fingers through his hair. Tyler followed, unsure of Jason's demeanor, and stayed a few cautious steps behind.

"This is the third time in four months," Jason said, the words lacking energy, spent like the man speaking them.

"I don't know what to say."

"Say what's wrong. Say what the hell happens when you flip like that."

"I don't know. I just don't."

"Not good enough. Not anymore," Jason responded harshly as he turned to face Tyler. "You almost killed this guy in cold blood. Scum yes, but still human. Never mind two hundred and fifty grand worth of bail money you almost lost me."

"I don't know what to say."

"Don't say it won't happen again, 'cause it will."

"I'm sorry, Jase. I truly am."

“I know. I’ve known you long enough to know that monster in the truck wasn’t you. But it was a monster, don’t think otherwise.”

The words hurt, but the truth was necessary and Tyler was glad that his best friend was the one telling him. He knew that Jason was upset, but he knew he’d be there for him through whatever this was; this monster inside him.

“I can’t even feel it coming on, it’s not like flipping a switch. It’s a smooth transition. It’s like it just washes over. It scares me. Not because I feel out of control. It scares me because it feels normal.”

“I saw guys like you before, when I was overseas. Fighting in those African jungles, enemies hiding behind every bush. You see men change. You see men become—”

“Monsters.”

“—lost in the violence,” Jason countered as he turned and walked back to the Groundpounder. “Come on. I have to drop off this trash at the 61st and get us back home.”

“You drive.” Tyler responded.

“Yeah, I’ll drive.”



The ride to the 61st precinct was an uneventful late night cruise up Coney Island Avenue. Most of the businesses were closed except for a few neighborhood pizzerias swarming with local teens and corner bodegas draped in the usual yellow awnings with Christmas tree lights lining the edges of every window. The city was alive no matter what hour; Tyler clung to every thread of activity as they weaved through his cortex. He watched with childlike curiosity and Jason spent most of the ride watching Tyler with concern in his eyes.

After a few minutes they slowly rolled past the brick façade of the 61st precinct and continued driving until they found a secluded area where Tyler could stay hidden while Jason took the subject in and filled out the paperwork.

“Alright, let’s get this trash out onto the sidewalk,” Jason ordered as he bent down to pick up his end of the beefy man. Without responding, Tyler pushed past him, knelt over the big Russian and lifted him like he was a bag of groceries. Tyler was always stronger than the average man, but his strength seemed to be growing exponentially over the past few years. Jason could tell something was bothering him; he’d been acting funny for the past few weeks. But they were in Brooklyn, picking up a bail jumper and right now he was more concerned with someone spotting Tyler’s bizarre visage than anything else.

“Well that’s it for Ivan the Terrible.” Jason joked, but Tyler seemed to be in another world, standing by the window staring out and kneading the non-existent kinks from the back of his neck. “The guys at the 61st know me, shouldn’t be more than two hours,” Jason said as he pushed a police baton into Illnavich’s back and prodded him to walk. “Then we’ll get something to eat and head back upstate. Okay?” Jason asked.

“Sounds good,” Tyler whispered.

“Cool.” Jason replied. “Remember stay in the car, keep yourself under wraps.”

“I know how to stay hidden,” Tyler responded coldly before opening the back door and pulling out a small black rucksack.

“Yeah. True,” Jason uttered to no one as he forced Illnavich toward the precinct. “Going somewhere?”

“Yeah dad,” Tyler replied sarcastically.

“Oh, *her* again. It’s a her right?” Jason inquired. “It has to be a woman the way you’re sneaking around.”

“Problem?” Tyler answered, folding his arms across his chest.

“Only if you’re seen,” Jason replied without looking as he checked the red restraints on the big Russian.

“If I don’t wanna be seen, no one sees me,” replied Tyler angrily as he sprinted forward at an alarming pace and jumped up high enough to catch a foundation bolt sticking out of a monorail support beam and climbed his way to the top. He turned to look at Jason and pulled his hood down low, signaling him that he’d taken his advice and planned on traveling incognito.

“He’s a demon,” Illnavich sputtered through his bloodstained teeth.

“Who? Hasn’t been anyone with me but you all night, scumbag,” Jason responded and pressed the baton into his ribs, prodding him forward.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29 2127, MIDTOWN MANHATTAN, N.Y.

Tyler rode the Lexington Avenue monorail uptown watching the street signs mounted at every fifth corner. They were a blur to the average human, but Tyler could read them just fine, which was impressive, considering he was riding on top of the monorail and not within.

He was more comfortable outside, away from the chance of bumping into any late-night passengers. Years of being hidden away from the world and warned of the dangers posed by exposure had forced him into the life of a recluse and kept him trapped there since he was a child. His missions with Jason were the only nights he was able to traverse the city in all its glory without fear of

being seen. Hood up, head down, he was just another anonymous shadow in the streets.

Vibration from the electromagnetic buffer gluing the monorail to the track massaged his tension away, his heightened senses gratefully neutralized by the wind.

He thought about the night's events, his loss of control. He was starting to think that the loneliness, the yearning to be around other people, was taking a toll on his sanity. He started to wonder if he was really becoming the monster that he saw in himself hours earlier.

He was so deep in his daydreams the gust of wind blowing across his face and through his hair became mere hints of reality, and he lost himself in thought, almost missing the sign that read 68th Street. His secondary iris picked up the speedy sign and sent a signal to his brain that it was time to move. He unzipped his sweatshirt halfway and stood with his arms glued to his sides until he was in a semi-crouched position, pressed back by the force of the wind. The monorail was traveling one hundred and fifty miles an hour creating enough force to lift Tyler off the roof as he opened his arms, stretching out his sweatshirt like bat wings, using the wind current to glide away from the train. Once he cleared the rails he let go of his sweatshirt and dropped like a brick to the trees below. He caught a branch from a huge oak and used it to divert his fall, allowing him to land just within the fence of a huge, glassy apartment building on 65th and Columbus.

The Terrace Arms was a seventy-two floor apartment building recently remodeled into a very modern structure that began with straight lines at its base and grew into a very abstract form that almost resembled the flame on a candle in the wind. The lower

floors were covered in a smooth light gray tile while the upper floors were all aluminum plating and dark glass windows.

Tyler snuck past the security cameras by flashing them with a blast from an infrared strobe light and worked his way between the safety partition that enclosed a pair of the frosted glass elevators. He slipped inside the emergency escape port built into the up tube and used his fingernails to pry open a connector cover missing a few screws. He wiggled his finger around until he found the actuation switch for the next floor and initiated a circuit that sent two platforms falling down from either side of the shaft till they locked together forming an elevator floor. Grinning at his work, he jumped up and grabbed the handles at the bottom of the platform and waited for someone to press up.

Within a few minutes, a red light began to flash beneath him and another modular floor fell into place as the doors opened and a tipsy young couple boarded and pressed the fortieth floor. The height was just high enough for Tyler to access the labyrinth of compartments jutting out of the building's exterior where collapsible fire escape systems were housed. He waited for the couple to shuffle off the platform and quickly vaulted onto the fire escape where he began to climb.

Jumping from the monorail and easily scaling the side of the building was a clue to the fact that Tyler had made this journey on many a dark night. But by the seventy-first floor, the air had become much colder, the October wind had become a cold blast, and he was having a hard time holding the metal bars as he climbed, the heat of his hands forming moisture along the frostbitten steel.

Finally reaching the penthouse, Tyler positioned himself in the shadows at the south end of a huge balcony that connected the

bedroom and living room of the top floor. He peeked within to spy a young girl sitting on the couch watching TV with a bag of potato chips in her hands.

She had short brown hair, with red highlights, flowing from left to right into a short bob. The left side was longer, falling against her neck. Her eyes were almost the same shade as the darkest brown of her hair. A slim, small nose dotted her face right above a smile that was probably a bit too wide framed in full lips. Her skin was tan with a touch of freckles. She resembled the adult version of a doll, too cute to be pretty, but mature nonetheless. She was covered in pink pajamas with little cartoon cows adorning every inch of the material.

He smiled as he watched her, putting his head down in embarrassment, as if she were sitting there before him. His eyes lingered until he looked at his wrist display and realized that Jason would be getting to the truck in only another forty-five minutes. He reached into his backpack and produced a very sleek black mobile com. It was the size of a credit card until he touched the screen and it expanded around his hand, the exterior plastic turning red as he clicked Amanda on his speed dial screen. As she picked up, the plastic cooled to green and he put the com to his ear.

"You have the worst timing, punk," said the sweet high-pitched voice of the girl on the couch.

"Why? Don't tell me you're watching *Love Turns Wicked* again. Amanda, you really need to raise your standards."

"If I did, you'd have to find a new friend."

"Ouch."

"Ha, you asked for that one. So what's doin'?"

"Not much. Just getting ready to head back to the hotel."

“I hate you. I’m sitting here in forty-degree weather and you’re jet setting in Barbados.”

“Hey, you picked real estate development. I told you to get into tech like me.” He smiled, so embroiled in the conversation that he turned a blind eye to the lies he was telling.

“Blah, I’m no nerd. I hope you got a tan, that last picture you sent me, um, you were lookin’ a lil pasty, buddy.”

“Yeah, well,” he started as he looked down at his hand, the ebony skin blending into the night, “I did get darker I guess.”

“Good, besides—” She lost track of her statement as she dropped the bag of potato chips and almost slipped off the couch leaning over to reach them.

“Be careful—” he started before he could stop himself, but he recovered quickly. “You’ll get punished for saying mean things.”

“Geez, I swear you’re psychic. You know I just dropped the chips and almost fell off the couch trying to get them?”

“Yeah,” he responded as he slapped himself in the forehead for misstep. “I’m a regular gypsy.”

“You don’t sound happy, what’s wrong?” she asked as she chewed loudly into the com; clicking channels to a new show with every chip.

“Bad, um. Call from the office. Problems at work.”

“Aw, we all have those. Hey nobody got killed, so don’t sweat it.”

The irony of her statement struck Tyler as he thought, *well, someone almost did.*

“Yeah, I know, but still.”

“I know. A bad day’s a bad day.”

“What about you? How’s your dad?” Tyler asked as he leaned

back against the railing for support.

“He’s good, feeling better. Not great. But feeling better.”

“Heart attack’s no laughing matter. Even if it was a slight one.”

“I know, that’s what I keep telling him.” She finished her sentence and sipped a soda, then jumped off the couch to walk to the balcony window. Tyler was forced to stand and press his back against the wall. He prayed that she didn’t come any closer, as his only other recourse was to dive right off the balcony. He was strong and survived many close calls, but he had no desire to test himself at over seventy stories high.

“So, when will you be back in Europe? I’m heading to Paris for vacation next month, maybe we can finally meet. I mean, come on, it’s been ten years. I think you’re duckin’ me,” she said as she cured Tyler’s anxiety by heading back to the couch.

“Yeah, that sounds great. I’ll check my schedule and see what’s going on then.”

“Uh huh, heard that before.”

“Seriously. I promise we’ll meet one day,” he said, pulling the com away from his mouth before uttering under his breath, “One day.”

“Hey, I gotta get up early for work. I need to crash. Call me tomorrow. Ooh, and send me a picture of yourself on the beach. I wanna see that tan!” she said while turning off the TV and strolling out of the room, the automatic sensors turning off the light as she left.

“Yeah, I understand, I mean me too. And yeah I’ll send you a picture. Talk to you soon, Amanda.”

“Nighty night, Tyler,” she answered and then the com line disconnected. So did his smile.

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 29 2127, BROOKLYN, N.Y.

The sound of knuckles rapping against the window woke Jason. He pulled up the baseball cap he had over his eyes to see Tyler smiling at him.

“Hey, sleeping beauty, open the door,” he said sarcastically.

“Bite me. Your turn to drive,” was Jason’s warm reply. He climbed over the armrest into the passenger’s seat with a thud. “How’d your date go, loverboy?”

“Bite me,” Tyler replied, mirroring his friend’s prose.

Jason ignored his comment and waved for him to turn away from the street as a ground cart floated by. The silver cart was only large enough to carry one person. Made of aluminum and fiberglass, its glossy edges were rounded and swept back, leaving a Plexiglas window taking up most of the front. Magnetic fields generated under the sidewalk as well as the ground cart were tuned to polar opposites, keeping the solo vehicle off the surface. The young man in the cart was talking on the com, only turning to look at Jason and Tyler for a moment before continuing his conversation.

Tyler jumped into the driver’s seat and started up the turbine engine, tearing away from the cube in one smooth motion.

“Can’t wait to get back to the mountains. Even the air down here is dirty,” Jason muttered under his breath.

“Yeah, but there’s so much going on. Even at night, there’s so much activity. I kinda like it,” Tyler said with a touch of melancholy in his voice.

“Yeah, I guess it’s cool, if you like dirty streets, traffic, drug addicts, hookers, etc.,” Jason said as he grinned.

“Good point, I could live without the traffic,” Tyler said, laughing deeply. Jason was glad to see Tyler without the brooding expression.

“All right, tough guy, time to head back to the burbs,” Jason snickered.

Tyler’s eyebrow arched as he spoke. “Burbs? Don’t you mean the goddamned forest?”

“Okay, Okay. Enough with the attitude. How’s this? We better get you back in that mansion before sunrise or your mom’ll have a heart attack worrying,” Jason said, smiling.

“Yeah, let’s get back,” Tyler said dryly

With that, the two men broke out in laughter and revved the Groundpounder T-class to one hundred and twenty-five mph, speeding up the causeway. Jason could sense the tension in Tyler’s last statement, and he knew they should talk things through. He needed to know that Tyler was okay.

“You know, if this was a regular mission, I probably would’ve bit the bullet tonight,” Jason said out of thin air.

“Jase, I know, I told you—”

“No, I mean if you *weren’t* there—I’d be dead.”

“Well. I was.”

“I’m glad you were.” Jason kept his eyes on the road; Tyler kept his on the white lines of the highway. The two men simply waited for the tension to ease before either spoke.

“Can I be honest with you?” said Jason, kick starting the conversation again.

“You always are. Brutally.”

“Whatever.” Jason tossed a scrunched up napkin at Tyler. “When I first met you, I thought you were a demon too.”

Tyler sighed deeply, lips tightened, and stared farther down the road.

“Come on. I was a kid, I’m walking through the woods of up-state New York playing Cowboys and Indians by myself and I hear someone crying.”

“I wasn’t crying.”

“You *were* crying. Don’t make a big deal out of it; you were a kid,” Jason said, smiling to help keep Tyler’s demeanor loose. “A crying kid. Hey, you were hanging from a tree with your forearm skewered by a branch. Any other kid would’ve died, at least all you did was cry.”

“Like I knew my bones were unbreakable. I thought I *was* gonna die. I wish I was as good at climbing back then as I am now.”

“Yeah, well, if you saw you that night, what would you have thought?”

“I guess we know what you were thinkin’.”

“Tyler . . .”

“Yeah, I’d have thought I was a demon.”

“I don’t think your anger comes from you thinkin’ that people see a demon when they see you. I think it’s because the more people you interact with down here, the more you’re starting to understand how different you really are.”

“I’m just a little—I don’t know. I’m tired of hiding, Jase. Tired of living my life like a ghost, right under people’s noses, unseen. I’m tired of it, that’s all.” Tyler followed the statement with a sigh and turned to look out the window.

“I understand. I mean, I don’t know how it feels, but I understand what you mean. We’ve always been straight with each other. You know I’d never sugar coat things. Because of the way you

look, you could never lead a normal life. What're your options? Where do you think you could go without being stared at like a circus freak?" Jason said sullenly.

"I don't know," Tyler said softly. "But it has to change." That last sentence came out cold and firm. He meant it. And Tyler always kept his word.

"You're rebelling, dude. Everyone does; though most do it at eighteen and not twenty-six. But you grew up different—still, everyone thinks their parents are just tryin' to keep them under their thumbs. They wanna control your life. Your mom ain't like that. She's just trying to keep you safe."

"I don't need her to keep me safe. I can run as fast as a car, jump from ten stories and land like a cat, you couldn't even stab me, most knives can't even cut me. I can take care of myself," Tyler hissed angrily, hiding his eyes under the furrow of his brow, but unable to hide their glow.

"I tell ya, for a guy that can speak seven languages, rebuild a computer from pieces, and teach himself calculus, you're really freakin' dumb."

"What the *hell* is that supposed to mean?"

"She knows you better than *you* know you. That's a mom, my friend. They know. She knows what you can do. She's not worrying about anyone hurting your body. She's worried about you having your heart broken. She doesn't wanna see you treated like a freakin' leper in the street. She's worried about your spirit."

"That's not—I—It makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense. You know what I'm sayin'. My home life was so screwed up I had to join the army to get away. Sometimes I think that's how I got into the 246th. I was so damn mad, I

was ready to fight a war before I even got to basic. Just needed a gun and a shove in the right direction.”

“But you did the right things for the right reasons.”

“*Nothing* is a good enough reason to kill another human. I regret every day. Every bullet. Every memory,” Jason said as he opened his window and pushed his face into the breeze fighting its way into the cabin.

“I wonder sometimes who had it worse. You growing up hidden from everything or me growing up with a blazing drunk who beat me every other night of the week,” added Jason.

“Too close to call.”

“Yeah. Way too close. Maybe that’s why we’re the only friend the other has.”

“Good enough for me.”

“Same here. But I wanna help you, man. Being angry and defiant ain’t gonna change things. You need to take a cold hard look at your life and figure out how you can really change things. What your choices really are.”

“Choices. Yeah, like what?”

“Well, you could always go live with freaks downtown. They dye their skin, pierce anything they can poke with a needle. They’d love to have eyes like yours. Crazy kids and their fads,” Jason said chuckling, in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Sure, call me a freak. I feel so much better now,” Tyler said sarcastically.

“Think about it. That’s all.” And with that, Jason pulled the baseball cap over his face and pushed back the seat to sleep.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31 2127, LEWIS, N.Y, NEAR THE BLACK RIVER

The road trip back to Tyler's home was uneventful, leaving both men nothing but time to replay the night's events to themselves. They cruised along a serpentine path housed within walls of old spruce trees that could only be seen within the halo of Jason's headlights. Eventually the forest gave way to a huge clearing that housed a 1920s-style Tudor mansion barely apparent under the light of a few old incandescent gate lamps. Even in the dark of the night his keen eyes could see the old mansion clearly. The organic architecture was odd for something this far north of the city, owned by a playwright who had it built around the turn of the century as a retreat. Great windows latticed with oak formed the second floor, which sat upon walls of red brick that opened to arched windows on either side of the grand entrance of granite steps to the front door. A patina tarnished every piece of exposed metal but it seemed to grow on the house as well. It gave one the feeling that the house wasn't only old, but forgotten, devoid of a loving caretaker who doted over every blade of grass and squeaky hinge. The house looked like the owners, worn and secretive.

Jason slowed the Groundpounder to a crawl and spun around the old limestone fountain, still trickling water from a set of cherubs, and threw the stick shift into park.

Neither of Tyler's parents was aware of Jason or the extracurricular activities they were involved in together. They meant to keep it that way. Likewise, Jason's father didn't have a clue about the existence of Tyler Haggerty. Some things were better left unsaid and unknown.

Tyler slid out of the vehicle, carefully closed the door, and grabbed his backpack from the cargo area. He turned to Jason with a dour expression and quickly pinned a limp smile to his face.

He finished his exit with a thumbs up sign pressed up against the driver's-side window. Jason inched away from the front gate and backtracked down the driveway, barely giving the engine gas. Tyler continued through the hallway of trees that led to the guest house, which was set well away from the main home, allowing him to sneak back in without tipping off his mother.

He stepped past the iron gate onto the cobblestone path to the rear entrance of the guesthouse and quietly made his way to the mudroom, where he tossed his jacket and boots in a pile on the floor. He crept inside the dark room, took off his jacket, and jumped into the couch. Black jeans and a gray T-shirt were too much work to remove; he rustled around till he found a comfortable position, and within minutes he was asleep.

The moon waned and retreated above the horizon as the sun took its place and coated the ground with whatever heat it could muster at the start of winter. Tyler slept in the last of the positions he wrestled himself into during the night. Dreams were outnumbered by nightmares these days and REM was too long for his taste. Exhaustion played on his face and no matter how hard the sun tried, its haggard rays couldn't raise him.



A clicking noise against the door initiated Tyler's waking program. The incessant sound sent his eyelids into an epileptic fit. His eyes begged to stay shut as he forced them apart, his ears sending the message that they were required immediately.

Tyler coiled his body up into a seated position and rubbed his face without reward.

His ears registered the noise as Titan, the family dog. He was

a full-grown male Siberian husky with shimmering silver-white fur and blue eyes that looked like ice in the light.

What was he doing out on this end of the property? Tyler thought. First thing in the morning, his mother would take the dog out back with her and have a cup of coffee while Titan begged for bits of breakfast at her feet. It had been that way since he could remember. He stood, stretched his limbs, crackling with each motion, and stumbled sleepily to the door. Now the scratching noise was mingled with Titan's whimpering; something was wrong.

He was right.

When he opened the door, his heart pulsed out of pattern. Titan stood shakily in front of him. His haunches were covered in blood. A quick survey of his fur revealed some shallow cuts and what looked like a puncture wound through his back leg; the kind a bullet makes. He knelt and hugged his childhood companion to steady him. Tyler had only two friends in this world, Jason Masters and Titan. The thought of losing either of them was too difficult to imagine. It was quite possible that Titan did more of the steadying that day than his owner. Tyler lovingly picked up his friend and carried him to the kitchen, where he sat him on the counter to dress his wounds. Something horrible was happening and there was no time to tend to the canine as he'd like, so Tyler had to make do with pouring an entire bottle of Betadine solution over his back and tying a clean dish towel around the wound on his leg.

"Okay, boy," he said as he opened the closet and reached inside to fetch a old 9mm hidden behind the cleaning supplies. "I know you're hurtin', go lay down."

But the husky refused to obey, turning tail to limp back toward the house. Tyler followed far behind the dog, not taking any

chances, moving from tree to tree for cover. Titan finally arrived at the rear of the house, near the kitchen entrance, which was open, and stopped cold. Though injured, he crouched painfully into a defensive position and growled. Tyler took that as confirmation that someone was in the house and called Titan over and with only a hand signal, ordered him to lie down and stay. Titan had done enough fighting already, it seemed; now it was his turn. Tyler's heart was racing in anticipation of whatever was in the kitchen. His mind became a kaleidoscope, washing images of his parents slain across his eyes. He wiped the sweat from his brow and tried to do the same to the gallery in his head.

He stood with his back to the wall next to the doorway, took a deep breath, slowly exhaled it, and ran through the kitchen door. Titan's senses were as keen as ever; Tyler posted himself in the center of the kitchen only feet away from a man dressed in black soliders' fatigues, covered at the chest, thighs, and arms with ballistic armor, aiming an MP-12 Autospotter rifle at him. Tyler fired before the Autospotter could target him and a bullet shattered the man's night visor along with the face behind it. Now his mind began to spin out of control. *What the hell was going on and where are my parents?*

He tried to calm himself and homed in on the footsteps he heard running toward the kitchen; more men coming. Calm gave way to fear, fear gave way to desperation. Tyler's eyes began to glow, an eerie gold light burning into a fiery halo. They were shining brighter than ever today but the men about to come through the door wouldn't live to remember them. He rolled across the floor and grabbed the rifle. He flipped on the Autospotter, a special sight that registered moving objects, and locked on to the ap-

proaching men. Tyler's night games with Jason would finally yield their reward. He'd learned a little trick about the Autospotter that Jason taught him. If you turned on the night vision in the daytime and pointed the Autospotter at a wall, you could find the targets moving behind it.

They never knew what hit them. Tyler pointed the scope at the kitchen wall and locked on to them one at a time, spraying 5.56mm rounds through the wall and cutting them in half. Screams, caseless gunpowder debris, and wall fragments cascaded across the room as Tyler emptied the MP-12 into the three men. He crouched behind the refrigerator and pulled the clip out of the rifle: empty. He tossed the gun on the floor and pulled out his own 9mm. He knelt down and tried to regulate his breathing, listening for any other men approaching. The surrounding area was silent and he pulled the Autospotter off the machine gun and ran it along all the walls of the kitchen. Nothing was moving. If there were more men, they must've heard the firefight.

His nervous system was overloading. His breathing sounded like a windstorm in his ears; the sweat working its way down his face seared like white heat and tickled like tiny feathers. Everything was exaggerated, his heart racing to the pace of a stroke. He couldn't get the image of his mother out of his head; lying on the floor bleeding out. The sweat finally hit his eyes. He wiped his face with his sleeve and peeked into the hallway leading to the dining room. It was clear. He slowly worked his way through, crouching with his gun aimed ahead. He couldn't hear anyone else moving in the house.

Tyler slithered up the stairs like a ghost. Even Titan would've had a hard time hearing his footsteps. Terror washed over his face

as he spotted a serpentine trail of bright red blood painted across the shiny wood floor, ending in a scarlet footprint in front of his father's office. A boot pattern. Alex Haggerty was a cardiologist and although the good doctor was retired, he still consulted on difficult cases with other physicians and he spent plenty of time locked in his office during the day. Tyler wiped his sweaty hand on his pant leg to dry it before he grabbed the doorknob. He carefully turned the old brass knob, felt the latch pull back and whipped the door open rushing in gun first.

Inside the office Alex Haggerty sat at his desk in the same position Tyler found him every day. Except this time his head was hanging and he sat in a pool of his own blood. Tyler dropped his gun to his side and put his hand on his mouth, struggling not to scream. He closed the door behind him and leaned against it for support. He hung his head and let a few tears stream down his face. Then he took a deep breath, cleared his eyes, and tightened the grip on his gun. There was no time for tears now. He didn't know what the hell was going on, or who these men were, and he had to find his mother. He walked forward and hunched over the dead body of the man who'd taught him how to throw a ball, how to fly a kite. He kissed his face gently as if to say goodbye and caressed his skin one last time. He took another long, deep breath to focus himself and silently went back to the hall, creeping toward his mother's room.

And that's when he heard her scream.

Training, silence, planning, the threat of more men: these things evaporated from his mind as he ran down the hallway. His speed was inhuman, his power incalculable. He lifted his right leg forward without missing a beat and kicked her door open. The impact

shattered the lock, the hinges and part of the door itself as it blew into the room, knocking another man in fatigues into an armoire. He entered just in time to see his mother on the floor amongst a half dozen bodies of other men dressed in black fatigues. The only thing moving was the blood flowing from her neck. Tyler stood motionless, his shock inhibiting muscle control. He couldn't breathe.

But the killer holding the knife moved lightning fast.

He whipped the knife around and used his forearm as a brace while he pulled out his sidearm in one smooth motion. Experience on his side, his sights were on Tyler in an instant. He pulled the trigger just as quick—*click*. The hammer fell on the bullet in the chamber, but nothing happened—misfire. The clicking noise was like snapping fingers for Tyler: it released him from his hypnotic state in time to see the killer slapping the magazine, attempting to clear the chamber. Like a true professional he didn't hesitate when his second trigger pull yielded the same results. He slashed back with the hand holding the knife, but this time he wasn't fast enough. At close range, Tyler fired off one round into the gunman's hands, tearing away a finger and sending his gun across the room. The man howled in pain, but he was no amateur. He lashed out with the knife and dove across the room before his gun hit the floor. Tyler was closer; he kicked the gun, which careened to the other side of the room. The man in black rolled faultlessly over Tyler's foot and turned as he came to his feet. Tyler adjusted his stance to meet the killer as he shot a hand out toward Tyler's throat. He caught the gunman's right hand with his left hand, pulling the man toward him and smashing his left forearm into his face. With the gunman stunned, he drove his knee into his stomach, leaving him breathless on the floor as if to pray.

Tyler's face was a mixture of blood, sweat, and pain. Disregarding the killer on the floor, he turned and took a few careful steps away and kneeled down before his mother. He smoothed her hair and placed her hands across her chest. The killer held his ribs—Tyler hit with a force no human could produce. The gunman knew that the fight was over; Tyler simply hadn't killed him yet.

"I only wish there were more of you left," Tyler hissed.

He sneered as the words slid over his teeth. His voice had an electric hiss to it, adding to his fury. His eyes were spewing an orange hue now, like a mask, and his sweat-covered face looked like obsidian under the room's light. His muscles were so tensed that he was shaking as he stood. The gunman backed away from Tyler, put his hand to his left ear, and whispered so low even Tyler couldn't read his lips.

The killer was receiving a message on his com-link and the message was danger. He threw himself to the floor with his hands over his head. Tyler quickly mimicked him, diving under the opposite side of the bed. That's when a cyclic burst of heavy caliber gunfire poured through the walls around them. The structure was shredded away and three more gunmen rushed into the room through the holes left behind. Tyler scrambled across the floor after his 9mm, trailed by a hail of bullets that ripped up the shiny hardwood behind him. He snatched the handgun up and turned over as he slid, coming to one knee to fire off a volley of lead at the two closest attackers. The man to the left was hit square in the chest with three rounds and flew backward, robbed of his chance to scream. The man to the right was hit in the leg and dropped to one knee with a shriek. The third attacker retreated behind the shattered bedroom wall to regroup. Tyler jumped forward, pick-

ing up the gunman's blade, and drove it into the wounded man's chest. He twisted the dagger in anger, adding an extra ounce of pain to the gunman's death. The third assailant used the diversion to come out from behind the demolished wall firing a stream of rounds like a net. Tyler grabbed the dying man in front of him by the knife in his chest and used him as a human shield. With his carapace in place, Tyler was free to take aim and annihilate the third gunman.

But the man in black wasn't down for the count.

Clutching his ribs with a bloody hand, he appeared behind Tyler. He flanked him by slinking behind the bedroom wall through the fragmented plasterboard and entered the bedroom through another entrance created by the guns outside. He had his own handgun held at eye level as he quietly closed in on his target. At the same time, Tyler emptied three rounds into the third gunman, one of which found a hole in his body armor and exploded in his chest.

"Don't move," the man in black whispered in Tyler's ear as he pushed his pistol against his head.

Tyler's mind immediately scanned for an escape from the attacker's bullet, but the sound of a gun firing and a spray of blood hitting the back of his neck interrupted his thoughts. He spun around and aimed in the direction of the gunfire and found his sights set on the face of Jason Masters.

"What the hell's going on here?" Jason said, scowling, weapon still trained on the motionless enemy. "I think we're okay n—" His anger faded quickly, along with his last words, when he spotted the broken and bloody form of an older woman on the floor.

Jason couldn't even finish the sentence.

Tyler didn't wait to ensure the battle was over before he squatted to pick his mother up in his arms and carry her over to her bed. He gently laid her down on the mattress and covered her completely with one of her sheets. He took a step back with a tear rolling down his cheek.

Then he screamed.

A normal man's shriek would have irritated Jason's ears, but Tyler wasn't a normal man and his cry was mixed with a low-pitched electrical hum that sounded like nothing he had ever heard. It sent a cold shiver up his spine and forced him to cover his ears with the palms of his hands. He'd been in wars before but never felt actual pain from another man's sorrow.

Jason knew Tyler needed to be alone, so he decided to check out the rest of the house and make sure all was clear. Tyler had no more shouting left within him. He spent the next few minutes letting out the tears. They sprang forth beyond his control in a torrent that left a mottled pattern of pink on the sheet as it mixed with his mother's blood. The sound of nails clicking against the hardwood floor forced Tyler to turn away from the shrouded body on the bed. It was Titan. He had been searching for a way into the house since the fighting started. The damage to the walls gave him easy access.

"It's okay boy, everything's fine now," Tyler said calmly, dropping to one knee. The big husky limped over to Tyler and leaned his body weight against him. Tyler ripped a piece of the sheet off and tied it around Titan's bleeding leg. As much as he wanted to sit there and mourn, Titan had lost too much of blood and he was all he had left.

"You already . . . the study . . ." Jason stumbled over his words,

unable to address the topic of Tyler's father's body.

"I know, I found him earlier," replied Tyler softly.

"How's Titan?" Jason asked, surveying the injured husky.

"He's got a bullet wound in the leg, it's clean through, but he's lost a lot of blood," Tyler said as he stroked Titan's fur.

"I'll take him into town and have the vet look 'im over," Jason proposed.

"What will you tell him?" Tyler asked. Titan had no more energy left; he let out a shallow yelp as he dropped to the floor and rested his head on Tyler's foot.

"I'll tell him a hunter took a pot shot at him and hit him in the leg. This far in the boonies, the vet'll believe it."

"Yeah, you're right. I'll carry him downstairs, and you bring the Groundpounder around," Tyler ordered.

"On my way." With that, Jason headed through one of the shattered bedroom walls.

"Hey, Jase," Tyler yelled before he made it outside.

"What?"

"How the hell did you know I was in trouble?" Tyler asked curiously, cocking his head to the side.

"Check your collar. You never took your com-link out last night. I heard the gunfire over the receiver when I was washing the Groundpounder," Jason said, pointing at attire which consisted of black sweatpants and matching sweatshirt. "But I got here too late," he finished, looking away from him.

"It wouldn't have mattered. I was in the guesthouse and I didn't make it in time—you couldn't have gotten here any faster. Besides, if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be here and neither would he." Tyler ended the statement by scooping Titan up into his arms and

heading out the bedroom door. Jason watched him till he was out of eyesight down the hall. Then he turned to survey the chaos in the room.

Jesus, what the hell went on in here? He scanned the bodies of the attackers. *And who the hell are they? What would a professional strike team be doing in a doctor's house in the middle of the Adirondacks?* Jason pondered. He waited for a reply from no one, then shook his head and went out to get the Groundpounder. He stopped to kneel and take a closer look at the man he'd shot. He unwrapped the cold fingers from around the strange looking pistol the man was holding and examined it. It was a Neuro Dart gun, a non-lethal pistol designed by the military to propel a charged dart that shuts down the target's neurological system on impact. *A stun gun? This is getting stranger by the minute,* Jason thought and continued to search the man's pockets. He found only one item that wasn't a piece of military gear, a business card. The name of the company printed on the thick linen coated paper was Execukill Industries, Inc., and underneath was the name Reinhardt Maximus, president and CEO. The address was in Manhattan on 55th and 6th. Curiosity kept him investigating and led to Jason peeling off the man's protective visor and then rolling off his ski mask.

The face underneath sent a wave of nausea through him so fast he couldn't compensate for the surprise and puked all over the floor to his right. Luke Masters lay on the ground in front of him, lifeless and broken. Logic dissipated and left an opening for the impossible as he stared at the face of his father while wiping the last remnant of vomit from his upper lip. The image wouldn't solidify in his mind's eye. *How could his father be involved in*

this?

Jason had always hated his father. Luke Masters was a hard man and heartless disciplinarian. Jason spent most of his growing up years bruised and afraid, till he joined the military to escape his life. He wasn't going to shed any tears over his loss. But this was his father, he'd stolen the life from his own father. *What did Luke have to do with this? Why would my father be heading up a group of mercenaries?* Jason's mind spun a web of questions that couldn't be answered, not now at least. Jason's father was a retired colonel with plenty of combat time under his belt. He had received plenty of offers to use his skills, both legal and illegal, but as much as Jason hated his father, he always knew he was an honorable soldier and would never have sold his skills to the highest bidder. He dropped his head into his hands and rubbed his temples. *No time now, I can't let Tyler know about this, not yet. Not until I find out what this is all about.* Jason stood and composed himself, then jogged outside to the Groundpounder, fired up the engine, and drove to the front of the house. Tyler was waiting there with Titan in his arms, his face barren of any discernible emotion. Jason pulled up the hatchback on the truck, letting Tyler carefully lay Titan inside, and closed the hatch tight.

"Hurry. And Jase—" Tyler hesitated.

"Yeah?" Jason replied

"Be careful with him."

Jason nodded in acknowledgement, jumped into the Groundpounder Class-T and tore off. The turbine kicked in and dirt splattered back as the sleek black truck flew down the driveway.

"He's all I have left," Tyler whispered.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30 2127, NEW YORK CITY, N.Y.

“Call from Miss Takagi on line three, Mr. Maximus.” An automated voice oozed from overhead speakers. The sound echoed off the stainless steel sheets fixed to the walls which contrasted the three-foot-square black stone tiles on the floor. Circular fluorescent lights filtered through orange plastic and fought the sun to make an impression on its surroundings. The room was cool and emotionless like its occupant.

Reinhardt Maximus lounged in an executive chair pointed at the window of his office on the two hundred and seventh floor as he gazed upon his panoramic view of the city. He studied every inch of the skyline and chuckled to himself at how the buildings seemed so small to someone at his level. He spun the chair around to reveal a well-groomed man creeping into his fifties while attempting to hold onto his forties. His mechanically tanned skin was flawless as it stretched across his slightly wide face, except for two tiny wrinkles in front of his ears: a badge of vanity left behind by plastic surgery. Well-coiffed black hair lacking any natural tones of brown fell in a perfect line along every edge of his face; not one lock out of place. His hair was receding slightly at the corners, emphasized by his hand robotically rising to comb his mane back with his fingers. His titanium gray sports jacket hung upon a bright white silk shirt bound by a black and white silk tie draped perfectly below his neck. Reinhardt packaged himself in wrapping paper of vanity, thinking himself a gift to anyone in his presence. But his slim, dark brown eyes radiated an aura of great strength, which he kept veiled by a pair of frameless black sunglasses that perched upon his imperfect nose, too thin for his face with a subtle bump near the top. His imperfections only served to give his face character, the roadmap of years spent in a ferocious attempt to

attain that perfection in every aspect of his existence.

He reached forward and tapped a button on the communication console mounted to the surface of his gray steel desk. "Yes, Asia, what is it?"

"I have bad news, Reinhardt," a woman's voice responded.

"You know how I hate bad news. Tell me this isn't about the Tallezar mission," Reinhardt said with a disgusted sigh.

"Unfortunately yes. All communications with the group were lost, their vital signs went off line as well. We're assuming they're dead." the girl replied.

"Obviously," was all Reinhardt said as he shook his head in disbelief.

"Shall I go up there myself and take care of it?" the girl asked.

"No, I don't want anyone to move until we know what happened. I find it hard to believe that an old couple exterminated a dozen mercenaries. Which leads me to believe that someone else came to their aid. Meet me in the command room in an hour and we'll discuss our next course of action," Reinhardt replied. "Oh, one of the mercenaries was wearing a contact camera, make sure you bring along the fiberdrive of the transmission."

"Of course. Shall I ask the others to be present?" the girl inquired.

"Yes, I'm not sure this situation is serious enough to require the whole team, but it certainly seems that we need to use a little more firepower. Instruct the others to attend," Reinhardt responded.

"As you wish," Asia replied.

With that, the transmission ended and Reinhardt spun the chair back around to stare out onto the cityscape.

Who could possibly have taken out the strike team? That

Masters fellow was a very competent and dangerous man. If someone capable enough to defeat him was helping, why didn't I know about it? Unless Alisha held something back, maybe the Tallezar woman was just like the others. Could this prove the birth certificate is real? Reinhardt puzzled over these things in his mind. He wasn't the type of man to take defeat easily and he wasn't about to give up on finding out what he wanted to know about Anya Tallezar.

The sun was dying again, Reinhardt always looked at the sunset as a failure. As if the sun lacked the fortitude to stay pinned to the top of the sky. He stood and pushed past his chair to glare at the world. His teeth were grinding, evident by the flutter of his jawline and the twitch of his nose. He put his arms up and yelled to no one but himself and the view.

"The faults of a superior person are like the sun and moon. They have their faults, and everyone sees them; they change and everyone looks up to them," he said, quoting from someone who found themselves wiser at some point. The sun responded by falling behind the line of buildings edging the East River and Reinhardt's anger boiled at his failure and the sun's cowardice.

He walked over to a huge abstract painting, a composition that only resembled something to someone wealthy enough to afford adequate pretension. The six-foot painting of burnt orange and turquoise shapes was framed in a thin rail of chrome which Reinhardt grabbed and shoved downward until the painting found a new home in a slot cut into the floor tiles. Once the artwork had disappeared completely, a switch was activated and the wall split at the seams and opened to a secret room.

Before the grinding noise of the wall opening ended, Reinhardt

fell to the floor and began pulling off his sports coat, both arms wrapped around himself as if he were removing the straps of a straitjacket.

“Forgive me,” he whispered as he pressed himself to the floor on his belly. He reached within the shadowy room and pulled forth an ancient whip, more of a riding crop covered in dark, burnished leather.

He slapped the whip backward, striking himself on the back. Over and over he lashed at himself until finally thin traces of blood threaded their way along the fabric of his perfectly tailored white shirt.

“FORGIVE ME!” he said again, this time the words garbled through his tightened lips, grimacing in pain.

“I WILL NOT FAIL AGAIN, I PROMISE YOU!” he screamed.

He continued to flog himself until the grainy voice of his assistant beamed into the room through the intercom system.

“Mr. Maximus, Ms. Takagi stated the meeting has to be pushed up. She’s waiting for you in the north wing, sir.”

As if the message set off a switch inside his mind, he stood and pulled the doors closed, sending a signal to an electronic circuit telling the painting to rise from the floor and cover the seam.

Reinhardt put on his perfectly tailored black jacket, smoothed the wrinkles, and headed to the conference room.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30 2127, LEWIS, N.Y. NEAR THE BLACK RIVER

A mound of corpses festered at the base of the Haggerty estate under the shade of an old white oak. Jason’s plan was to bury the bodies as a precaution against local state troopers sticking their noses where they weren’t needed.

Tyler was barely visible standing at the bottom of a deep trench he'd dug by himself. His superior strength made the job a simple task, much easier than carrying the emotional weight of his murdered parents on his shoulders. His eyes focused through the pit toward a faraway place as he moved the shovel at a furious pace. Something about the numbers didn't add up for Tyler; it confused him as he scanned the heap of body parts on the ground. He'd killed six men himself and Jason took out the leader, which should've been seven in total. But when he was finished, he found himself staring at thirteen mercenaries. It didn't make any sense. From the amount of blood on the floor in his father's office it was obvious he died long before his mother. The men Tyler had killed had been wandering around the house keeping the perimeter secured; they knew Alex wasn't a threat. That left only his mother. The numbers suddenly didn't make much difference. Knowing what happened wouldn't bring his parents back to life.

Tyler hopped back to the surface, covered in dirt, dirt that barely covered the blood. He began pushing the bodies into the mass grave without noticing the haphazard poses of the dead as they landed. He didn't notice their faces. He didn't care. He didn't see the small contact camera that fell to the ground as he threw the last body in the pit.

With that task completed, he set out to the rear of the house and found a bright space a few yards from an old white gazebo, where he knelt down in the breeze. He grabbed a handful of dirt and massaged the earth until it squeezed between his digits. The soil was following the same course as the life he knew, slipping through his fingers. The loam met his standards and he began scraping away at the ground with his hands. His nails were harder

than an average man's enamel, easily clawing through the first layer of clay-ridden dirt. He made quick progress with each stroke, but each motion brought a new stalk of tears falling from his eyes. He was digging the final resting place for his parents and he knew no other way than to do so with his bare hands. He wouldn't allow them to rest in the same tomb as their killers. He wiped his tears with his sleeves and gently, lovingly, placed the bodies of Annie and Alex Haggerty into their graves; said a silent prayer to them and walked away. Then he said a prayer to himself, he promised them that he would find the person or persons responsible for their death and avenge them.

The distant sound of a vehicle approaching pulled Tyler away from his thoughts. Jason was back. Tyler hid behind the house and held his 9mm ready. Better to be safe than sorry. Less than a minute later, Jason pulled up in the Groundpounder, dragging the haze of road dust behind his vehicle. Tyler revealed himself and holstered his gun.

"How is he?" Tyler asked anxiously.

"Stable, the vet closed him up and sedated him. He'll have to rest for a few days. We have to wait till the morning to pick him up though," Jason replied. The only reply Tyler could produce was a sigh.

"Did you get rid of the bodies?" Jason asked.

"Yes. There's no trace of them." Tyler replied.

"Good, all we gotta do now is torch this place. If there's any evidence left here that'll lead them in our direction, a good fire will take care of that." Jason knew that Tyler wouldn't be able to handle the idea of burning down the only home he knew his entire life, but it needed to be done.

“A good fire . . .” Tyler repeated the words as if in a hypnotic trance.” Give me a few minutes to pack some of mine and my mother’s things,” Tyler stated.

“Sure. I’ll pour the gasoline around and then wait out here for you,” Jason answered.

Tyler couldn’t manage a reply as he entered the place that was his world ever since he could remember.

He traversed the stairs to the west wing for one last time, running his hands along the worn banister, remembering how each bruise in the wood occurred. He looked upon the door to his father’s study, thankful that it was closed, that the blood was hidden from view. Onward to his own room, which was larger than most people’s apartments and probably more self-sufficient, he entered, tossing himself on an overstuffed brown leather recliner, and digested the minutiae of his abode.

His mother used to say that some people spend their entire lives trying to find “life,” while for others, no matter how hard they try to hide, life always seems to find them. He’d tried so hard to find life the past six months and in an instant it found him, hidden away in an old Tudor in Lewis, New York. He diverted his eyes from the history placed around the room affectionately and went to his dresser. He quickly searched his belongings and decided to take the few things that would be impossible to replace. He filled up a small bag with pictures of his parents, his chess piece collection, and a few other sentimental items. He packed these along with some clothes in a huge duffel bag, shouldered them both, and departed listlessly.

The last part of his journey landed him within the remnants of his mother’s ravaged room. Victorian-era furnishings completed

the traditional room and its two-tone burgundy walls. Bloodstains spiderwebbed the floor and touched every piece of furniture in the room, but it was the flowing white gauze drapes that caught his attention. Odd it seemed, considering Alex had decorated the entire house himself. He would joke around saying that Annie was a man hidden in a woman's body. The drapes seemed to hear him as the breeze stole its way into the house through the shattered walls and moved them to its rhythm. They were a feminine touch that made the room soft. He wondered why he never asked her about them before.

He sat Indian style on the floor, reached under the bed, and pulled out a tiny, fireproof metal box where she kept her personal belongings. He sifted through the pictures of her with Tyler as a child, all the bankbooks and extra cash along with a few incidentals, and decided it would be easier to just take it along. Within a half hour he had packed his life in a few bags and returned to find Jason lounging in the Groundpounder. "Put those in the back, and I'll finish up," Jason said as Tyler approached.

"No," Tyler responded.

"What do you mean no?" Jason queried, wondering if Tyler lost his nerve.

"No, you put the bags in the back and I'll finish with the house." Tyler's face was grim; his expression seemed carved from stone and Jason knew not to bother asking why.

"All right, do it," Jason said, tossing the flare to him and grabbing the duffel bag. Tyler took the flare and entered the main hallway. He stared down at a lake of gasoline that had pooled on the floor. He saw his own reflection in the liquid mirror, and wondered what he was going to do now. He was alone. Worse than that, he

was alone and couldn't go anywhere, couldn't be seen. People would look at him like he was a freak, with his sleek shadowy skin and sapphire eyes. *What the hell am I going to do now? Where the hell am I gonna go?* Maybe hell was the answer. But one thing was solidified in his mind, he wouldn't go to hell alone, he'd drag the people responsible for the death of his parents down as well. He popped the cap off the flare and snapped the auto-lighter. The flare spewed a white hot flame and Tyler just held it, mesmerized for a moment. *Is this how it's supposed to begin?* he asked himself. *Is this how I was supposed to go out into the world? Fine, this is how it will be.* He dropped the flare and the instant it touched the puddle of gasoline it sent a curtain of flame across the room. As Tyler walked down the hallway toward the door, he was outlined in flames, his dark face chiseled into fire.

A dark fire.

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 30 2127, NEW YORK CITY, N.Y.

Execukill Inc. sat in the heart of New York City atop the remains of old Rockefeller Center, which had burned to the ground after a chemical fire erupted in the basement in 2095. Fire marshals labeled the blaze accidental, but like everything else that Reinhardt Maximus wanted and couldn't get . . . he simply destroyed it. His new corporate HQ was now the largest building in the world. It stood upon six of the most expensive blocks in the country, 48th to 51st between Fifth and Sixth avenues. It rose high into the sky, two hundred and seven floors worth of building, whose penthouse floor was imperceptible to the human eye. Near the top it split in the middle, creating two spires jutting up from the main building. From a distance some residents thought it looked like a pitchfork.

In one of the towers a meeting was taking place about a young man named Nicholas Tallezar. Maybe the people of New York City were correct.

The cool blue interior of Reinhardt's command room was quickly heating up in the presence of Reinhardt's fury. The ceiling was covered from end to end in frosted glass tiles with rows of fluorescent bulbs shedding clinical light over the room. Beneath them, the entire span of the wall was covered in video paneling playing security footage of every inch of Execukill's offices. There were four people sitting around the blue granite conference table with Reinhardt.

Sergei Kasyanov aka Probe sat to his right. An odd looking Russian with round framed glasses crowding his large crooked nose, his face was pallid and greasy, sweat building along his brow. He was still unaccustomed to how warm Americans liked their dwellings, his native Russia built him for brutal winters not toasty office space. His slick black hair was shoulder length and hung against a glossy black leather trench. He had the eyes of an animal, part predator, part dull and lifeless.

Next to him sitting very stiffly and formally was Asia Takagi, better known to those at this table as Spirit. She was a very attractive woman with dark almond-shaped eyes and full lips cast within a frame of high cheekbones. Her long jet-black hair was pinned up in a bun, pulled away from her face tightly, exposing four thin scars an inch long that seemed to flow into the streaks of highlights reflecting across the taut strands. Her face was as callous as it was beautiful. She was wearing a very expensive navy pinstripe suit with functional blue heels. No one who saw her on the street could imagine how deadly she was or how many weap-

ons she had hidden in her ensemble.

Sitting on the opposite side of Spirit and Probe were Luna Rath and Damied Steele. One look at the pair was all it took to realize that they weren't human. Steele had a sky blue tint to his skin and completely black eyes that he covered with a wicked pair of black plastic shades. He wore a white T-shirt and a leather biker vest, with generic jeans and boots: a vain attempt to fit in with the masses. His deltoids held a ring of what could only be described on Earth as tribal tattoos. He was much larger than a normal man and more heavily muscled. His goatee hair was just as strange; it looked like shiny enamel that grew in links, the last link curved into a razor-sharp point that hung down three inches from his chin. Rath had the same transparent blue complexion and black links of hair parted in the middle and hanging down just above her shoulders. Her face was simultaneously dangerous and attractive. Her nose was smooth but strong, not too thin, not too thick, nostrils perpetually ready to flare. Her lips were full and wide, a darker blue than her skin, more like cobalt. As she chewed on her bottom lip a small dimple appeared on the left of her mouth. She was very tall for a woman and built for combat as well, but there was still an elegance to her form. Even though she was perfectly toned and tight, she still had curves in all the right places. Her face matched her frame with its mixture of feminine allure and symmetrical strength. She was the first to speak, the translator positioned against the right side of her trachea creating a barely audible hiss as she spoke. Unlike Steele's, Luna's garb was anything but generic and definitely not designed to hide in plain sight. Instead she chose a sleek white jacket crafted from smooth matte leather with three raised coils that started at her shoulders and ended at the

triceps. The coat hung open to reveal a black silk mock turtleneck that shimmered under the office fluorescence. Her shirt was cut at the ribs exposing her hips, as did her black pants, which left the top of her waist exposed as well. She was not one to hide in the shadows.

“Well, what’s next, Reinhardt? Want one of us to go deal with the situation personally?” Rath asked coldly, her glossy black eyes glimmering as she pulled down a pair of rose colored shades and tossed them on the table.

“It might take more than one of you to handle the situation after you see this,” Reinhardt answered, pulling a micro fiberdrive from his pocket. The others shifted in their chairs, unappreciative of his lack of confidence in their individual skills. He pressed a button on his chair arm and a port popped open in front of him. He inserted the fiberdrive and closed the lid, and a holographic image was initiated in the center of the conference table.

“What is video?” Probe asked in a heavy Russian accent.

“It’s footage from a contact camera worn by one of the mercenaries on Luke Masters’ team. The camera was programmed to send the data back to the command room, which it did till it ran out of power. After Asia informed me of the loss of communication with Masters’ team, I had the footage pulled for viewing. Now, watch and see . . .”

Curiosity overtook the four and they watched closely as the image of Tyler and Jason fighting off the mercenary team played before them. It ended with Jason Masters killing Luke Masters.

“Who is that?” Probe inquired.

“What is that would be the appropriate question,” Reinhardt answered furtively.

"It's the boy, obviously," Spirit said dryly.

"Exactly," Reinhardt confirmed. "That's Nicholas Tallezar. The young man in the video fits the description we pieced together from the birth certificate and the security guard at the hospital where he was delivered. The same basalt skin, the same fluorescent blue eyes. It has to be him. I knew I was right about Anya," Reinhardt mused to himself, as he let the words slip off his tongue.

"And the other man?" Probe asked.

"Still researching, we should have an answer in about two hours," Reinhardt replied.

Rath and Steele seemed uncomfortable all of a sudden. Steele stared ahead in a daze while Rath fidgeted in her seat, swiping her hair back over her right ear as she spoke. "You obviously asked us here for a reason, Reinhardt. What's your plan?"

"Simple, my dear Luna, I want you and Damied to stay here and run tactical. Asia and Probe will head up a strike team and track down our friend Nicholas. Oh yes, and kill that troublesome friend of his as well. I don't think that all four of you will need to be involved in the mission. So work out the details amongst yourselves, I have a meeting to attend," Reinhardt stated.

"Gentlemen, and lovely ladies, it is now 16:00 hours precisely. I will be back in this room at exactly 16:00 hours tomorrow, and I expect to see all four of you sitting here with Nicholas Tallezar waiting for me, and his companion buried and forgotten. Understood?" Reinhardt said coldly.

"Understood," the four said collectively.

With that, Reinhardt stood up, buttoned his suit jacket, and walked out of the command room.

"Pompous ass," Luna Rath said as the command door sealed

behind Reinhardt.

Probe chuckled and asked, “Does video show time they leave house?”

“Yes,” Asia responded. “Approximately 2:30 PM eastern time. They have a four hour head start. Probe, let’s take the chopper up to the Haggerty house and see if we can pick up a trail.”

“Anything you say, my pretty,” Probe said with a salacious smile.

Asia Takagi gave him a nasty look in trade for his comment and then walked swiftly from the command room. Probe laughed heartily and slowly sauntered behind.

Damied Steele and Luna Rath hadn’t left their seats yet. They just stared at each other as if they were communicating mentally. But they weren’t psychics. They were from the planet Barrelliex, a large blue planet some twenty billion light years behind Pluto. The two seemed oddly unnerved since watching Reinhardt’s video.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Rath asked Damied Steele.

“Yes, the boy bears a close resemblance. But it’s impossible. Let’s wait and see him up close before we make our thoughts known. These humans, the way they alter themselves with silly decorative markings and colors, chances are we’re just being paranoid.” Damied replied.

“True, I’d be the first one to tell you you’re crazy, but after seeing that video . . .” she said, trailing off. “We need to get a better look at ’im,” Luna Rath said.

They both stood and Damied slowly walked from the command room. Luna Rath lingered for a second, looked down the hall to see how far Damied had gotten, and hit the play button on the

optical unit.

“No way you’re human, kid,” she whispered to herself, flopping back into the chair waiting to catch her heavy form. “Things just got complicated.”

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31 2127, LEWIS, N.Y, NEAR THE BLACK RIVER

The Black River rustled and churned in the ravine behind a short line of wooden buildings, covered in dust from nearby Route 22. The veterinarian’s office was set up in the corner unit, a small black and white sign hung in front of the yellowed curtains bearing the name DR. ROGER PATTERSON. Still sporting the same clothes from the night before, Tyler and Jason were sleeping inside the Groundpounder in the parking lot of the vet’s office when the doctor pulled up at 8:55 AM. Jason hopped out of the truck and met him at the door making sure he saved every minute of valuable travel time. The veterinarian felt something was amiss, but he’d known Jason since he was a young boy and chalked it up to typically odd Masters behavior. Within minutes Jason walked out with Titan in his arms, bandaged and groggy, his traumatic experience obviously taking its toll. Jason hefted him to the back of the Groundpounder and laid him on a pile of blankets that Tyler had arranged earlier. But as tired as the injured husky was feeling, he still forced himself to the front of the Groundpounder to lick Tyler’s face.

“I know, I know. The feeling’s mutual,” said Tyler as he nuzzled his face in the dog’s neck and hugged him gently. “Sleep now.”

It took six long silent hours to drive into Manhattan. Jason and Tyler hadn’t spoken the whole way, other than ‘I gotta go’ every now and then, while Titan slept in the back. Tyler was glad he was

able to doze during the trip; he'd fought bravely and needed the rest.

Their plan was a simple one. Since Jason couldn't trust going to his home and Tyler didn't have one, they would go to Jason's office in the city. It wasn't really an office, but a rundown apartment near the Battery Park tunnel. Jason used it when he needed to stay in the city overnight. Tyler should have been very nervous about sleeping somewhere other than his own home for the first time in his life, but the only function his brain would perform was to replay the image of his dying mother over and over again. Jason wasn't doing too well either. It was one thing to hate your father, but to kill him in cold blood was unthinkable. To find out that his own father had killed his best friend's mother, unforgivable. Experience had taught him that when things this entangled floated to the surface, that which still hid in the deep was much more treacherous. Jason had a bad feeling that things were going to get much worse before they got better.

He broke free of his thoughts at the sight of his exit approaching and turned off of the West Side Highway followed by a quick left onto Vesey Street and pulled in front of a small brownstone. The three-story beige structure sat between a parking lot and a small office building. The front stoop was painted a dull, dark brown, and long weblike fissures showed through every layer, giving away its age. People walked on every corner; eight in the evening was prime time in New York City. Every window held a silhouette of a person's life playing inside. Every crack in the concrete told a story. A helicopter flew overhead gliding toward the East River. An old man with a pipe cocked to the side of his mouth walked a little poodle in a sweater vest followed by a young couple locked

arm in arm smiling at nothing but themselves. There was life in the city and it intrigued Tyler. The lights of the city locked onto his eyes and commanded them in every direction they flickered. Jason pulled a pair of shades from the glove box and tossed them to Tyler with a baseball cap to follow.

“Come on, we’re here.”

“Okay, I’ll get Titan,” Tyler grunted as he donned the shades.

“No, I’ll get Titan and you can get the bags, he-man,” Jason said with a fake smile glued to his face.

“Humph. Yeah right.” Tyler wasn’t as talented an actor as Jason; he couldn’t even manage a smile, never mind a laugh. He pulled on the baseball cap and walked to the back of the Ground-pounder while Jason opened the front door. Tyler picked up Titan and carefully loaded him into Jason’s arms, careful of his injured rear leg.

He stopped one last time to breathe in the wonderful sights of the city and lowered his head as he remembered why he was there. He wondered if everyone who lived here realized how lucky they were to have these lives. But his night vision told the truth to the city as he spotted an old vagrant sitting against the other side of the fence inside the parking lot.

Tyler put the bags down, walked around the fence, and put his hand up, waving weakly as he hid his face and dug his other hand into his back pocket.

“Evening,” said Tyler.

“Yep, it is,” replied the squatter.

“You could use this more than me,” Tyler said, handing him a fifty-dollar bill.

“Fifty bucks?” the bum uttered in grateful surprise, his reaction

dulled by alcohol.

“I’m sorry. It’s all I have in these pants,” replied Tyler as he lowered his head to cover his appearance and picked up the bags.

Jason watched from the window on the second floor landing and wondered if there would ever be a time to tell him about his father. Would all that goodness that was Tyler survive by the end of this nightmare?

He followed the sound of Jason’s footsteps up the stairs to the top level and ended up in front of a gray metal door without any markings, other than years of knuckles rapping the center. Tyler dropped the bags and grabbed the key from Jason’s pocket and opened the door. Jason hauled Titan inside the ragged looking apartment followed by Tyler with the bags.

The inside of the building wasn’t any more appealing than the exterior. Not that it mattered much to Tyler; nothing would feel like home. He peered down at the street through a side window and took notice of the overflowing garbage cans to the side of the brownstone. “Home sweet home.”

The place was definitely one of the older buildings in the downtown area, but clean and neat nonetheless. The smell of fresh paint permeated the air in the room and offset the old rug and shabby furniture.

Titan was only on the bed for few minutes before he fell asleep, which forced Jason to unpack his bags silently. Tyler on the other hand was staring out of the living room window, analyzing every light and movement of the city. He wondered to himself what New York must look like from atop the Empire State Building, because the view from here was phenomenal. Jason spied on Tyler as he started removing weapons from a duffel bag on the floor. He could

see that being here was going to help keep Tyler from dwelling on the situation. He wasn't going to forget the death of his parents, but the noise of a fire truck or ambulance flying by just might grab his attention long enough to give his mind a break.

The sound of a magazine being slapped into a machine gun brought Tyler back from his daydreams. Tyler turned around to see a huge array of weapons on the kitchen table and shuffled over to grab a snub-nosed machine gun.

"Damn, isn't this a Conrad 7mm gas compression?" Tyler inquired curiously.

"Yep."

"How'd you get your hands on it? This is like one of the most advanced to hit the market before Congress banned gun production in the US."

"Yeah, well, the government might've stopped companies from making guns, but they can't stop people from making them," Jason answered with a smile.

"You're kidding me? Hand made by Conrad himself?"

"Yep."

"Hmm. So, expecting a war?" Tyler crowed sarcastically.

"Expecting one? No," Jason said in a very serious tone. "Preparing for one? Yes. You remember the men from yesterday? They were professionals, Tyler. Whoever sent them paid them a lot of money to do a job. Whatever they were after, they didn't get it. That means that someone out there is going to be highly pissed off. That someone isn't gonna just lay back and say, oh well, the strike team I sent in failed so let me forget about the whole thing. They'll keep looking till they find what they were looking for."

Tyler looked away toward the window, trying not to register the

things that Jason was spouting, but he couldn't help replaying yesterday.

"And maybe they weren't looking for a *something*, maybe they were looking for a *someone*," Jason added sullenly.

"A someone, you think they were looking for *me*?" Tyler asked nervously. The thought of people knowing about him sent a chill up his back.

"I didn't say that," Jason replied curtly. Tyler could see that he was holding something back and that wasn't like him.

"What then? You're thinking something, I can sense it."

"I'm just speculating, nothing more," Jason said softly. He was lying.

"Just say it."

"Look, no offense, but, everyone else on the street might think you just look bizarre, but I've seen you do things that would blow their mind. You're not normal." Tyler looked away at the last sentence, leaving Jason rubbing his temples. "Christ, I don't mean that in a bad way, you know what I mean," Jason blurted.

"But no one knew about me. I mean my mother told me I was born in the mansion. Never even left Lewis until . . ." Tyler's eyes registered Jason's thoughts.

"Until you started coming down here with me." Jason finished his sentence and sat at the kitchen table.

"Oh no, no—"

"Don't even start. The odds of someone spotting you on the street and tracking you to Lewis is crazy. No way the trips did it."

Tyler was too upset to continue the conversation; he let Jason's last comment dissolve in the air and went back to the window. Titan slept peacefully on the bed and Jason continued to ready the

various weapons on the old veneered table.

“The weapons are all cleaned and loaded,” Jason said coldly. “I have to go out for a while, I’ll be back later. There’s food in the fridge and a TV in the bedroom.” Jason pulled something from his pocket. It was a mobile com. “Here, take this just in case. It’s encrypted, if you need to get in touch with me just click the call button twice.”

“Where are you headed?”

“I just need to take care of something.”

“Take care of something?” Tyler inquired. Jason wasn’t a liar; he was bad at it. A bad quality in an actor, but a great quality in a friend.

“Need a minute alone to get my head together.”

“Gotcha,” He said, looking around the apartment. The walls that weren’t repainted were covered in a cheap layer of wallpaper, somewhere between pea and puke green stripes. The furniture seemed as old as Tyler and the room was filled with an old musty odor. But, true to form, Jason had kept the place immaculate; five years in the army made him a neat freak.

Jason grabbed two 9mms off the kitchen table and put them in his jacket. His face was grim as he headed for the door.

“Hey, Tyler,” said

“Yeah?”

“No mommy orders. But do us both a favor. Stay inside, okay?” With that Jason headed out of the apartment and Tyler could hear his feet quickly treading the stairs to the street below.

Tyler walked to the window and watched Jason get into the Groundpounder and drive away. As Jason’s Groundpounder rolled down the street out of his line of sight, his stomach tightened and

he had the strangest feeling that he wouldn't see Jason again. He sat down next to Titan on the bed and stroked his fur.

"Don't worry boy, Jason always comes through. He'll be back as soon as he figures out what we're gonna do about things," Tyler said out loud. He wasn't sure if he was talking to Titan or trying to convince himself that Jason was going to find a solution to this nightmare. He pet Titan for a few more minutes, then fell asleep next to him under the moonlight shining through the window.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31 2127, LEWIS, N.Y, NEAR THE BLACK RIVER

A Target 340 HoverChopper sent wind rifling through the trees of the Haggerty estate as it floated above the remains of the mansion. It was a huge, army green vehicle, sporting clear bubbles of Lexan windows on either side of its oval body. Two powerful turbine engines were mounted to the rear of either side of the chopper and the main steering propeller sat on the top. Wisps of smoke still rose from the ruined building as the mansion came into view along the orange midday horizon. The chopper hovered about forty feet from the ground, its engines humming loudly. A small door could be seen opening on the side of the chopper, and a lone figure jumped from the doorway and landed like a cat on the ground below; it was Spirit. The expensive suits were traded for a set of tight fitting black pants, an emerald green sleeveless vest with nothing underneath, and short black hiking boots. Two short swords decorated her back.

The hilts were each milled from one solid piece of titanium wrapped with a man-made black fabric. The blades themselves were ancient, covered with scratches and abrasions from centuries of combat. The shifting of her eyes from left to right as she

scouted the area revealed that her mind was even sharper than her blades.

Her shiny black hair flew freely in the wind as she quickly scanned the area for anyone. When she deemed it safe, the HoverChopper landed a hundred feet from the charred skeleton of the mansion and a team of men dressed in lab suits disembarked. After the men in white came Probe, strolling out of the chopper carrying a huge black case. Spirit led the lab team to the mansion and they began cordoning off the area for their examination.

“Let’s have a look around while they’re working,” Spirit ordered.

“Yes ma’am, whatever you say, pretty,” Probe croaked.

Spirit was too professional to dignify his comment and proceeded to examine the grounds for clues. Probe laughed loudly at Spirit’s attempt to ignore him and set his black case on the ground. He touched a button at the top and the case’s sides slid away into the bottom revealing a tray of high-tech gadgets, a few of which still had blood on them from previous missions.

Probe slipped on a black carbon fiber ear clip with a slim aluminum arm attached to the side by a thick wire. The arm ended in a paper-thin translucent viewer resembling a monocle that sat over his right eye. He knelt down, pressed a switch on the panel inside the black case, and his monocle came to life, displaying a glowing green overlay against the plastic. He scanned the ground around his feet, slowly working his way from right to left in almost perfectly straight lines. He moved his hand to the monocle to perform a slight adjustment and his fingers came back with blood. He wiped them on his leather jacket and surveyed them for a moment; realizing it wasn’t his blood, he shrugged and continued his survey. After a few minutes he called Spirit over.

“Hey Tovarisch, I got that what we are needing.” Probe stumbled through his English translation.

“That’s ‘I’ve found what we need’. I bet even your Russian grammar is horrible,” Spirit fired at him.

“Ahhh, don’t hate me, pretty, just look through scope.” The Russian offered her the helmet and Spirit walked past him and scanned the ground.

“Tire tracks?” Spirit queried.

“Da, your big commercial jeep,” Probe answered.

“You mean a Groundpounder?” Spirit asked.

“Da, yes. The class T. I can tell, because only class “T” can dig into ground like this. Moisture sensor on my scope say it goes by maybe nine hours ago.”

“Good, while the technicians examine the remains of the mansion, we’ll follow the tracks,” Spirit said as she walked toward the technicians. She spoke with them for a minute, at which point, followed by a flurry of head nods, the technicians went back to their work and Spirit headed to the HoverChopper. She entered through the portal she jumped from and two minutes later a huge cargo bay in the rear of the chopper opened. She drove a topless military green rover down the loading ramp and pulled up to Probe, just a little bit too close, almost as if she were secretly hoping to hit him. The powerful engine rumbled and shook the four small wheels on either side.

“Get in,” Spirit ordered.

“I love it when woman is forceful,” Probe said, the words slithering from his tongue.

He jumped in the rover, put the scanning helmet on, and they sped away, following the tracks of Jason’s Groundpounder.

“Someone has to teach you English grammar,” Spirit said sarcastically.

“Da, you can teach me, pretty. You can teach me anything you want,” said Probe, laughing heartily.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31 2127, LEWIS, N.Y, THE MASTERS RESIDENCE

Rain splattered across the windshield of the forest green rover as it sped up the dirt road leading to Luke and Jason Masters’ home. The sky started to grow dark and the moon sent an ominous silver glaze across the green pines. Spirit pulled the four-wheeler in front of the aged gray house and parked.

“The first set of tracks stop here,” Probe offered.

“Then this is where we’ll begin. No cars parked and no lights on; probably empty, but scan it first to be safe,” Spirit said in a commanding tone.

“Da,” was all Probe said as he pulled a large, gray, gun-shaped object from the back seat. He aimed it at the house and watched the viewing screen attached at the front of the instrument. “All clear, my pretty. Nobody home,” he said.

The two disembarked from the rover and ran up the stairs to the porch of the old colonial house. Most of the home was concealed by overgrowth of bushes and unkempt pines; the only parts exposed seemed to be the ones in need of repair. The floor of the porch made harsh creaking noises as the two stepped across, and the facade of the house wasn’t in any better shape. The gray paint was peeling off in large flakes and the wood beneath was showing signs of termite damage. Spirit shook the rain from her hair and twisted it into a ponytail to keep it from her eyes. Probe wiped the droplets from his long leather trench, muttering Rus-

sian curses and complaints. Spirit pulled something too small to see clearly from her belt and pressed it against the doorknob, and within a minute she turned the knob and entered the house.

“What a woman,” Probe said mockingly.

Probe followed behind Spirit, who was already making her way up the stairs to the second-floor landing.

“You search downstairs and I’ll handle the upstairs,” Spirit ordered. With that she silently walked down the hallway to the first bedroom. For a second Probe just watched her walk. *Incredible, she is silent as cat without even trying*, he thought. The home was sparsely furnished and the pieces that did line the walls were the cheap, inert kind that you’d find in a motel. Probe began to search the cabinets and desks on the first floor. After looking for a minute or two he found something that grabbed his attention.

“Spirit, you won’t believe this if I don’t tell you,” Probe shouted.

“What did you say? God, your English, ugh,” came the muffled reply from the second floor.

“Come here and see what I find,” Probe responded with a heavy twist of his Russian accent. “Come on, pretty, you have to see—” Before he could finish Spirit was behind him.

“Don’t shout, I’m right behind you,” she whispered.

Probe jumped a step forward with a gasp. “My god, stop being ghost!”

“Stop whining, show me what you found,” she said coldly.

“Look at this paper I find.” Probe handed her a yellowed sheet of heavy paper, which she examined closely.

“Luke Masters?” she said, slightly puzzled.

“Da, and look at this,” Probe said as he handed her folded set of papers.

“Lease agreement . . . 234 Vesey Street . . . Jason. Jason Masters?”

“Maybe we should check.”

“Yes, definitely. But first let’s check the second set of tracks leaving this property.”

“Da, okay. I will check,” Probe said, heading for the porch.

Probe spun around and headed for the door. Spirit was set to follow him when something caught her eye. “Wait, look at this,” Spirit said, confused.

“What?”

“The picture on the wall, the man on the left is Luke Masters and the man on the right looks just like the second man in the security video,” Spirit whispered.

“Da, spitting image, as you say. What does this mean?”

“I don’t know, but I’m sure Reinhardt will be interested to learn about this little fact,” Spirit said as she examined the picture one more time. She turned the lights off in the house and walked onto the porch, closing the door behind her. The rain had let up a little and was merely a mist of tiny droplets. She headed toward the Range Rover and found the Russian hard at work scanning the second set of tracks.

“Well?” Spirit asked sharply.

“The tracks head east, on trajectory for highway,” the Russian replied.

“They’re headed to the city, probably to that apartment downtown. I’ll radio for the HoverChopper to pick us up, pack your gear up and be ready in five.” Spirit ended the sentence by touching the com-link in her ear and rattling off orders to the HoverChopper pilots.



The command room had shifted and reconfigured into a new pattern of desks laid out in a line forming a square which housed two rows of communication techs. Fitted with the latest in advanced technology, the floor of the room was constructed with rows of curved plates that allowed the layout of the room to be adjusted. Coupled with movable walls and liquid displays hanging from the ceiling, the room itself was fluid. The command room took up the entire two hundred and third floor and a quick rotation of the ten-ton cylinder it was mounted upon opened enough space to house the techs that were handling a dozen monitors projecting their displays onto large visors.

One of the techs waved his hand in the air and turned to Luna as he pressed a series of virtual buttons in midair.

“Receiving an incoming message from the HoverChopper, it’s Spirit,” a communications tech said to Luna Rath.

“Pop it on the main,” she replied.

The main display crackled with white dust for a split second and then Asia Takagi appeared on screen and her metal-edged voice filled the command room.

“We think we locked in on the target. He’s somewhere in Tribeca. We’re on our way there now. There’s something else, we followed tracks from the Haggerty home to a small house about eighteen miles away.” Spirit’s voice echoed over the intercom.

“And?” Rath queried.

“And, it’s owned by the now deceased Luke Masters. And even more interesting, the apartment in Tribeca seems to be leased to someone named Jason Masters. Can you run a check and see

how he's related to Luke Masters?"

"Very strange. Yeah, I'll pull up the background on this Jason Masters," Rath replied, and repeated her orders to the communications tech, already punching keys instantly. "Anything else?"

"Yes, can one of you send me the schematics for the building in Tribeca?" Spirit asked.

"Affirmative," Damied Steele replied. "I will send them right over."

"Spirit out." Spirit disappeared behind the same hissing and crackling signal.

"I have that information, sir," the communications tech stated.

"Send it to her," Steele replied.

"Luke Masters?" Rath asked loudly.

"Yes. The mess is getting messier," Steele ventured.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2127, NEW YORK, CITY, N.Y. MIDTOWN

Jason Masters sat on the hood of his Groundpounder in front of Central Park. The treeline was green and dense, hiding him from the residents taking their morning jog along the inner paths. Tiny droplets of rain stuck to his hair and clothes making it look like he was covered in sequins. He was staring into the trees as if he were hypnotized, unable to think of anything but the image of his father's face unmasked and the thought of that same man killing his best friend's mother. He'd never met Tyler's parents before; it sickened him to realize that he was introduced to their bodies lying broken in the dirt. Tyler couldn't focus on anything but his loss; Jason on the other hand was carefully analyzing the eyes, skin so close to jet black, the amazing strength and speed—the generally amazing things that made up Tyler Haggerty. His parents living a

thousand miles away from civilization, the odd appearance, the secret life, and now an execution at the hands of a band of mercenaries, more likely ex-military. The puzzle pieces weren't fitting together, but the similar pieces were coming together on the table. The Haggertys weren't the goal at the center of this game. It was Tyler.

Wild thoughts sprung from his imagination, movies he'd seen as a child where children were made part of experiments that turned them into super soldiers and military weapons. He pictured Tyler as a baby suspended in liquid ooze inside a glass tank, surveyed by an army of doctors and government suits standing around taking notes on clipboards. He shook the thoughts away and rolled his eyes at himself, but in the dark, secretive places that we hide our inner thoughts, he always knew that Tyler was more than different. He knew that there was no way his existence was as simple as a genetic detour on the road to DNA. Maybe Tyler was the next phase of evolution. Maybe he was a herald of things to come. He chewed on the inside of his lip and exhaled sharply, shaking his head slowly.

He'd felt this feeling in combat before he left the military. When a battle starts, you sense the enemy already has a plan in motion and you have no clue where you'll be attacked next. He didn't know what to do and worse than that, Tyler was relying on him to find a solution. More men would be coming, Jason was sure of that. When and where he didn't know, but they would come.

He wiped the dew from his face and got back in the Groundpounder. He pondered some takeout, hoping the sustenance would jump-start his brain and help him figure out where to start. He fired up the Groundpounder and rolled down Central Park

West with thoughts of cheeseburgers on his mind.



A sound at the door woke Tyler from his nightmares, and it took him a moment to realize the sound wasn't part of his dream. He looked over at the sleeping form of Titan on the bed and figured that he was hearing things until a barely audible scraping noise near the door told him he was wrong. He carefully got up off the bed and crept over to the kitchen table. He picked up a Shatterstorm V76, 14mm rapid-fire and silently headed to the front door and waited to see if he would hear anything again. He didn't want to swing open the door and point a gun in the face of a defenseless old woman on the way to do her laundry.

But someone was quietly turning the doorknob. This was no old lady. In one lightning fast motion, Tyler swung open the door and thrust his pistol forward to home in on whoever was there. The hallway was quiet and empty. He held his gun high and scanned the hallway—nothing. He dropped the Shatterstorm and raised his eyebrow, as he turned around and caught the odor of something familiar, red clay. *Fresh red clay, but red clay's found mostly upstate*—at that moment, the hair on the back of his neck stood up—*or from someone who recently trudged through the dirt upstate*. His mind raced. He and Jason had been back from the Adirondacks for almost sixteen hours; any scent of it would have faded. Someone was out there; he couldn't see them, but they were out there. He closed the door softly as if he had convinced himself nothing was there and waited by the door listening. After a few seconds, he whipped the door open and was face to face with an Asian girl, wearing what appeared to be a green and black

combat outfit. On her back, two intricate swords hung, one just under the other on her right side.

Before he could bring up the gun, Spirit kicked it out of his hands and kicked him in the face with the same motion. His head snapped backward and pulled his body along for the ride as he hit the ground. Spirit was already in the air aiming for his face with both boots, but Tyler was far from defeated. He popped onto his feet, grabbed Spirit's foot, and used her momentum to fling her across the room. Spirit was surprised by the young man's strength, but compensated quickly, turning herself in midair before hitting the wall and using it as a springboard. Her body reverberated into a side kick aimed for Tyler's head. He rolled under her kick and came to his feet in front of the kitchen table, eyes blazing like blue plasma. He grabbed a Mercurian-10mm machine gun and spun around.

"Enough already," Tyler grunted as he unloaded the Mercurian at Spirit. She avoided all the rounds that Tyler fired, twisting and turning faster than a normal human should move. Titan leapt over the couch and scampered behind the assassin, still hobbled by his injured haunch.

Tyler's face mirrored his thoughts, and they weren't good. As he fired the last round from the Mercurian, Spirit stopped and pulled out one of her swords.

"Bullets don't think," she said, stinging Tyler's ears.

Tyler's jaw flexed defiantly as he picked up a shiny silver orb, full of high explosives, from the kitchen table and pushed the detonator bar forward.

"You let go of that detonator," Spirit hissed. "We both die."

"I have no fear of death—I've never lived," Tyler said, eyes in

a trancelike state.

Spirit realized in an instant that Tyler meant what he said. A single bead of sweat rolled down her face.

She slowly began to lower her sword. He watched as Titan crept up behind the calculating ninja, and his grip on the molecule sphere loosened—that's when Probe came dashing into the apartment. He was barreling toward Tyler with all his might, but Tyler simply rolled forward, avoiding him cleanly, and tossed the molecule sphere in the air.

For a brief second, time stood still. All three sets of eyes fixed on the glossy gray ball tumbling through the air. It whirled up toward the ceiling fan and as it fell it vibrated at such a rate as it became almost invisible until it let out a shrieking sound and began to erode the molecular framework of everything within a three-foot radius.

Then time began to speed up. Tyler and Probe scrambled for the door. Probe was the first into the hallway. Tyler couldn't stop himself from veering toward the kitchen table to grab his mother's metal box. It was too important to lose and he realized his gamble as he played hopscotch, jumping across the crumbling floor. Probe turned to meet Tyler toe to toe and received a very quick and well placed front kick to the stomach. He doubled over and flew back into the stairs, at which point Tyler grabbed him by the back of his trench coat and flung him down the rest of the way.

The molecule sphere had already begun to break down the floors and walls of Jason's apartment. Spirit was caught behind the destruction and quickly realized that the window was her only way out. Without a second of hesitation, she sprinted toward the portal and dove through.

Meanwhile, Tyler jumped over Probe and bolted down the stairs, sprinting toward the front door.

He screamed for Titan to follow him, but he was moving too fast to look back. The floor was starting to give way and Tyler knew that once the molecule sphere's blast hit the gas pipe the whole building would go up. He finally made it to the front door as the pipe burst, sending a swirling wall of flames shooting down the stairwell. The flames blew out the front door and just missed Tyler's feet as he dove onto a red sedan. He slid across the freshly waxed hood, landing on the blacktop facing the oncoming traffic. His quick reflexes forced him to roll back toward the sidewalk and avoid becoming the hood ornament on a speeding roadster.

Probe wasn't as lucky. His screaming form flew from the second floor stairwell window and landed hard on the concrete, knocked unconscious. Finally the building's spine fractured under the strain of the broken walls and the foundation began to crumble. The rest of the building imploded, sending a hail of ash and concrete dust into the air.

Without taking a breath, Tyler got up and started running at full speed. Lights became a blur, people became static obstacles to evade. He pushed until his heart hammered in his chest, and a long streak of green slowed until it transformed into a park as his pace slowed to a jog. Logic grabbed control of the wheel and he realized that with no place to go the park might be his best bet. A quick survey in every direction confirmed that he hadn't been followed. He let his guard down slightly and walked into the park, slipping through a grove of trees until he found a weathered green bench and took a seat. He gulped in a lungful of air and hung his head in his hands as he let it all out in one great sigh. The night

was quiet, no one in sight, a good sign that his trail had gone cold. More than likely, his attackers were too busy trying to get away before the police and firemen arrived at the scene. He wondered where Jason was and what he was going to think when he returned. He thought of the mobile com and remembered where he saw it last, sitting on the now nonexistent kitchen table. He wondered how he would find him; maybe it wouldn't be wise to try to locate Jason with his two pursuers trailing behind. Most of all, he wondered about Titan. The last thing he remembered was seeing Titan creeping up on the Asian girl to attack. He hoped beyond all hope he was okay. Even if he couldn't find him, he just wanted him safe.

"Happy Halloween," a child's voice uttered. Tyler raised his head from his hands to see a little girl, no more than six, dressed in a princess costume. He sat transfixed instantly as the girl in the pink dress holding a plastic silver wand opened her shopping bag, hoping for, expecting, candy.

"Wow! What a great mask! Look momma, look at his mask," the little girl said excitedly. The child's mother was walking a few feet behind her, and eyed Tyler cautiously as she emerged from the shadow of the trees.

"I see, Vicky, it's amazing. Come on now, stop bothering him," she said in a stern but loving voice.

The little girl flashed Tyler a smile from ear to ear and skipped back to her mother. The two continued their stroll through the park, leaving Tyler with his still frozen expression, hands shaking.

"It—it's no—bother," Tyler whispered, his voice floating in the wind. "Happy Halloween."

After a few minutes fear gave way to exhaustion and Tyler

searched the area until he found a nice dark place to sleep. He chose a patch of high grass lined with trees to rest his bones. He dropped to the ground with an audible thud and pulled a piece of cardboard over his frame, just like camping, he thought to himself. He stared at the sky for a moment and noticed there weren't any stars. *How strange*, he pondered, *all these lights and no stars*.

His blue eyes faded to dim navy as they did every night when his body gave in to sleep. And in that moment Tyler was forced to do that which had eluded him since the morning—realize that his parents were gone, his world was destroyed—and the fear of what would come tomorrow took over his stomach, twisting it until the butterflies turned into hornets. Under the cover of the trees and the night's canopy he did the only thing that was left to do for a lost child trapped in a man's body. With a long sigh, the tears ran gently down his nose and across his cheek forming tiny stains on the dirty cardboard. He wrapped his arms tightly around himself and coiled into a fetal position. He thought about Amanda, but if he couldn't get his body to move, he'd never get it to walk. The last of his energy reserves drained quickly as his emotions spilled from his heart as equally as they did his eyes. Thankfully, after a while the universe held sympathy over the crushed young man and allowed him what little comfort it could offer. Sleep.



Sirens screamed from the rear of Jason's Groundpounder, forcing him to the right lane, yielding as a flurry of speeding red and blue vehicles raced past. It was the third set of emergency vehicles that passed him in only four blocks.

Geez, what the hell's that all about. Must be a goddamned

towering inferno downtown. He turned off the West Side Highway and saw the kaleidoscope of lights spinning and flashing in front of the now nonexistent building that housed his office and immediately knew what happened. The rubble of the brownstone stood about twenty feet high, firemen and police rescuers scurrying across the debris like ants searching for food. The neighboring cars parked on the street were a display of every type of damage: shattered windshields, crushed hoods, flattened tires, soot and scorch marks along the closest. The wreckage from the building could be seen a hundred feet in any direction. Flames rose from the remnants of the building and convulsed wildly in the cold night wind.

Tyler, Jason's brain played in his head. He slammed the brakes, screeching behind a fire truck.

"Hey, back that car up, the sign says keep back two hundred feet," said a tall fireman covered in soot.

"I live here, my friend was at home sleeping," Jason said frantically.

"Calm down, we're still searching. So far we haven't found any victims yet. Either way, you can't stay here. Move that truck back and sit tight. If we find anything I'll come get'cha."

Jason was too upset to argue with the man and jumped back in the truck. He set the transmission to reverse and squealed back away from the fire truck. Inside he rubbed his temples and hoped desperately that Tyler had made it out in time. *I knew they would be back. Damn! Why didn't I stay with him?* Jason tortured himself with these and other questions. Nothing was going to stop these feelings from surfacing in his mind. Nothing but the sight of Tyler alive and well standing before him. Which from the looks

of that building wasn't likely, but Tyler wasn't the average guy, so neither were his chances. If anyone could get out of that building alive, it was him. Jason put his seat back and stared at the roof of the truck. It was going to be a long night; he wouldn't sleep until he knew whether Tyler was alive or dead, not a wink.

The lights from the vehicles flickered on Jason's face in a strange red, white, and blue pattern. They put him in a trance as he pondered the fate of his friend.



The graceful sound of Rachmaninoff's Symphony Number 3 crept along Reinhardt's study with a deceiving calm. The room was decked out luxuriously with real black-dyed crocodile skin wallpaper and black and white checkerboard tiles made of marble. He sat in a heavily padded red leather chair with a cigar in one hand and a black rook in the other. His chessboard was custom made from exotic woods and marble edged in gold. It was set upon a lazy-Susan style table which allowed him to spin the board around and play as both players.

Reinhardt was a brilliant tactician; neither black nor white had ever won.

A small bright red light began to flash on the wall above his desk of black metal and glass.

"Mute," he spouted, sending the room into sudden silence. "Answer call," he continued, his computerized assistant processing his vocal commands into action, sending the incoming call over the a slim video display hanging on the ivory colored ceiling.

"Yes," was all he spoke in almost a whisper as Steele and Rath flashed to life above him.

“You need to come down to the command room, things didn’t go as planned.” Steele’s voice hissed through his translator.

“Good god, do *not* tell me they *escaped!*” Reinhardt said, shaking his head.

“We aren’t sure, the police haven’t finished searching the rubble yet.” Steele replied hesitantly.

“RUBBLE!” he shouted, jumping up from his chair and sending cigar ashes cascading down on his charcoal gray suit. He steadied himself and took a deep cleansing breath. After he calmed himself down he spoke.

“What happened, Steele? I specifically sent Spirit and Probe to keep this mission clean and quiet,” he said in a slow calm manner.

“Well—it was noisy and messy,” Rath shouted in the background.

“Spirit is here getting cleaned up and Probe is getting . . . repaired. They haven’t said much, I think they’re upset about failing to capture the target,” Steele responded.

Oblivious to Steele’s last comment, Reinhardt stared intensely at the chessboard. He put the cigar to his mouth and took a long drag. He picked up the black rook again and stared at it for a moment. Then, in a fit of rage he kicked the chessboard off the table, sending it clamoring against the cold granite floor. As he stood and walked toward his private elevator, Steele’s voice could be heard in the background.

“Reinhardt? Reinhardt, are you there? What was that noise?”



Tyler woke to the feel of something cold and wet on his face. To his delight it was Titan licking him affectionately.

“Titan! Thank god!” Titan wagged his tail wildly and sat before his master to receive his well-deserved petting. Tyler rubbed the

fur under his chin, stopping to hug him every few cycles.

“I can’t believe you made it out, geez you are one tough dog!” he shouted as he knelt down to hug the tired pooch.

As he continued to smooth the dog’s fur, he noticed his mother’s metal box hiding in a bit of weeds. He continued to pet him with one hand and opened the box with the other to see if everything in the box was worth almost losing his life or at least his feet. The box was full of cash, bearer bonds, and all her other personal documents. Nothing unusual, but he hadn’t reached the bottom yet.

“Boy, when things settle down, I’m buying you a steak dinner.”

Though he was a dog, Titan certainly understood steak and barked appreciatively. For the first time in days Tyler actually laughed.

“We have to stay hidden till dark, then we find Jason,” He told the husky.

Tyler retreated deeper into the cluster of trees and found a comfortable spot to sit. Titan lay down next to him and made himself comfortable in the weeds. With nothing to do for the next twelve hours, Tyler decided to look through his mother’s papers and see if he could find anything useful. The first thing he saw when he moved the papers around was a picture of his mother and him as a boy at his tenth birthday. A tear rolled down his cheek as he caressed the picture of her face.

I love you mom, you’ll always be with me. He wiped the tear from his face and started digging through the papers. After a few moments, exhaustion took over, signaling him that his body needed more sleep to heal. Unable to argue the point, he conceded and lay back against a tree. Seconds later, he was asleep. Titan did what he always did. He walked over to Tyler as close as he could get and achingly dropped down next to him.



On the other side of the Sarah D. Roosevelt park, Luna Rath stood within a small grove of sweet gum trees. In the daylight her skin shimmered with a hint of pearlescent color shifting from white to light blue to sky blue. She knelt within a grove of bushes, between each thumb and forefinger a paper thin filament of translucent material with a close-up image of Tyler superimposed across its width.

“It’s me, put Haber on,” Luna Rath said into her com-link in a whisper. She was about forty yards from Tyler, still gazing at him.

“This is Lord Haber, proceed,” an older, distinguished voice replied.

“I have a visual on the boy,” Rath reported.

“Do you have any news? Is he Vemuri?” the voice inquired anxiously in return.

“I’d put money on it.”

“Put money?”

“It means the odds are good that the boy is Vemuri.”

“You and these Earth idioms. This isn’t good; what could a Vemuri possibly want on Earth?” the voice asked.

“Stranger than that, seems like he was born and raised here,” Rath said, taking off her glasses.

“What does that fool plan to do with him?”

Rath adjusted her com-link and replied, “With Reinhardt, ya never know. Probably try an cut ’im up; play mad scientist.”

“That will not do, he must be taken from that planet one way or the other. The council grants you permission to do whatever is necessary to get that boy away from Earth. God knows what would happen if the Vemuri found out one of their own was living

on this antiquated planet,” the voice said.

“What about my other mission: Damied Steele?” Rath asked.

“He’s a problem as well, but this situation is priority. Understood?” the voice asked harshly.

“I’ll take care of it,” Rath replied.

“I know you will, you always do.” With that, the com-link clicked off and Luna Rath put her hands in front of her face and pulled them away from each other, stretching the binocular film across her view again to spy on Tyler. She focused in on him and saw that he was still sleeping.

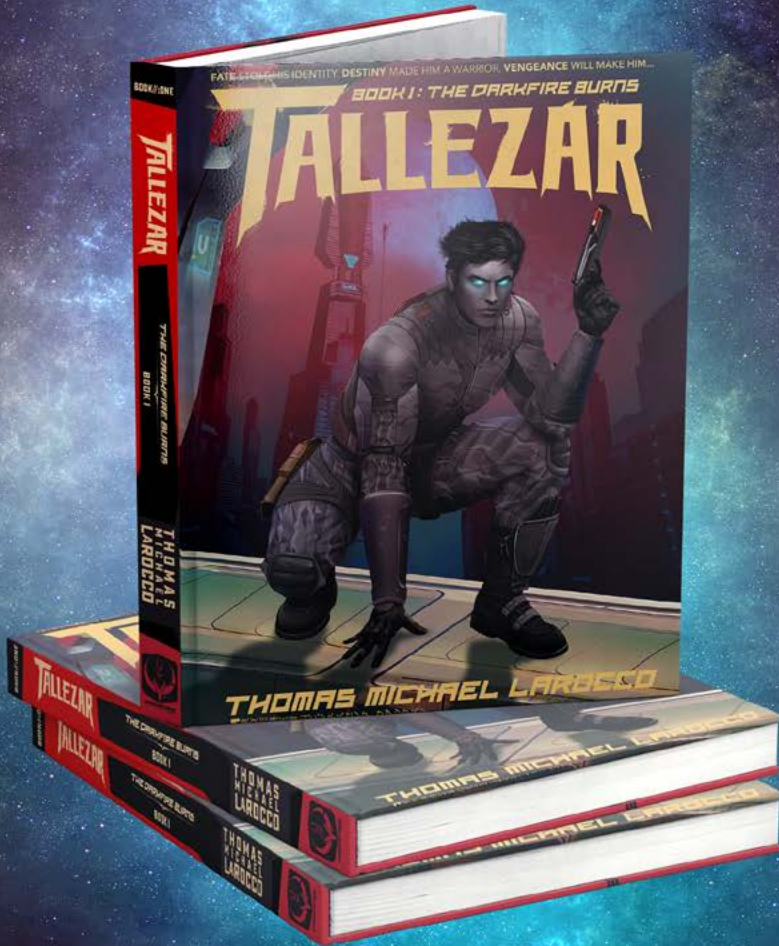
You’re a Vemuri, huh? I bet you don’t even know it. Maybe I should just take you out right now and save myself the trouble of being blown up like Spirit and Probe. She left the filament roll away into her left hand as she surveyed the area for any unwanted guests. When she was sure there weren’t any humans walking along the park path, she pushed her way farther into the bush and put the sight of a strange alien weapon to her eye, aiming it at Tyler. The gun was a full meter long mesh of tubular connections coated in satin black with a huge horizontal sliver of a barrel at its tip. There were small, subtle lights all over the area where she held the gun with both hands. As she moved her fingers and adjusted for a shot, the lights moved to follow her hands and shone even more brightly. It was as if they were cognizant of her movements.

“If I squeeze this trigger, you won’t be a problem for anyone anymore. I can send your remains back to the council and get back to my life,” she whispered.

She brought a pulsating blue light down in between Tyler’s eyes, took a deep breath, and aimed.



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