

Chapter 1: Deserved

“If you can’t be honest with yourself about this, then when will the lies end?” Taya asked.

“You’re judging me? You let ’im inject ink into ya fuckin’ eyes?” Quinn gestured toward his own baby blues. Jagged nails complemented by an array of gold and silver rings flashed in the soft light of the lift. “You give me shit for getting some knuckle glow. Meanwhile, yer out here lighting up ya eyes?”

“I’m just saying.” Taya’s grin slipped through her feigned scorn. Poking the older off-duty officer had proved particularly fruitful—and joyful—today. “We get a couple decent gigs and you toss your cash for a glorified manicure instead of actual wear.”

“What, ya want me to be able to bend bars? You wanna take on some military contracts, huh?” Quinn mockingly slapped at his own biceps. The black leather jacket he wore didn’t even strain at the motion, but that didn’t stop Taya’s partner from grinning his crooked-tooth smile at her, pale skin stretching over old acne scars. He was quite animated when he spoke, and Taya found herself focusing more on his hands than his rolling drawl when he continued. “I’m flash, yer fire. We’re *synergizin’*. B’sides, I know you’re aching to use ya new wear.”

The cybernetic implants within Taya did make her faster and stronger than her body would typically allow, but none of the wear available within her pay grade would result in erupting heads. Though if the prices kept dropping and Taya was able to get her enforcer license, perhaps she would be able to shatter a skull with a perfect punch. The thought made her lips twitch.

Not that I would ever want to do that. Unless... Well, some people deserved far worse.

“Yeah, I’m chomping for some punk popping off at me again.” She ignored the flash of concern on the older man’s wrinkled face, and willed the lift to climb faster. It soared through the megastructure, through microcity after microcity, as the floors blurred by.

Taya watched through the gate as a sea of ramshackle buildings spreading across Floor Ninety-Eight came into view, sprawling out toward the horizon. The ceiling on this floor was well over thirty meters high—a feature that would normally come with projected holomodels

looming over the buildings, but legislation had been passed banning that particular style of intrusive adverts. The districts before her were still blanketed in billboards, neon signage illuminating everything in sight, but the lack of models did agree with her. Their dead, colorful eyes always bothered her.

“They don’t sparkle. The ad said somethin’ about ‘bloom,’” Quinn said, but Taya was already shaking her head, a smirk on her face.

“I saw ’em turn on, Quinn. But don’t worry—guys’ll love it.”

For a moment, Quinn seemed torn on how to react. He settled on letting out a deep sigh and ran a hand through his hair, saying, “New rule. No more talkin’ personal shit on duty,” he chided. “Deal?”

“Ah, right. It’s all about stayin’ respectable in the beatdown business.”

The hand moved from his hair to the bridge of his nose. “Fackin’ hell—we do a whole lot more than hit people.”

“I mean, that’s fair,” Taya agreed. “You did bite that bartender.”

The lift beneath them shook as the box snagged on some flaw in the rail system. The ad display on the back wall flickered, its audio distorting for a moment before returning to a jingle about unisex birth control tablets. It clashed horribly with the cool, soothing tones of the elevator’s interior. The steel of the lift had been worked until it had taken on a soft, blue tinge—one of Taya’s favorite colors as it had been utilized in almost every corner of the megastructure.

When the megastructures had first been built to escape the haze, centuries ago, there had been no time for aesthetic pleasantries. Each floor had been erected out of bare steel. Over the generations, however, the people surviving within the structures had done what they could to improve upon the minimalist design by tempering the steel that surrounded them and, on the wealthier floors, carving liquid-looking designs into the walls. Within many of the residential districts, painting a home any color other than the natural hues of tempered steel was seen as gaudy and attention-seeking. Steel was the barrier between humanity and death. The warm-to-cool spectrum it provided was, in Taya’s opinion, more than enough. Even the black exterior of the buildings, tainted by the haze that had engulfed the world, held a dark beauty.

For a few moments, the lift darkened as they entered the space between floors. The sounds of city life were cut off, as if by a razor, leaving only the audio from the small display behind Taya and Quinn to fill the compartment. No reception could penetrate between floors, meaning even

the audio feed for the products being pitched in the back of her mind was silenced. Taya never noticed the jingles until they were gone, whispering to her even in her sleep.

A few blissful moments of peace followed with only the small screen showing a relatively unobtrusive ad for adult diapers. Taya exhaled heavily, imagining herself floating in the black void of space. She tuned her auditory systems to block out the elevator's pitch, something her personalized—though not necessarily legal—police-grade internal system allowed. The cold of the steel gate against her shoulders helped Taya ignore the heat steadily increasing inside the lift.

I'm here. I am floating in the abyss.

Taya opened her imagined eyes, taking in the splendor of an ocean of stars beneath her. She'd long dreamed of exploring space, a childlike desire set aside in favor of focusing on recovering the Earth from the haze.

A hitch in the lift system rail shattered her illusion of weightlessness.

Goddammit.

As quickly as it had left Ninety-Eight, the lift tore into Floor Ninety-Nine, home to the structure's most notorious entertainment district, where life blended into one continuous wave of stimulation. Buildings reached toward the high ceiling, most coated in ads for drinks, games, clubs, sex, escape—promises of *better* all blurring before her eyes. Voices crashed into her ears from the massive holomodels that stood atop several of the buildings. The formulaically perfect humans were displaying, enjoying, consuming every pleasure money could buy, the overall lighting kept dim enough in the evening to make the ads' presence constant. Tunnels on high floors connecting the printed buildings within the floor were more often than not completely covered in the looming commercial-use displays.

Buy, fuck, gamble, numb.

A grotesque hack from Quinn pulled Taya from her thoughts. She opened her eyes and looked over at Quinn. His own were glazed over, likely focusing on some model's feed. Taya owed her life to him. He'd never taken a bullet for her, but when she'd fallen to pieces, he'd put aside his own grief and set her up in this career. Without him, Taya had no idea what she'd be doing. Still, Quinn could never fully overcome his low upbringing in the structure. Not that Taya had started much higher, but Quinn had had it rough. His general aura was that of a man who'd grown up too fast while never fully maturing. A weight heavy on his shoulders slouched him low. If he noticed you watching, his perpetual scowl would be quickly hidden with a tight smile

and verbal jab. Only on rare occasions had Quinn let her in, talking drunkenly about his younger years in the HazeCore. She watched as he picked at something on his chin—a scab—before flicking the bit of flesh to the floor.

“Quinn... you have this flaw about you.”

His eyes refocused, a chuckle in his throat. “What’s that?”

Taya rolled her shoulder, trying to relieve her headache. “Your presence is, I don’t know, somehow it’s antithetical to peace.”

“I think that’s more the Job but, a’ight.” Quinn’s large form joined her at the gate, curling fingers into the gridiron. “Appreciate the insight.”

“Maybe it’s not you,” Taya relented. “Sometimes I need places *without* things happening *all* the time. Peaceful.”

“Yeah, ya lost me at ‘peaceful.’” Quinn sucked on his teeth, pressing his forehead to the gate next to her, looking out at the only world she’d ever known. One contained within steel walls, filled with printed buildings and streets. Generations of 3D printers slowly reprinting the new world into more and more realistic re-creations of the world that once was. “Not *sure* what you’re getting at.”

“‘Not sure’?—use context,” Taya said.

Quinn’s glow flicked on, his new, blue-webbed hands sparkling to life against the gate’s grid. “*Gah*, you’re just jealous of my glow. It’s basically a work expense, right? The more I glow, the more people assume *we* got good wear—at least when we’re together. You go purple, I go blue. It’s *intimidating*.”

“Violet,” she stated for the hundredth time.

“Same thing.” Quinn flared his own light as he patted his ludicrously large revolver, a sapphire ring with twisted metal admittedly looking pretty damn good with the glow. “Ya could learn a lesson or two about the importance of letting the little things go. Ya don’t gotta fight everyone on everything.”

Taya let him sit in his own words for several moments, staring at him without blinking.

Quinn finally broke the silence. “Look, you won’t have to put up with being my ‘apprentice’ much longer. A’ight?”

“Oh, it hasn’t been that bad. But are ya sure it’s for intimidation and not because—?” Taya stepped away and gestured out toward the level spilling into view before them. “*Everyone is*

adding their own light'?" She said the words in her best impression of the overly excited holomodel dancing on the lift's ad screen, now encouraging everyone to spend their money on her custom-designed line of glow. Taya had seen the ad roughly a thousand times before and had damn near perfected the animated impression.

"Oh, *fack off*." Quinn pushed off the gate and kicked the printed faux gridiron. Made of printIron, a recently popularized naming convention for printer-made objects Taya found horrifically grating. "You're trying to get people to call ya 'Ghost.'"

"One, I was drunk when I said that, and two, I still think it's a good fit. The unknown. *That's* intimidating," Taya said. "If you actually picked up a book, you'd know that vengeful spirits are the baddest around. There have been ghost stories as long as there's been recorded history. We're a haunted species."

"A'ight, T. That'll be perfect when I send ya off. That's solid branding. Seriously, you're nearly ready. God help anyone who hires you."

"Well, thank you, boss."

Quinn scowled exactly as he always did when she referred to him that way.

The lift darkened as it, once again, entered the space between floors. Thick layers of concrete and steel blurred together as they rocketed away from the entertainment district of the microcity. Broadcast music options and discussion feeds disappeared from within Taya's hud as they rose, reducing the overall clutter in her vision. Everyone learned not to focus on their huds early in life, but Taya still kept hers slightly less packed than most. One headline readout, a minimal GPS showing her location on whatever floor she was in, her latest notifications, sometimes a live connection to her friend Juno, and a drop-down menu for quick transitions into other important widgets like her banking info. Simple and clean, compared to some anyway.

"What you don't understand," Quinn flickered his glow, playing with his new light in the darkness, "is that visual presentation is everything. Screw the name, go for a look."

"Quinn, you're an idiot." Taya flicked on her own glow, eyes blazing to life. The three rings burned into her back blared through her shirt and jacket, the brilliant violet fire scorching over the lift. "I've already nailed the look."

"Sweet Mother of the Virgin Mary," Quinn exclaimed. "I still can't believe you let them put that shit *in* your eye. Like *really* in."

The mother of the Virgin Mary? His colorful phrases always required an internal squint.

Taya dimmed her glow, allowing Quinn's blue to return to the space. "It's not the same as the stuff they put under your skin. Adding the dye was worse than the incision."

"But *I'm* the one who's bad with money." Quinn mumbled.

"You're the one with the second job. How are all those cop benefits not enough?" She stomped out the temptation to add 'dirty' before 'cop.'

"This job's a cakewalk compared to who and what I gotta deal with during the day, a'ight? Might as well be taking a break," Quinn's said. "Oh, screw the ghost thing. Imitate what's real. Get some vampire red in that glow! The *vampire* enforcer. Hell, I know a guy that can get you a safe 'n clean bite."

"Are you serious? Hey, remember when you had to bite a guy? What happens with a badge worse than that?"

"Your mistake is thinking the scums are the worst thing we deal with." Quinn spoke from deep in his throat, years of smoking lending a slight rasp to his words. "Worst things I've seen in this structure 'ave been in apartments with views of beautiful, white, puffy clouds above the haze."

"Can we get back to making fun of your spider jizz glow?" The lift dinged, and Taya tapped the gate with her foot before it opened.

Sighing, Quinn ran hands through graying brown hair. "Did you make sure and read over the casefile I forwarded ya?"

"Yeah, of course." She'd read every casefile during her apprenticeship. "Total creep, we're going in hard."

"And you're taking the lead. Let's get ya one step closer to the full badge, yeah?" Quinn shouldered past her into the microcity within Floor One Hundred and One.

The lift opened onto a busy street, narrow by old city standards but quite wide for most market districts within any microcity. The pavement was clean and the ceiling tall, speaking volumes of the floor's wealth. The shops offered everything from rapid 3D printing services to the latest in-home floating displays. Less prevalent were the sex, drugs, and cheap escapes of the lower levels. Taya and Quinn were high enough in the structure that the dull screens common down below had been replaced with a mostly vibrant neon palette. Vendors, normally eager to nab an extra customer, weren't even hollering at passersby. Instead, they were relaxing within their stores. This high up, money flowed aplenty.

How the upper-middle makes us all envious.

Still, the ceiling's illumination was kept dim throughout the districts here. Their lift would have to take them far higher, almost to the full extent of the publicly available levels, before more natural sunlight was provided for the residents. Each face drifting past reflected the neon around them. Pinks, greens, blues, and reds were the most common, encouraging the fashion trends meant to utilize the harsh lights with highlights of reflective material. A free, lighter version of injected glow had been rapidly rising in popularity. Taya's physician had informed her that human skin was changing due to life within the megastructures. Underexposed to the sun, faces were cleaner in appearance while a sickly lack of color—at least compared to the past—was the norm. She'd stopped paying attention to the rambling when the doctor had begun linking the absence of what he called 'solar damage,' or something like that, to the recent infatuation with adding neon designs to skin, or, as it was better known, glow.

They passed under a neon sign bearing the Crusaders' golden crucifix logo, which cast a yellowing tinge over Quinn.

She found herself wondering if Quinn's near-white skin would be considered freakish back when the world was alive. He was paler than most of the biters common on the lower floors of the megastructure. Contradicting previous popular belief, becoming a vampire didn't actually make anyone paler; instead, it altered the texture of skin, which resulted in a diminished coloration—due to some blood-related issue, Taya assumed—and the myth of flawless beauty. Turns out the undead actually possessed pretty perfect skin.

Taya and Quinn had to walk several blocks before reaching their target's apartment complex. The residential building acted as both a support for the floor above and a living space, a setup that had become quite popular decades prior. An ostentatious entryway displayed the mandatory signage for such a building, warning any and all who entered that damage to such a vital structure would result in prison time. The interior had been renovated recently enough to have an ad-line that ran through the middle of the foyer. In these higher levels, allowing ads within their complex meant lower prices for renters. A relatively recent trend, as far as Taya knew, and a bothersome one.

Who the hell wants neighbors voting on their living space?

Taya's own apartment many levels down was in a lower, printed stackpile-style structure. Each home in the pile exiting directly onto the street, eliminating communal worries almost altogether.

"Ya remember the number?" Quinn asked.

"Eight-fourteen," Taya answered, her voice sounding too-loud in her ears as her system adjusted.

Taya paid a market fee within her hud to block ad audio being broadcast to her system. The screens littering the steel building blipped into silence, filtered out by her temporary premium purchase. Quinn's breathing became annoyingly noticeable, dragging in and out of the man's wide nose. His pulls of air were undercut by the dense, low hum of the structure droning all around them. A slight vibration of the immense power pulsing through all floors within all megastructure. She found the noise deeply relaxing yet rarely had the pleasure of listening to it. Taya's standard ad filter had been downgraded repeatedly over the years, and the sound of the world around her was usually polluted with a soft jingle or pitch.

"That's the complex number, Taya," Quinn said.

"It's the apartment too, Quinn. So did you read or skim-read that casefile before forwarding it?"

Quinn gave her a shrug and a grin. "For jobs like this? Little of column a, a *lotta* more of column b. B'sides, why wouldn't I let my apprentice do the reading?"

"Down here." Taya pointed them down a hall past a display reading [800/850].

They reached a door matching the rest in view, aside from the dully shimmering [814]. Quinn pressed the buzzer. "No licensed wear and one registered pistol. No make listed. Should be easy. I'll keep the neighbors out if ya can handle 'im."

"Read that on the walk down the hall?" Taya cranked her wear, shaking her shoulders before rolling her wrists, adrenaline finally dulling the pain of her often-present headache.

"You ready to take the lead, Shorty?" Quinn asked.

"Long time comin'," she responded. "And fuck you. I'm only two inches below average."

The latch clicked within the metal frame. A balding man named Gerald Twint pulled the door open. He offered them a faint smile, "May I help y—"

Taya's fist collided with the man's solar plexus. Gerald let out a winded cry as he fell back into his home.

“Hello. I’m Enforcer Taya Mint, and you fucked up, Gerry.” Taya crossed the threshold as Quinn closed the door behind her, leaving the two in privacy.

“Guh—” The man raised his hands, weakly gesturing in surrender. “Wh—”

Taya’s wear-powered kick sent the pervert back into the kitchen. Gerald clutched broken ribs. “Let’s practice listening, okay?”

She watched as the pathetic predator tried to crawl to cover behind a kitchen island made of metal with dark, marble highlights.

“I was hired by some concerned parents, Gerry.” Walking over, Taya stomped on the back of the man’s knee, resulting in a full-throated scream from the pedophile. “They paid me good money to come pay you a visit. Do you happen to know why, Ger-bear?”

“Stop!” Gerald screamed “Something’s brok—”

Taya dropped her own knee onto the man’s hip, pinning him, resulting in another cry of pain from the man. “They were *so* worried, Gerry. Now, why would they be worried?”

“Ah! God! I don’t know! Please!” The man writhed as he begged. “I just take stock footage!”

“See, how did you know it was about the footage, Gerald?” Taya grabbed the man by the back of the neck, lifting his torso off the tile before slamming him back down. “You were filming children on the playground, **WEREN’T YOU?**” Her voice was amplified by her system with the final words.

“No!” he bleated. “I was paid by the school. I was just tak—”

“Really?” Taya sent her police-grade A.I.—illegally gifted to her by Quinn—to obliterate the man’s security. Within a second, she had his internal drive cloned and sent off to her mentor. “While my partner reviews your *life*, do you wanna watch a touch of cinema? You’re the lead. I mean, *I* had to watch it before coming here, so it seems fair.”

Gerald’s eyes popped open, desperate to look at anything other than the video forced into his vision. He couldn’t avoid it, though. Taya had full control of his internal system now. The footage would be visible wherever he looked as long as she had his hud.

Unfortunately, overriding Gerald’s hud with her own forced Taya to watch too. A semi-transparent screen consumed her vision, displaying a three-dimensional Gerald as he was followed by unnoticed security drones.

The drones followed their mark all the way to the head of an alley across from District Three of Floor One Hundred and One’s primary school. Well-dressed children played in a square

coated in re-created sunlight. Swings were pushed, and children giggled with glee. The drone's vision encircled Gerald as the man deployed a pin-sized drone of his own. The unseen security drones seized its feed the moment it activated, adding its view to their own recordings. Gerald pushed the white cylinder, causing it to glide silently toward the playground. Unnoticed, the tiny device, enslaved to the security drones but still obeying Gerald's system, began circling the children at low angles.

"NNnnnO!" Gerald thrashed, making noises like a wounded animal. Taya began to wonder if he might be having some kind of seizure. He managed to get onto his side. "Stop! Don't show me that!"

Taya maxed the wear along her chest, back, and spine. Muscles corded with the implants contracted powerfully as her violet flared, and light coated the man beneath her.

The Gerald within the video moved one hand to his belt. Observing drones shifted to reveal—

"STOP!" Gerald's scream tore at the room, spittle flying from his mouth. "STOP NOW! I DIDN'T! IT'S FAKE! STOP!"

"I don't believe you." Taya said the words softly, reaching for her Taser.

Gerald spat thick saliva directly into her eye. Without thinking, Taya brought both hands up to wipe away the slimy spit. A fat hand slammed into her chin, sending her sprawling. The physical pain was dulled almost instantly by her system, but a pang of embarrassment shot through her.

Gerald desperately clawed to his hands and knees, trying for a kitchen drawer.

Stupid bastard.

Wear vibrating, she launched herself, knee raised.

Gerald whirled, pistol in hand.

Crack.

Something impacted Taya's chest. Air fled from her.

Momentum carried her forward, and she crashed into Gerald as Quinn threw the door open.

Taya slapped Gerald's pistol from his sweaty hand. He clumsily groped at her face, trying to stop her attack, but her fist cracked his jaw. Gerald's arms went limp as his head lulled in a daze. She followed up with a series of powered hooks that sent blood spraying across the white

cabinets. The fight left Gerald, fear and pain seizing his limbs. Taya grabbed him by the collar and lifted the man off the ground, earning a guttural squeak.

“Oh, you’re going to regret that.”

Taya noted the dishes on the counter. It seemed Gerald had been washing them manually in a full sink. She rammed the man down onto the printMarble with every ounce of force her wear provided. Sliding him along the counter, Taya forced the man’s head into the soapy, brown water. He fought her once again, blindly groping for any form of leverage, clawing at her jacket and face. His fingers found purchase on her arm, nails dragging across her, but Taya pulled the man from the water and began slamming him into the counter. “Fucking! Prick!”

“Enough!” Quinn’s arm looped her own, ripping Taya away. “We were paid for a warning. We delivered.”

Gerald came up retching; a recent meal mixed with dirty dishwater splashed to the floor. Taya shook the wetness from her jacket and hands.

“If I—you shit—if you go near a school again, I’ll rip your *fucking* heart out.” Taya’s voice shook with desire, a desire to put her hands back on the man. To punish him further. She landed one last kick, cracking Gerald’s head into a cabinet.

Quinn shoved her back, stepping between her and the beaten husk on the floor.

Taya moved for the door back into the hall, shoving a collection of printed priestess statues off a decorative shelf in the process. The sound of them shattering undercut her. “Creepy fuck shot me!”

“You hear that?” Quinn knelt down beside Gerald, pistol in hand. His accent was hidden by a tone blacker than death. “They won’t have to pay us next time, my friend. I’m going to make sure your neighbors find out why we came here today. No one will be here to help you. Show me you understand. Give a li’l nod for me.”

The sound of Gerald whimpering followed Taya into the hall.

“Wait to call that med drone till after we leave, yeah? I’m Officer Tuhplet. And you already met my partner here. I’m going to have you sign some papers.” Quinn’s instructions were cut off as Taya entered the hall, slamming the door behind her. A neighbor down the hall watched her with bulging eyes. Taya took two steps toward the nosy fuck and screamed. He backed into his apartment and slammed the door shut, the heavy metal lock clicking into place.

She bent down, placing her hands on her knees as ragged breaths rattled her ribs.

Quinn would be out soon after promising to break *this* or shatter *that* if they had to come back. Either it would work or Quinn would have to pass on the inevitable follow-up contract to someone willing to take it. He never asked Taya to execute a kill contract, and, as far as she knew, Quinn had never taken one.

The image of Gerald's terrified face made her open her eyes.

What I did was fine. That was fine. It's okay. I did what I was supposed to. That was fine. I am fine.

It felt like her heart was shaking in her chest. Anxiety violently twisted her stomach. A constant tingling, numbing sensation from her system made Taya look down.

Pain blossomed in her chest before she could get her system to mute it.

Clawing at a crack in her armored skin, Taya dug around until she pulled a bullet free, allowing a thin stream of blood to trickle from the wound. *Fuck.*

Her system had done its job perfectly, replacing pain with a sensation similar to a limb falling asleep, but her armor had failed.

Taya had paid handsomely for better woven netting just a couple of weeks prior. While it had blended in brilliantly with her existing skin, the promise of it holding off anything but a high-caliber round had clearly been bull. Gerald's pistol hadn't looked like something she'd see every day, but it certainly wasn't a high-caliber. She would be sore for days as her body reintegrated with the net and her skin regrew into the sealant already beginning to accumulate.

Stubbs, you're giving me a refund.

She got her breathing under control.

"You okay?" Quinn joined her in the hall, examining her bleeding chest. "Just a crack. Bullet didn't get through the netting, though. This pistol is *old school*." Quinn waved the confiscated weapon in the air before her. "He popped you with gunpowder. I'll charge 'im tomorrow at the station."

Taya coughed painfully. "Go cuff him now!"

"No can do." Quinn pocketed the gun. "Not allowed to make arrests while acting as an enforcer."

"He fucking shot me!" The adrenaline flooding through Taya made her want to vomit. Standing up helped a little with the nausea, forcing her stomach to unclench.

"Taya, they're—"

She cut him off with a long retch, her morning meal staining a neighbor's welcome mat.

Quinn rubbed her back gingerly. "It's okay. This isn't an easy job. But I gave ya that system for a reason, yeah? Put myself at risk getting you that police-grade A.I. Gerald tried to get a recording going. I had to shut it down while ya were slappin' 'im up. If you're going to strike physically, follow it up digitally."

"I'm sorry," Taya panted. "I thought when I—never mind. I'll do better. Any other notes?"

"I know you weren't gonna kill 'im, but I can get shit from my end if you escalate to a kill contract, a'ight?"

Wiping her lips, Taya weighed whether or not she would have stopped before executing the man. Straightening, she met her partner's blue gaze. "I kn—I understand."

"It's all right, we all lose our cool. You also identified yourself, but not me. Laws are clear on that one." Quinn's hand squeezed her shoulder. "Aside from that, you did exactly as I showed you. And none of that's a biggie. Even a *child* with a gun is a threat. You were in control and took the safety measure of immediate action. But sometimes, shit still goes wrong. Even on the easiest jobs and even for the very best."

"Buttering me up?" Taya rubbed the sealant forming around her wound; the yellowish goo was already hardening, like a reinforced scab. "Let me guess, another watchdog job you don't want to bother with, yeah? Quinn, Tier-One solo shit isn't worth my time anymore. You just had me lead a Tier Two, and you're sending me off to a One *again*?"

"Taya, this is T-Three. Solo investigation from a client you already know." Quinn wrapped an arm around her shoulder, guiding Taya away from Gerald's apartment. "Leading today means you get to check off those last requirements all in one go. Means ya clear for T-Three, my girl. Tomorrow, you're taking on a fully sanctioned investigation, *solo*. Cops already got called, so I can't legally do nothin' even if I wanted to. After getting a solo Three, I'd basically be breaking the rules not to submit you for a license."

"*God*, I love conflicts of interest." A bubble of excitement began to overwhelm her anxiety. It was tradition for an apprentice to graduate after they completed a solo Tier Two. While she'd done that, Quinn had expressed reservations for admittedly good reason. Taya had known Quinn would have to let her go soon, but *tomorrow*? "What's the job?"

"Remember ol' Mrs. Carlson?" Quinn summoned the elevator.

"Of course."

“I’ll pop ya the brief tonight. I’ve messaged my sergeant, and he’s sending an officer to take care of the rest of this shit here. You go rest. I’ll make sure Gerry doesn’t run.”

“You kidding? I’m going to the aid station.” She flicked the sealant hardening on her chest, hoping her face didn’t betray the butterflies in her stomach.

The elevator arrived, resulting in a resounding *ding*, and Quinn gave her a big grin as she entered the lift. “It’s got a last test, though.”

Taya reached out an arm and stopped the doors from closing. “Being?”

“Carlson doesn’t know you’re comin’. You gotta learn to sell your services, Taya. Investigation on the police end is always slow.”

“Quinn, no. C’mon, don’t make me pitch.”

“It’ll be easy. She likes you.” He forced her arm from the elevator, saying as the doors closed, “You can promise faster results.”

Chapter 2: Can You Afford It?

“NEED CASH NOW? THE ANSWER COULD BE *INSIDE* YOU.”

The voice caused Taya to start in bed. The lingering pain from the day before zinged through her torso, eliciting a pained grunt.

The ad drone at her window buzzed in excitement at seeing her wake, then continued, **“UNFORTUNATELY, RENT COSTS ARE ON THE RISE YET AGAIN. YOUR PROFILE INDICATES YOU HAVEN’T—”**

“Go away.” She threw a pillow at the open window. It didn’t lead into the outside world, of course. Instead, it opened out onto one of the sprawling districts of the floor she lived on, Ninety-Four.

“ARE YOU SURE? MARROW IS IN SHORT SUPPLY! PAY IS—”

“I said leave!” The yell resulted in a throb of pain within her chest. She finally heard the jingle that had been playing in her ears as she slept, souring her already bitter mood.

“I MUST REMIND YOU THAT AN OPEN WINDOW OUT ONTO THE FLOOR IS UNDERSTOOD TO BE PERMISSION FOR OPPORTUNITY DRONES SUCH AS M—”

Grabbing her skull-emblazoned pistol, Taya lazily rolled over and aimed at the bulbus machine currently shoving a speaker into her apartment. The moment her barrel leveled with the drone, it zipped away, alarm buzzing. The drone would report the transgression immediately to the local police department, where it would be filed away to be handled later. Luckily for Taya, during the day, Quinn was indeed a cop, and he was happy to take care of such incidents free of charge as long as she was his apprentice. Though, now that she thought about it, Taya wasn’t sure Quinn would keep it up after she took off on her own. He had helped her get started in the industry and was fiercely protective, but maybe that was only because of her position under him. While getting jobs seemed very doable without Quinn, having to obey laws or risk endless fines would curb her actions.

In the face of the police and military’s ongoing war to maintain order and the resulting record amounts of violence, Structure Seven Zero Three was beginning to rely heavily on those in her profession. Once Quinn concluded her apprenticeship and Taya managed to get a few clients willing to recommend her services, she imagined the financial strain of the last year would become much more manageable. With a smile she breathed a sigh of anticipation and relief.

Getting up, Taya walked across her studio apartment and closed the window, begrudging whatever movie studio had paid to advertise their upcoming horror movie into her demographic's dreams. She leaned against the cool glass, watching as life bustled within the district she called home, wishing she could afford a better default ad filter. It was a fine floor to live on. High enough that a majority of the buildings were real metal instead of the dull, reinforced printcrete. Far from the best, but safe and reliable. The trains arrived on time, and the neighbors minded themselves. Most of the ads weren't even *that* intrusive or stimulation-oriented. Instead, her floor's branding focused far more on commercial tech in nearly all of its districts. The result was a consistently crisp and cool light filtering through her window—the preferred tones of tech marketing.

For someone situated near the middle of this floor, Taya had what she considered to be a damn decent view. From her apartment, the train wasn't too loud, and the surrounding buildings weren't too brightly lit. If she craned her neck, she could even see the megastructure's polished steel reflecting light back at the district. Two blocks over was a support-designated building, close enough to be considered good luck. Floor-to-ceiling the structures were built for strength and were a much more pleasant sight than many of the others. Still, she envied those who could afford to live on the megastructure's edge. This high up, those who had windows close to the edge could see past the haze on good days, to the *real* sunlight beyond.

Shower.

The thought came as the glass stopped cooling her body.

A cool, blessed shower.

After grabbing a pack of sour gummies, Taya stripped off her tank top and shorts, waded on her corner shower, and stepped behind its tempered glass. A few strands of white hair streaked the metal walls and drain. Blood stained the corner where she had sat the night before. Taya scrubbed it away with her foot before taking several long gulps of the water. It tasted of purifying chemicals, and, while Taya would never admit it, she liked the taste, sweet with a tinge of citrus. She'd once expressed this opinion to her closest friend, Juno, who had gagged in response. Bad luck for her, in Taya's mind. She just drank tap, avoiding the expense of the 'spring purified' water so many clamored for.

Examining herself, Taya poked at the white cracks sealing the wound in her chest. The netting was supposed to limit small-caliber rounds to just surface wounds. It was some of the

best available within her price range that didn't sacrifice her skin's natural texture. At least the netting had done its job after the impact and released its sealant.

Wiping away condensation from the mirror above her sink, Taya examined her face. The bruises were already fading away, little patches of blue and purple that interrupted the high cheekbones and medium-dark complexion. A bloody slit cut through the low brow. Another bruise sat at the near tip of her squared chin, her most prominent remaining resemblance to her father. Just days prior, she had his brown eyes too, but a recent trip to a highly respected glow artist had provided Taya with her now violet gaze. The color felt right to her, another step away from what had been.

Smearing off more condensation, Taya checked the damage to her body. The crack in her chest was already closing, sealant seeping from the web woven invisibly into her skin. Bruises littered her arms and chest, but nothing severe—aside from the sealed bullet hole. She sighed at the sight of the purpling. Physically, she was stronger than ever due to the wear she'd put in, but late nights out and long hours on cases had prevented her from hitting the gym as frequently as she used to. Still, she was in better shape than most, and the new stress lines on her face went with the bags under her eyes.

“Console.” The display next to her front door lit up. The square screen was all but invisible when turned off. “Order A.P.R. Highest strength.”

The screen flashed green before displaying a countdown starting at twenty-seven minutes.

Her account balance flashed behind her eyes, displaying [\$34,787] before rapidly flashing down to [\$34,677].

Why haven't I been paid?

She stepped out of the shower and began to towel off, swallowing her last gummy before beginning to brush her teeth.

Opening the contacts in her hud, Taya rang Quinn.

A female A.I. interrupted on the first ring, invading her vision. “Quinn is asleep and on his day off. Would—”

She hung up, her vision returning to her standard hud screen.

Taya went about preparing herself for the day. Throwing her bloodied clothes into a wash, Taya pulled on cargo pants and a blue top before deciding to just clean her bloodied white jacket—her favorite—with some cleansing wipes. It didn't *really* need dry cleaning. Breakfast

consisted of an energy shake and reheated chicken. The meat was real—a treat, but one she bought too often. The news blaring in the background spoke of the latest high-level construction accidents, flooding in some of the underground levels, and the latest trends in the glow market. Apparently, a hologram model was now the most followed influencer on blah blah blah...

The front door chimed as she finished tying her boots.

“Show me,” Taya commanded.

The front door screen displayed the feed from her doorbell. Juno smiled up at the camera with sparkling brown eyes, proffering two cups of coffee. “Morning, morning, morning! Figured you might need this after your gig yesterday.” She gestured with the cups.

“Open.” The light around Taya’s door switched from a dull yellow to a bright green.

Juno bounced into Taya’s home, radiating waves of positivity like only she could. Her curled hair bobbed frantically from side to side. “Morning, morning, morning!”

“It is indeed.” Taya leaned back in her chair, weaving her hair away from her face into a loose braid.

“How does helping me study for an exam sound?” Juno’s excited stride carried her across the apartment. The woman bore her ever-present grin, the kind that tugged upward at one corner and caused her to speak from the right side of her mouth. “Tomorrow, I was thinking we could head up to Ninety-Nine. This one district re-created Bourbon Street from pre-haze New Orleans. All week there’s gonna be masks and Cajun food. Oh! And maybe tomorrow—”

“Can’t. Got a gig.” Taya took one of the coffee cups from its printed plastic carrier, smiling in return. “Quinn put me on it solo. And I just don’t think my head will allow me a night out tonight.”

“Well...” Juno considered. “Can I come? Stakeouts are long, quiet, and boring. Perfect for studying.”

“Jun, I love ya, and by god it’s more fun for me to have you along, but unless that degree turns into something with a badge, we should avoid getting you shot at.” Taya took a sip and froze. “Holy shit, that’s good. It tastes *real*.”

“It is.” Juno flared her flowery pink glow in delight. Neon petals caressed her face and neck, complementing her umber skin well. “I know. I’m great!”

“How?”

“*How?*”

“Oh, c’mon. How? This is real coffee.” Taya gestured. “Like grown-in-shit-soaked-dirt *real*.”

“Appetizing.” The smirk Juno adopted let Taya know she wouldn’t hand over the secret. “I know a *girl* who knows a *guy*.”

The sound of a small package drone’s arrival outside made Taya get up and open the window again.

“RIGHT NOW WE HAVE A LIMITED TIME OFFER F—”

Taya grabbed the package and slammed the window shut.

“The fascinating and scandalous life of a college student.” Taya opened the container, removed the plastic packaging, and twisted open the bottle of painkillers she’d ordered. They were stronger than what she’d had on hand. “But I really have a meeting with a client. Remember Mrs. Carlson from the protection thing?”

“My god, you got a repeat customer?” Juno blurted. “Have we checked the temperature of hell? Did the haze suddenly float back off into space?”

Taya patiently watched her friend. “Ya done?”

“Yeah, I remember,” Juno relented. “How could I forget the cinnamon buns? Sublime.”

“Seems Mrs. Carlson thought I was a downright charming enforcer.” Taya put a few pills in her mouth and began walking to the door, snatching up her coffee and the faux-leather, white jacket. She took a swig before continuing. “Gave me a good review and everything.”

Juno stood as well and followed her out, waiting patiently as Taya sent a signal to her home to lock the door and arm the security system. As they stepped out onto the street, Juno kicked at a pebble of concrete, sending the gray printStone skittering off Taya’s sidewalk and into the road. A large-scale shipment drone resting at her neighbor’s door blew it, almost immediately, into the gutter. The gust of wind vanished as soon as the drone dropped its load and peeled upward toward the ceiling. Juno waited for the buzzing sound to disappear before replying. “So, you’re watching for her ex-hubby again? The guy has to be as ancient as she is. Is he really a threat?”

“Nope, missing persons. I’ve still gotta read the file, but Quinn grabbed it for me. Probably an easy job if he wants me on it. I doubt Carlson’ll have me taking on the Crusaders.” Taya eagerly swallowed more coffee, knowing she would regret drinking it so fast. “Turns out her ex wasn’t even really after her last time. Just dead.”

“What? Wait, so you’re hoping a paranoid old woman will hire you for another job you’re not actually needed for?” The judgment in Juno’s voice wasn’t light. “And Quinn gave this to you?”

Taya forced her tone to stay mild. “I gotta pay bills, and if I don’t take it, then someone else will. Not all of us have a secret coffee-shooting dick to help out, Jun.”

Juno choked on her sip. “Good hell. It isn’t like that.”

“Be more interesting if it was.”

“No.” Juno’s head tilted. “And your approach to the morality of enforcer work is truly nuanced. Very impressive.”

Walking to the rail line took only a few moments, a luxury offered by her condo that Taya took great pleasure in. It was always a pleasant walk for her, even as Juno rambled about the goings-on in her impossible-to-keep-track-of family.

As they stepped onto a railcar, Juno finished with, “But she still doesn’t want me to make the switch.”

“You’re half a lawyer already, Jun.” The rail payment system scanned both of them, and [\$34,677] became [\$34,627]. Taya pushed her money worries from her mind. “Why toss all that work?”

“Cause my career hasn’t even started, and I’m already exhausted,” Juno answered. “You agree with my mom?”

“Who the fuck wants to be a mortician?” Taya asked.

“It seems like I’d be doing a lot of good.” There was a beat as Juno considered. “I’d be a part of a long tradition of helping people grieve and deal with death.”

“From wanting to be a prosecutor to embalming dead bodies. Give it a month or two. Could just be cold feet.”

“I will.” Juno looked at one of her many nature-inspired tattoos before looking back to Taya. “Life seems slightly less bunk for the both of us recently.”

“Thanks.” Taya lifted her cup. “I strive for ‘slightly less *bunk*.’”

“As do we all.” Juno lifted her own. “You seem to be settling into the enforcer life.”

“And?”

“I just didn’t think it would be a life to settle into for you. A pit stop for cash, then on to *other* things,” Juno explained. “A lot of that wear will be terribly expensive to pull out.”

“Why would I pull it out?” Taya asked. “Even if I don’t get my solo license, they can’t legally remove it. I’ll be super till my last pump.”

“Yeah, I guess. You still happy Quinn got you into all this?”

Taya leaned forward, pushing hairs already escaping from her loose braid back behind her ear. “You’re about to try to tempt me with another high tower security gig from your dad, aren’t you?”

“No, Taya, I’m not,” Juno rebuked. “*You*’re the one who told *me* the plan. You know, a firm could even hire you out of this before you officially get the license. Happens all the time.”

“Mhm, who told you that?”

Juno’s eyes glazed as she sent a message before returning to Taya. “You know, if you went back to university, lotta opportunities for someone with a little combat experience *and* a degree.”

“No.”

“C’mon, Taya. You gotta give me something here.” Juno refrained from addressing just what exactly had pushed Taya out of grad school. They’d had that conversation before.

“Here’s how I think of it.” Taya inhaled. “*Licensed* enforcers get scouted for *high-paying* military contracts. In another year, I’ll have the reputation and wear to negotiate for a nice offer. Then it’s just getting paid to hold a gun in a hazmat suit out in the haze or watching some politician go about their day-to-day. I’ll make more than you pumping the dead full of preservatives.”

Juno eyed her with suspicion. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

I’d rather blow my brains out than join some boot crew.

“All right,” Juno relented. “I know you can deal with this all now, but, what you’re doing, it still takes a toll. The body remembers.”

“What?”

“Look how tense you’ve become—the fidgeting.” Juno looked pointedly at Taya’s tapping foot. “You’re only still after you go to the gym.”

“I just haven’t smoked today.”

“That’s not a good answer.” Juno turned to glance out the window of the city train. “My stop. Guess I gotta go study alone, then? You sure you don’t want to pass this one up and take me to your escape? It’s the best study spot ever programmed.”

“Gotta take the train to a lift so I can go up to Carlson’s floor.” Taya paused and threw a wicked grin. “Hold on, is coffee person really not important? Does Jun got a potential boo?”

The train came to a slow stop.

“Ew,” Juno scoffed. “It’s a guy and no. Don’t put that image in my head.”

The doors pinged open.

“Who is it?” Taya followed Juno as she headed for the door. “Quinn better not have a lead I don’t.”

“Why would I tell him before you? I’m going to bug you about all this more later. Don’t think I didn’t notice the sealant. I’ll be calling Quinn.”

Watching her friend disappear into the crowd, Taya shouted over the milling heads, “Is coffee guy the reason you’re suddenly into dead bodies?”

The only response she got was a raised middle finger poking out above the mass of people.

Please be that and not because you... enjoyed helping me grieve. Jesus.

Sucking down the last few drops of coffee, Taya tossed the cup through the closing train door, sat, and pulled out her notebook.

As she doodled, a voice from a nearby display caught her ear. The sickly smooth tones belonged to Martel Mancini, a public figure within the biter community praised by millions as a ‘humanitarian,’ a label sensible people found painfully ironic. The first and *only* vampire to host a show broadcasted on the inter-structure network, his program had become wildly contentious, meaning *The Discussion* was always on the trending feeds.

Within the screen, the dark-haired vampire sat at a table across from a popular holomodel Taya had seen in several ads recently. The tension between the two was obvious from their body language alone. Studio lighting made the holomodel a bit more translucent under its projections, her blue lipstick coming into a teardrop shape underneath ample lips. Across the table, the creature’s pale complexion contrasted rather handsomely against the warm lighting.

Curiosity took hold, and Taya tuned her audio to pick up the broadcast.

“—trying to blame one for the crimes of the many?” Martel leaned forward, his expensive suit perfectly formed to a remarkably muscled body. “Should we talk about the sins of the living? Do we really need to try to compare historical body counts?”

The holomodel scoffed, leaning back in a pink pantsuit proudly displaying sponsor badges woven into its fabric, her straight, blue hair falling gracefully past her shoulders. “You’re a literal

corpse driven by a parasite—or virus. Whatever you’re calling it now. Just because *some* of your kind have become pacified doesn’t mean humanity is required to welcome you with open arms.”

Taya had heard nearly the exact same line spoken by another model sponsored by several of the same brands. The lobby groups behind the model were pushing the argument hard.

“I’m not asking you to personally trust anyone.” Martel’s tone remained slow and deliberate, in stark contrast to the holomodel’s programmed vibrant tones. “I’m asking for laws that acknowledge every vampire is only responsible for their own actions. *We* are asking to maintain our basic right to privacy.”

“So you want to influence the laws of the living? Why? What gives you the right?” The holomodel was developing talking points through a combination of algorithms digging through millions of comments left by her followers and an unknown collection of directors to add in a personal touch. Combined with the programming behind the model’s physical appearance, the end result was an incredibly human effect.

“Your own elected officials,” Martel answered. “Every single one of my kind is already under enhanced levels of scrutiny. Thankfully—”

“And you think that’s unfair?”

“—Thankfully,” Martel continued, “we’ve seen more and more people within our nation’s structures agree that all people deserve the same principal protections established in the very founding of the nation.”

“*People?* Hell.” Blue smiled at the camera before continuing. “You’re an advocate for the rebirth hypothesis, no? That when one of your kind is... made—birthed—it should be registered as a new citizen. Yet you want to be treated as if you’re the same person you were the day before. Do you not see the contradiction? So tell me, are you even the same consciousness that you were before being... infected? How are we not all talking about that?”

“Ms. Blue, I would be happy to answer questions about the state of undead consciousness right after you can explain to me the basics of how consciousness works in the first place.”

The holomodel laughed while it processed live responses posted about the interview. “Martel, I think, therefore I am. Consciousness is as simple as that.”

“Right. While I allow our viewers a moment to process that insight, let me ask you this.” Martel used his systems to bring reports into the broadcast. Taya received an alert asking if she would like them downloaded to her drive. She ignored it. “Crimes from the Returned have

plummeted since packblood became available. We are a class working to get clean. Yet right now at this crucial moment, our right to encryption is under threat. Why ignore positive trends in favor of fearful laws steeped in half-truths?”

“Because you’re *forced* to get clean.” The holomodel beamed in a soft, pink glow, similar in hue to Juno’s petals. “*Active Feeders* are nothing more than serial killers. We as people *know* each of you is afflicted by the exact same compulsion even if you happen to be clean feeding at the moment. You’re equating resisting these urges to those very urges *not existing*. Law enforcement needs greater access to the dead’s communications to keep us safe. You should be in favor of this. It’s not like your text will be made public. Only law enforcement will be looking over your shoulder.”

“Let’s say the law passes, and every vampire within this structure faces being sent down for simply being in possession of encrypted data. That means all of us would be entirely reliant on the known-to-be-weak security systems available to us within our lenses—not even able to use the higher-end built-in systems available to the living. What then stops extremist groups like the Crusaders from monitoring every single move a vampire within this structure makes?”

The holomodel’s name finally came on the screen. Ari Blue responded with a twisted grin cracking through her sculpted cheeks. “I assure you, Mr. Mancini, I understand your *concerns*, but my *convictions* are representative of the people who support *me*—the living. People who are afraid for their lives and their children’s lives.”

“Ms. Blue,” Martel’s voice grew cold, dropping the professional tone of a talk show host, “I don’t appreciate the implication.”

Ari leaned forward, tapping glow-filled nails on the table between the two. “Did you respect the humans you consumed, Mr. Mancini? Do you really think your struggle for ‘equality’ is the same as the living have fought?”

“Absolutely not. Only a fool would. This is not a struggle based on class, race, or sexual orientation. This is in no way an inter-human struggle.” The vampire leaned back, inhaling deeply as he bit his lower lip. Fangs glinted in the studio lights. “But I’ve spent nearly a century now working to undo the harm done by my hands. Do you not believe redemption is possible?”

“*Justice*, as it should be, is up to the victims. I represent simply the opinions of the majority.”

“Majority of *your* followers, Ms. Blue.”

The hologram turned to the camera, pouting green eyes opening wide. “Money is the voice of the people. I’m proud to say we’ve raised enough money to help rebuild Structure One Nine’s partial collapse and pay for the recovery of several bitten children who—thank God—didn’t turn.” Ari’s projection added a floating display next to her head, showing children not old enough to have graduated from high school. “The dead are all aghast at the idea of consequences for their actions. They don’t want amplified scrutiny despite what we are watching happen right before our very eyes. It’s as simple as that.” She turned back to the vampiric host. “Militant undead make threats across the structures, and we’re not supposed to retaliate?”

“The actions of the extreme are not reflective of the many. What the Twenty-One Faces have been accused of are terrible crimes, but those are radicals.” Martel had regained control of the passion in his voice. “We are simply calling for each individual to be regarded for the choices they have made. Not—”

“Post-packblood,” the holomodel scoffed, readjusting in her seat as she glanced at the camera. “Everything before then, call it a wash, right?”

“Have you ever felt starvation?” Martel gave a cold stare before continuing. “Not hunger. Not just feeling weak from a lack of sustenance, but your body beginning to consume itself. Your stomach begins to contract. Pain, it amplifies it all. You can’t even feel hunger, so let me explain. There is no room for anything else. Rational thought dwindles as survival instincts become roaring fires in the mind. Before resorting to consuming humans, I’ve seen people resort to trying animal blood, engorging themselves on water, anything to try to cure the *need*. The creature resorting to killing for its next meal isn’t the same as a man murdering his neighbor over personal disputes.”

Ari matched the man’s flat tone. “Flirting with the supernatural rhetoric, I see. Your hunger is somehow so much worse than our own. Tell me, are there really demons in your heads, or is it more likely this virus simply makes you insane?”

Martel smirked. “Funny, in my life, I’ve never personally seen a vampire feed on a child. Yet the claims of—”

Ari interrupted. “Your life? Exactly how old are you Mr. Mancini? I believe photos have recently surfaced of you as early as 2025. So, at least three hundred years, no?”

“Old enough to have witnessed and come to understand many of humanity’s greatest mistakes.” Martel leaned forward, fangs glinting as he spoke. “But my son just turned three.”

“Congratulations,” Ari acknowledged. “Sorry to hear of your divorce.”

Martel nodded, unsure at what seemed like a sincere apology. “Like many of my kind, he was born after packblood became available. He’s never harmed a soul in his life—aside from when he told me he loved his mother more.”

A virtual studio audience laughed at the remark.

Martel continued. “Because of what we are, his mother and I can experience a hundred lifetimes loving him. Because of the sins I committed before he was born—before packblood existed—should he grow up without a father?”

“Was he even really born?” The hologram model flickered as she half rose from her seat. “Does he even have a pulse?”

“Well, I am certain you don’t.”

Taya changed the channel, picking up an ad from the latest company claiming to have a working replicator prototype—technology that would finally make printers obsolete, or so these ‘visionary companies’ claimed. Every few years, for as long as Taya could remember, investor-hungry entrepreneurs spouted the same campaign promises of solving whatever engineering problems had ruined previous attempts at creating the prototype.

Not this time, though! We super-duper promise we’re different and found a loophole of fucking physics.

Taya snorted at the thought, feeling much less interested in finding a feed to watch. It all felt endlessly repetitive to her. Public broadcasts were all vampire-obsessed, politics, sex, or tech.

With a grunt, she paid to mute all input to her hud. Her account balance updated, and the low hum of the train beneath her began providing a beautiful barrier to the ruckus of the other passengers. With a sigh, Taya cracked open her notebook again, doodling an idea for a leaf glow pattern for her ribs—something still easily coverable. Taya liked the rings on her back well enough but enjoyed having her eyes be the only glow most saw. She felt it left a special kind of impact.

Hundreds of generations of screens. Still, none feel as good as printPaper.

“Nita is a good girl.” Mrs. Carlson moved to refill Taya’s cup of tea, stopping to blink at the still-full cup. “She does her schoolwork, comes home on time, and rarely talks back.”

Though the elderly woman's voice shook, she never failed to enunciate her words, a trait of the well educated. It was the tonal opposite of Quinn's rolling city accent.

Taya closed her notebook, refocusing on her client. "And Nita is in what grade?"

"Second. Chattiest of her class." Carlson smiled fondly.

Taya reopened her notebook and resumed writing. "So, she is popular?"

"Never had many friends around, if that's what you mean. Just a talker. Storyteller.

Developed an imaginary friend, but the lady from the adoption agency said that was normal for girls Nita's age."

Taya took a moment to examine the photo of the child Mrs. Carlson had given her. Nita was wide-eyed, bearing a toothy grin. She had a lighter complexion than Mrs. Carlson, with full curls swinging well past her chin. From what Taya understood, Nita had endured a tough situation before being adopted by an elderly stranger, but her smile wouldn't suggest that.

"Ever catch her lying or keeping secrets?" Taya prodded. "Surprised to see anything out of place or things you didn't buy in her possession?"

"No, never," Carlson said too quickly. "Nita wouldn't put a foot out of line in that way."

But you didn't say toe.

"She just went between school and here? Mrs. Carlson, you're not giving me too much to work with. Keeping things from me makes this harder."

A twist of worry added to the countless wrinkles lining the woman, and Taya wished she could take the words back. Hunching even deeper into herself, Mrs. Carlson rested her head on her hand. A long breath spoke of elevated levels of stress.

Taya tried to recover. "Mrs. Carlson, I promise I will tear this city apart to find Nita. I won't stop until we have answers. But I need you to be honest with me here. Dig deep."

The older woman took a moment to calm herself before responding. "Nita... runs off sometimes. I try my best to keep an eye on her, to keep her entertained, but she should have her parents. I'm tired—sore—always. I nod off. She'd always come back, though. Always before the lights begin to dim."

"That's good," Taya encouraged. "Do you have any idea where she went? Whom she might've seen?"

The air between them felt still, the silence filled by the sound of a servant drone humming patiently in the corner of the old woman's two-story apartment. Carlson had wealth—more than

Taya ever would—but she was isolated from the world. Not the standard ‘everyone around me is dead ’cause I’m halfway to dust’ kind of lonely, but rather the kind that came from social resentment. Taya knew Carlson had tried to leave with thousands of other wealthy, successful STEM explorers—their hopeful, gleaming eyes looking to Mars for a new start. Giant domes had been built. An attempt at planting crops had been made. Schools had been built in an elaborate style fit for the times, all of which now appeared tacky and aged to Taya.

During the great crash of 2188, every off-planet investor had pulled their funds. Underprepared emergency evacuations resulted in destitute scientists, doctors, and engineers flooding an already barren job market. Salaries plunged, and the seeds of spite bloomed into choking weeds.

Mrs. Carlson had been lucky. She had enough left in her accounts to retire semi-comfortably even after a messy divorce. The old woman had found some form of happiness while many of those she had worked with to achieve a dream had died of either starvation or suicide on the distant planet. Others who had managed to get back were left with nothing and bore the additional burden of a general sense of resentment from the rest of the population.

God, please don't still be crying into your pillow.

She'd never forget watching over Mrs. Carlson at night, making sure the husband didn't show—a husband who, Taya had found out through a routine background check, had been dead for over a year. Even with Taya there, Mrs. Carlson would patrol the house, checking the locks again and again. A woman as well off as she was still couldn't shake the pain of what had been, a pain Taya understood.

No, don't think about him.

Letting out a shaky breath, Carlson finally answered. “No. I’m sorry, Taya. I should have worked harder to help her get some friends. I’ve just been tired. Nita called them her magical adventures. Embellished about how she was guided to the highest and lowest floors. God, maybe she really was going low. You must think me a terrible guardian. She’s not even my blood, but when the call for helping house orphans came, I thought with enough money I could—”

“I think you’re doing the best you can.” Taya reached across the small table between them and squeezed Carlson’s hand. “So, she’s been gone a week, and the police haven’t made any progress at all? You haven’t gotten a single update?”

“No. The detective I spoke to, she’s given me nothing. Tells me to be patient. Other cases have taken priority. But, Taya, I feel it. My sense is—” She faltered. “There is something wrong. She needs to be found *now*. Nita can’t wait for the police.”

“You don’t have to convince me. I know all about that feeling.” Taya scribbled in her notebook, careful not to come anywhere near a sketch of a drone she’d been distracted by on the way over. “I’m surprised the police haven’t just pinged Nita’s system remotely.”

“They did. It’s offline.” Mrs. Carlson stood with a slight wobble in her arms. A message from Carlson came through to Taya’s system. “That is the last location it registered.”

Goddammit.

Nita had last been seen inside a bar several floors below. Dánkoma was a massive building entirely devoted to pleasures of every kind. Brothels up top and dance floors down below. The bar nearly touched the ceiling and sparkled with the broad display boards that coated all four sides of the structure, advertising the sin within. It was a sin even Taya herself had enjoyed on repeat occasions. A couple weeks back, she’d held Quinn up as he puked his guts out in one of the high tunnels connecting Dánk to a hotel across the street. Quinn had been staying there while apparently moving apartments, not that Taya was ever invited over by the man. Quinn had laughed as they’d felt the train passing by Dánkoma directly underneath the tunnel. Her partner had drunkenly declared ‘*Science!*’ before passing out and forcing Jun and Taya to carry him to his room.

Taya had hoped this would be as simple as having Quinn utilize the powerful network accessible only to law enforcement, which could ping anyone anywhere anytime. “How’d she end up there?”

“I thought—I don’t know, I thought it had to be a mistake,” Mrs. Carlson confessed. “She can’t have gotten so far. I mean, floors away? Ridiculous. Lifts won’t let unattended children on. She’s never been below Floor Eighty at the lowest.”

“Understood.” Taya closed her notebook. “Before I go, anything else you’d like to tell me?”

“She loves to watch the drones fly.” Mrs. Carlson walked Taya to the door, the unsteadiness of age marking each step. “I thought that’s where she ran off to—to watch them fly by on some rooftop. She loved the fast and small ones.”

Pulling on one boot, Taya smiled at her client. “You make Nita take off her shoes too?”

“Of course I do.” That disapproving tone only people over seventy could manage seeped into Carlson’s voice. It always made Taya smile.

“Well, then.” Taya took in the apartment again. It screamed of the elderly. “Have you ever been down to the Fifty-Seventh, Mrs. Carlson?”

The woman’s eyes bulged. “That’s over thirty floors down!”

“It’s a fun time.” Taya pulled her jacket back over her shoulders. “I have friends on that floor. See ’em more often than you’d think. Not everyone down th—”

“Nita isn’t down there, Taya. She’s up, if anything. Girl dreamed of going to university. Was obsessed with wanting to get into astronomy. Didn’t understand that didn’t mean she’d become an astronaut. Wouldn’t be surprised if she’s lost on campus. I’d start at the college floor.” Mrs. Carlson leaned over and unlocked her front door with a firm finger against the display panel. Watching Taya pull on her other boot, Carlson let a sliver of curiosity slip through her tension. “Is it fun, visiting down below?”

“I’d say.” A memory tickled Taya. “Can’t have any real fun above Sixty.”

“That’s an exaggeration, Taya.” Mrs. Carlson took a beat. “Hell, who am I to judge? I’ve done my share of regrettable things.”

“I don’t believe that. I spent days with you, Mrs. Carlson, and you only left this house for a ‘morning constitutional.’”

“Please, I never called it a ‘constitutional.’” The older woman paused, giving Taya a once-over. “Young people never think the previous generation ever had their phases. Heck, I slept with the captain of our evacuation ship off Mars.”

“*Mrs. Carlson!*” Taya gave a wide grin, happy to see that worry hadn’t completely consumed the woman. “Knocked boots on your way off Dead Red? Zero-gravity hanky-panky?”

“All that time just drifting in the stars, floating away from our failure... We got stir-crazy, I guess.” The older woman’s face twisted, and her eyes clouded. “God, I miss them. Good people who were never allowed to escape the shadow of abandoned hope. The controversies we were all dragged into for daring to hope. Trying to explore the universe and we were punished for it. ‘Waste of resources,’ I mean, really?”

Taya felt the old scientist’s sudden pain but was unsure how to lift the woman’s spirits. “Incredible how quickly people in the right circumstances can become family.”

“Absolutely,” Carlson agreed. “All those memories. Just mine now.”

Taya softly smiled. “I’d be happy to hear more of ’em.”

Mrs. Carlson smiled back and shook her head. “Not the same, dear. You can never really share a memory. Once I go, those moments go.”

“I see.” Taya wasn’t sure she did.

Mrs. Carlson gave the first grin that reached her eyes since Taya had arrived. “Once I’m gone, so are all of them—forever. At least, how they truly were in that time—during that monumental effort we were stupid enough to—” Carlson eyed Taya’s outfit. “What I wouldn’t give to set off in my thirties again.”

“Don’t you mean *twenties*?” Taya pointed at her face. She was well aware of the bags under her eyes, but she was still three years off from thirty. She didn’t often value the voices of the elderly, some of whom had grown up while the megastructures were still being built. Haze scars mottled their throats, burns worn by those unfortunate enough to have breathed the early mists before the ventilation was completed. But Mrs. Carlson didn’t have any of those burns; she was a couple decades shy of that era. In her prime, it had been the perfect time to attempt to flee to Mars, when hope still made people dream of leaving the structures.

“I’m aware of your age, Taya, but that’s not what I want. Taya, your thirties are your peak, I promise.” The woman not-so-subtly pushed Taya out the door and onto the silver-and-neon street. “Now, please, make the money I’m giving you worth it. Fostering Nita, I—I do love her. I heard her story and, taking her in, it—Taya, I did the best I could to give her a home.”

Shit.

“...Mrs. Carlson.”

“Yes?”

Taya turned to look the woman in the eye through the still-open doorway. Carlson had basically hired Taya before she’d even walked through the door. “You’ll pay me when I find her. Not a moment before.”

Mrs. Carlson put trust in her words. “And that will help me sleep.”

The words stung. Taya wanted to hug the frail woman. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Carlson didn’t respond, offering only a smile before closing the door. Taya stood there for several moments, pondering the case that had been handed to her.

A ’ight, Nita. Ten years old and lost in a city of millions... It’s been a week since you were last seen... and a little old lady’s heart depends on it. Fuck.

Another voice, not her own, jostled to the forefront of her thoughts.

You'll see his face everywhere you look on campus. Are you ready for that? His ghost will haunt you even more there.

Her mind recoiled at the memory of her mother's voice mocking her.

Taking a deep breath, Taya began walking back toward the train station. She felt like her whole world had begun to revolve around lifts and trains. Before becoming an enforcer, she'd rarely been outside her birth floor, the entertainment districts on higher floors, and the university level. Now she buzzed about the megastructure every day like a bee.

Taya flicked open her account balance. [\$184,001].

She rang Quinn without thinking. An A.I. re-creation of him appeared in the lower-left corner of her vision. His avatar was wearing a Seven Zero Three S.P.D. uniform. Golden shield with a red stripe emblazoned on the right shoulder of the black military-style shirt.

“Sup, Squirt?”

Taya nearly gagged. “Nope. Absolutely not. Why would you even think calling me that is okay?”

Quinn sighed before mumbling, “Sfine. Good morning, Taya the super-spooky ghost. Ya happy with the bonus?”

She repressed a chuckle. “Yeah. Why so much?”

“Creepy fuck hung himself after we left. The P.T.A. gave us a fat tip. Paid nearly as much as a kill job.” Quinn flashed that broken-tooth grin surrounded by his five o'clock shadow. If his words hadn't already put a nauseous fist in her stomach, Taya would have been annoyed by how ugly-attractive the man could be at times. “Also, after your... conversation with 'im, I may have hinted that *that* recording was going to end up on some *very* public pages. Coward couldn't—”

“Stop.” Taya's stomach twisted.

Quinn's avatar snapped to a serious expression, his accent almost completely disappearing. “Taya, the guy was a creep. If he hadn't hurt kids yet, he would've.”

Quinn's willingness to limbo under the rules was often taken too far for her taste, but he would do anything to help kids. Quinn had nearly lost his enforcer license for refusing to return an abused child to her parents. He'd finally given in when his cop buddies had broken down his door. She'd caught him checking up on the little girl's well-being every few months ever since.

“Yeah.” She felt no remorse at the beating she had given the fucker, but the mental image of the pathetic man hanging still twisted her gut. “You just need to shut up sometimes.”

“Ya wanna grab a bite?” A branded McDonald’s cup appeared in Quinn’s hand—their conversation had become sponsored, the work of an A.I. scanning their words without context. Every virtual conversation *could* become sponsored without fear of a privacy breach. “Ya seem so amped when we’re on the job. It makes me think ya might be ready. Then you clam right up whenever I try to pick your brain. Get all cold.”

“You and Juno both. Quinn, I’m all right. I promise.” Taya minimized Quinn’s avatar, automatically removing hers from his vision as a result. “We’re friends, right? That means I don’t gotta put on a front. I got shot. Just feeling pissy today.”

“You’re right, but I’m here if you need an ear.” Quinn seemed to mess with something on his end of the call before saying, “I saw it’s about a missing girl named Nita. Did you see Carlson? That old bag really adopt a kid?”

“Look who’s actually learned how to read.”

“Fuck you ’n yada yada. Get to it!” Quinn snapped his fingers in rapid succession, sapphire rings clacking together. “What do you think of the case? This is big for you, T. Got any ideas?”

Quinn requested to bring back up his avatar. Taya allowed it, knowing he preferred to see her face when they talked.

“Well, *Q*, I appreciate you putting me on this, I really do, but damn. The girl’s been gone for days, and your people haven’t done jack shit about it. Her system can’t get a ping, and all I got in terms of a lead is an iffy register at Dánkoma on Fifty-Seven.”

The scar on Quinn’s forehead scrunched. “Dánkoma. Shady place for a kid. False registers aren’t real, though, Taya. That’s just what cheating husbands spout.”

“I know. Carlson wants me to head up to the university level. She wants to believe the kid is a genius lost in the library or something.”

“Yeah, ’cause missing kids are always heading to academic buildings. *Of course.*” Quinn’s brow furrowed. “So... where are you going?”

“Dánkoma.”

“Smart. Carlson’s just another idiot with money. Good on ya.”

“Are you kidding? Mrs. Carlson is a genius and smarter than the both of us. Christ, I wish she was my grandma. The woman radiates sweetness and life. Plus, her baking...” Taya’s mouth

began to water, remembering a particular golden apple cinnamon roll fresh from the oven, positively *dripping* in homemade glaze. “I’ll work this, but I don’t expect much.”

“Hey, if it doesn’t go anywhere, you’ll just take on another. No one gets a demerit for their first T-Three flub.” Quinn seemed oddly at ease. She was grateful he didn’t have any of those mood filters that were rising in popularity, designed to make anyone more pleasant to talk with. “I also didn’t know you liked her *that* much. Wasn’t it just, I dunno, babysitting last time? You said it was annoying.”

“It was. But we bonded. I mouthed off, and she got tired of me. It was great.” Taya’s stomach begged for a piece of fresh-baked bread of any kind, the nausea from before long gone. “Put two people in a room and they bond, bud. That’s why we became so close. Took longer, but you did grow on me. Like a wart.”

Quinn’s avatar ran hands through his hair. “Taya, ya *don’t* get close to clients. Especially for something like this. You gotta stay ob-jec-tive.”

“Yeah, Quinn, ’cause Mrs. Carlson killed her foster daughter and hired *me* to play an epic game of cat and mouse. She’s a serial killer who gets off on the chase. Have you had one of her meat pies? Oh my god! I ate one when I was over there. Do you think *that* was Nita? We’ll need to analyze the contents of my stomach. I’ll swing by tonight, and you can slice me open. Look for fingernails. Those don’t cook down.”

After a moment, Quinn seemed to register she had stopped talking. “That was a fun little adventure ya went on there.”

“Yeah.”

“Let me know what you find at the bar, a’ight?”

“Sounds good.” Taya ended the call.

A message came through immediately.

Quinn: Seriously, I’m here if you need advice. It’s not a bad thing to get help on a difficult case. You can ramble about shit and make jokes I don’t understand to your heart’s content.

Taya: I’m good.

Quinn: Consider me your support on this one.

Taya: It's better than having you as the lead.

It wasn't until she was back on the train that Taya realized Quinn might take that as a reference to his failure as her mentor and partner to keep her from getting shot the day before. Being her mentor, her safety was technically his responsibility.

I should just quit texting altogether.

She thought back on the entire conversation.

Shit, I'm an asshole.

GET YOUR WEAR THE EXTRA PUSH IT NEEDS.

The voice came over the train as an opaque ad flickered across the windows. It showed a ridiculously muscular A.I. model lifting two vamps into the air by their bleeding throats—something even the greatest wearheads would never be able to do.

DID YOU KNOW THAT PRICES ARE AT AN ALL-TIME LOW?

Taya thought of her bonus.

I bet Stubbs has some time for me and my refund.

Chapter 3: Can You Afford Not To?

Stubbs' workshop was equal parts medical facility and nerd heaven. An operating table was nestled away in what Stubbs referred to as 'the Butcher's Block.' Outside of the B.B.—the seat where Taya had received most of her wear—the space was littered with ancient arcade machines; holograms of nude models dancing to a beat only audible to those who tuned in to the shop; and opaque, tentacled wear thrown over tables, ready to be recycled or installed.

The holograms lacked any A.I. or sentience. They were merely representations of the being that dominated the feeds, a way for fans to bring their idol into their homes or, in Stubbs' case, place of work.

"Hey, Tech." The door slid shut behind Taya as she entered the room, her system automatically connecting to the internal music before lowering the volume to allow the sound of her voice to funnel directly into Stubbs' ear.

"She comes again! For a responsible checkup? *Nay!* Taya wants more wear." Stubbs' head popped up from behind one of the arcade cabinets, his eyes shifting to a dull orange as they widened at the sight of her. The technician's wirelike hair jutted out at odd angles from amid a maze of braids. The more the week progressed, the less hinged Stubbs tended to appear. "And I, her loyal technician, shall tell her nay. It's too soon."

Taya grabbed an old, wheeled fabric chair, plopped down, and rolled straight through one of the mindless holograms that was dancing about the space. "Couldn't I just be saying hola to a friend?"

Rolling up the tools he used to keep the cabinets running, Stubbs shot her a broad, friendly smile. "It's too soon, Taya."

Taya did a spin. "Are you saying I'm not a friend?"

"Don't try to butter me up. You're too clever to pull it off." Stubbs walked to his desk and flicked on his console screen, his high boots clunking noisily with each step. "Stock is kinda low, anyway. It's either premium stuff or the things you never bother to work on."

"Too clever? Wh—I don't care. Durability." Taya unconsciously pulled at her forearm skin, able to feel more than see the slight micro netting within. "You've wanted me to focus on durability, right? Last week you talked me into this chest piece. Let's build it out."

“Sure, let’s just roll it out inch by inch.” Stubbs looked at her with a raised brow. “We could go for it all at once and put you on a payment plan, but I’m guessing you still find debt repugnant?”

Taya blew out her cheeks with a long breath. “You know me so well.”

Stubbs’ jagged glowlines smoothly shifted into a pretty blue before fading into a deep red. “Taya, these tiny tweaks ’n upgrades—it’s not a good way to get this done. Save up for something big.”

Taya took a snap of her account balance and forwarded it to Stubbs. The man’s voice cut abruptly. She respected Stubbs’ concern. It was part of his allure, a quieter part, often sidelined by the strong forearms and exuberant demeanor that had elicited a primal crush in Taya years back. He was tall, dark, tattooed, and enhanced in ways that she was sure would be a blast to take a tumble with. But she’d never worked up the courage, and they’d since moved past that point. She and Stubbs were friends—nothing more. He’d even helped her on a few easy, off-the-record gigs related to wear theft. The man had access to all kinds of interesting databases.

Breaking the silence, Stubbs popped his lips. “Did you take a kill job, Taya?”

“God, no.” Taya spun once in the chair, stopping abruptly with a drop of her boots after assuring herself Gerald’s death wasn’t her fault. He was a monster, besides. “Just been utilizing the great work of Dr. Stubbs. Feeling like I could crush concrete.”

“I’m a technician, not a doctor.” Stubbs walked from his console, opening a cabinet where he kept much of his higher-end product. “You do need more armor. I could be talked into padding you up.”

“Well, last time you said you wanted to crack open my heart.” Taya rolled to the side, placing herself in the center of a hologram man flinging his wang around within a sheer fabric thong. “Can’t think of why I didn’t like the idea at the time. It’s on the tip of... something.”

“The paradox of you coming to me, seeking me out as the best weartech on the floor, and yet you still won’t take my advice.” Stubbs turned, holding two cubes. Lines of red glow danced across one while the other pulsed orange, indicating levels of quality. “Not a soul has died under my knife.”

“You don’t use a knife.”

Stubbs scoffed. “It’s an expression.”

“And they’re called scalpels.”

“Your job freaks me out, and I see what you’re trying to hide under that jacket.” Stubbs pointed. “Someone shot you with something big.”

“No, it was small, and this cracked. You said it would be able to take serious hits.” Taya felt a flair of annoyance. She pulled her jacket zipper the rest of the way down and pulled up her shirt. A thick crack of white sealant had grown across her chest. “A pistol shredded this, Stubbs.”

Stubbs’ eyes widened. “Wait, a pistol did that? Impossible.”

She dropped her shirt and pointed accusingly. “And you promised it would take anything short of a rifle round.”

“Seriously, that *is* impossible,” Stubbs said. “I have the same armor on my chest. Look.”

Taya rose from the chair as Stubbs drew a pistol from a desk drawer. “Whoa, don’t—”

He leveled the pistol at his own chest and fired. The weapon was illegally silenced but still made a startling *clack-hiss*.

Taya’s hands left her ears. “What the fuck?”

Putting the pistol back, Stubbs raised his own shirt. “See? No air-powered round could puncture your chest. Arms? Sure. But that’s ’cause you don’t listen to me.”

His skin was marred but would heal. Corded muscle interwoven with wear to the point of visibility made focusing on where the bullet had hit difficult, but, by her best guess, it would take two or three more shots from a pistol to seriously crack Stubbs’ chest in the way hers had. He would be completely healed in a little over an hour.

“I don’t sell bunk product, Taya.” Stubbs lowered his shirt. “*You* got hit with something dirty.”

“Well, it was gunpowder.” Taya finally sat back down. “CO₂ spits, while powder rounds *bang*. So—”

“You got hit with a powder round?” Stubbs scoffed. “Well, no duh you got cracked. You’re lucky it didn’t punch through. *Jesus*. Was the guy worried about vamps? Lotta people think you need powder rounds to take ’em down.”

“No clue. Does that work?” Taya went over the few clear images of Gerald’s apartment in her mind, searching for anything hinting at a life close to the undead crowd. “You said I need my heart and arms bumped, right? Let’s do the arms.”

“Hands,” he recommended. “You can’t afford reinforcing your entire arms with what you need. I’ll do the hands, and we’ll install more netting higher when you get another *totally non-kill* payday.”

Taya frowned. “I don’t get the friend discount?”

“I think of you more like an annoying sister.” Stubbs examined a smudge on one of his tools before scrubbing it with a disinfectant wipe. “It’s either the payment plan or full price.”

“*Stuuuubbs.*” Taya stood and began walking to the Butcher’s Block. “Oh, if I catch you reading my journal again while I’m under, I’ll test the hands out on your throat.”

“I don’t read it.” Stubbs procured the cable that would put Taya under, sending her to her escape. “I just enjoy the drawings.”

She took it and lay back in the chair, sliding the end of the cable into a port behind her ear.

“Still creepy.” Her words came out muddled as the jack began to take effect.

Taya entered her escape.

Crystal-blue waves crashed onto white sand. Trees swayed as the ocean wind tickled Taya’s skin, raising goosebumps. Despite the sun beating down from above, the heat was never anything but pleasant. She lifted a tropical drink to her lips and sipped. The flavor wasn’t right, but the citrus, rum, and crushed ice still provided a soothing, cooling effect.

Taya put the drink back down and continued reading the latest fantasy smut novel from the legendary Edina Winter recommended to her by Juno. Her patio-style couch molded against her body perfectly as she snuggled down into a particularly spicy scene. Just as the characters began tearing at each other’s clothes, Juno appeared.

“Ohhhh, have you gotten to the part where they bang on top of a dragon?” Juno sat up from a suddenly visible beach chair and crossed her legs, summoning her own tropical drink.

“*Christ!*” Taya jumped, knocking her drink to the side. The drink vanished before hitting the ground, then reappeared at her side. “Dammit, spoiler, Jun.”

“Yeah, ’cause you can spoil porn.”

Taya closed the book and lowered her sunglasses. “You absolutely can. But, more worthy of scolding, why aren’t you in class?”

“Professor is rambling about how ‘social media forced traditional media to reinvent itself’— blah blah blah. All shit we learned in grade school. So I may have drifted off. My escape pulls

me into yours if it fires up.” Juno lay back, soaking up the re-created sunshine. “Got pulled from a nice dream too. Kinda annoying.”

“So undo the setting.” Taya scrolled through the list of escape DLCs she had collected over the years before summoning a dragon to circle lazily in the sky, providing the occasional shade as it passed under the sun. The creature didn’t look right, but it had been cheap.

“Nah, I cherish even dream time with you too much. Ya know, if you spent as much money here as you do on wear in the real world, you could have a nicer situation.”

Taya spawned a plate of delicious Carolina barbecue ribs. “You don’t enjoy hanging here?”

“Well, visitors don’t get the ‘sensations package’ so,” Juno lifted a martini, “I don’t taste this. I’m happy to pay for us to do another deluxe escape experience.”

“No, Jun.” Exhaling, Taya continued. “Just be happy you don’t have nightmares.”

“Filter them out, dummy. Seriously, why don’t you?”

“‘Cause that would mean more ads. Trading a sleeping nightmare for a waking. Plus they don’t always work. I don’t need the monsters chasing me wearing Rumu sweaters.”

“Wait, didn’t you meet with a client? Shouldn’t you be protecting an old lady right now from some imagined threat?”

“Actually, the threat is real.” Taya grabbed a new drink from the air and tore into a perfectly tender rib. “Her foster grand—no, daughter—is missing. Has been for a while.”

“Since when do you investigate missing kids?” Juno asked. “Need a Watson?”

“If Watson agrees to stay in class.” Taya wondered if it was possible to give herself brain freeze in here. She had never tested it before. “First order of business, Watson, could you tell me where every missing kid in the Seven Zero Three is? Oh, and get Quinn to hand me my license *today* and stop hanging with us off the job.”

Juno rubbed her chin, her ever-expressive face furrowing in thought. “Equally difficult tasks.”

“I can never tell if Quinn cares about *me* or just feels bad. I just—*ugh*.” Taya shifted her drink from iced to blended and took a big swallow. “God, the kid’s probably dead. Carlson’s worried sick. She tried to hide it, but she was shaking more than usual.”

“So, you’re just relaxing here? Doing some thinking?” Juno’s foot swirled lazily, her pink-painted toes moved effortlessly through the white sand.

Taya pressed her free hand to her temple, attempting to will away the stabbing pain. After resting her tongue against the roof of her mouth for a moment, the cold pain went away. “*No*. I’m on the table at Stubbs’.”

“Taya!” Juno lectured. “Quinn told me you got shot *last night*, and you’re doubling down?”

“Quinn needs to learn how to keep work at work.” Taya despawned her meal.

“Funny, we talked just hours ago, yet you,” Juno’s voice jumped in intensity, “somehow omitted the ‘being shot in the fucking chest’ part!”

Taya tried to take the intensity for what it was—a genuine display of love and concern. “I’m just getting the damaged armor fixed,” she lied. “Want me unprotected?”

“Mmm, nice try but actual logic dictates that you don’t get shot at in the first place. Is this an acceptable week at the office to you?”

Yup.

“Jun, it’s just another year, tops.” Taya pushed down a spike of frustration. “Look, you know I’m safe now, right? Hell, you have access to my system. Track me on this gig if you want.”

Juno stood. “And you know that’s pointless.”

“I’m sorry my life makes you uncomfortable.” Taya remained sitting and let her voice grow distant. “I’m just getting by.”

“You’re just getting an adrenaline fix,” Juno snapped.

“You can change professions, but I can’t?”

“I’m struggling to comprehend just how many ballparks away from the point you are.” Juno seemed annoyed at Taya’s lack of anger. “Stop this lazy-ass deflecting.”

“Guess that’s hard to understand when your biggest concern is a passing grade.”

A pang of hurt bled across Juno’s face. She turned from Taya, cursing under her breath. It had been a cheap shot. Juno hadn’t told Taya about her wealthy upbringing until months into their friendship.

A pang of guilt forced Taya to break the silence. “Jun, I’m sorry. I mean, I’m waiting on a grade from Quinn. Who am I to talk?”

Juno turned back to her, tilting her face to meet Taya’s gaze. “I work harder than you, Taya. I certainly don’t struggle as much, but I put in the hours.”

Taya didn’t respond.

“I get your job can suck, but you chose it. You can’t then diminish what I have to do. That isn’t fair. And look, I know Quinn annoys you, he annoys me too.” It was clear these emotions had been bubbling in Juno for a while, and her voice rang with a firmness that implied hours of contemplation. Juno considered Taya for a long moment before softening her tone. “But he stepped up. He put aside his own grief and helped me get you out of the gutter.”

Despite Taya and Quinn openly despising each other before Syd passed—mostly due to Quinn trying to get Syd to enlist in the police academy—he was largely responsible for her not spiraling further in her depression. They had grieved together, and Quinn transitioned from encouraging Syd to pursue his interest in law enforcement to providing Taya with a job after her scholarships were pulled. Taya hadn’t been able to leave her home for months, and Quinn had supported her both financially and emotionally despite having known Syd longer than either Juno or Taya. Quinn was a piece of shit, but Taya owed him her current life—depression or not.

Taya unconsciously rolled her shoulders, burying the memories clawing at her from beyond the grave she’d put them in. The feel of Syd’s stained hospital bed. Syd, so thin, trying to hide his tears as they both realized he had become too weak to walk, too weak to make love. Taking him home when the doctors said they’d done all they could and needed the room. The final night, carrying his emaciated form to the bathroom, not realizing he’d been dead for hours.

He had been so still. Why didn’t I feel how cold he was? He was so angry. The shock—I failed him. I could have called an ambulance. I just cradled him—useless. I still haven’t returned his mother’s calls. I missed his fucking f—

Taya felt the first tear fall from her chin as Juno hugged her fiercely. “I didn’t mean to—you just froze and—God, I’m so sorry.”

“Time, Jun.” Taya didn’t return the hug. Anger burned hot at every memory. “Just give me time. I promise, I’ll get—ah. I promise I’ll keep working at it.”

After a beat, Juno released her and wiped the pain from her own face. “You still seeing Dr. Doax?”

“Yeah,” Taya lied. “I can’t seem to stop being an ass today.”

“I mean, you got shot yesterday.” Juno smiled and tugged Taya’s hair as they separated. “Seems like a pretty reasonable excuse to me.”

The two of them finished making up long before Taya received the ping from Stubbs letting her know the procedure was done and she could wake up. After sending Juno back off to her

own dreams, her personal paradise evaporated into the digital void, leaving Taya with nothing but a memory as the real world materialized around her.

There was a loud clang as Stubbs dropped something into the sink, followed by a muffled curse. A pale vampire glared down at Taya, cradling a limp woman bearing fresh bite marks in its arms. The words 'Bite By Night' stamped in a bloody font dominated the lower third of the poster.

Stubbs' head appeared in Taya's fuzzy field of vision, forcing her eyes to refocus. He pulled a cord from the round port behind her ear. "Wakey wakey, Teri."

Taya blinked, pushing herself up in the Butcher's Block as her system rebooted. "God, you and Quinn both with the nicknames... Wait, did I cry?"

"Yup. Watching a movie in there?" Stubbs was like the rest of the people in her new life. Aside from Quinn, none of them knew. Taya could sit with Stubbs without any ghosts cropping up in the conversation. Her former student life came with baggage, and the enforcer crowd didn't give two shits about her dead fiancé. Half of them would probably mock her for it. Not Stubbs.

After giving her a strange look for her silence, Stubbs continued, "Anyway, I fixed your chest for free, *just in case*. You're back up at one hundo. Your hands now tie into the same power rings on your back. I recharged your power bank, too. Isn't this neat?"

Taya looked over to see Stubbs holding up the bloody nano mesh he had removed from her palms with a still-gloved hand. It dangled from his loose fingers, red stains seeping from the muscle wire into a metal sink. She rolled her eyes and flexed her fingers, feeling the minor enhancement.

Stubbs was frowning. "'Quinn.' You're still working with Officer Asshole?"

"Duh." Taya stretched her fingers back, trying to feel any difference. The only thing she felt now, though, was sluggish. It always took a couple of minutes for wear to restart properly. Taya usually kept hers on low, flaring it when needed. Having to rely only on her muscles made her feel like an uncoordinated child. "Having a cop to watch my back is priceless. Every mistake is taken care of. I've got it easier than any other apprentice I've met. Not a ding on my record."

Stubbs sucked his teeth. "That's the problem. He's as dirty as they come and is dragging you in the mud. The guy's a pig in every sense."

"And you're squeaky clean." Taya dropped her legs from the operating chair and stood slowly.

“It’s different.” Stubbs began putting away his tools. “Look, we do what we need to do to pay the bills. He’s already got a salaried job with a pension. Quinn doesn’t need to be beating down people for money or whatever else he gets up to. The *officer* does it ’cause he likes it.”

“Stubbs, he’s fine. Quinn’s useful and loyal.” Taya swore her hands felt slightly stiffer than before. “He’s an idiot and, yeah, a pig, but I owe him.”

Stubbs tilted his head, that strange look returning. “Why? Is that why you hate debt?”

“God, no. He got me into the enforcer business, Stubbs. Couldn’t have done it without him.”

“Not exactly a favor people are grateful for most of the time. Why the hell are you an enforcer anyway?” Stubbs tossed the remnants of her procedure into a red medical bin, letting the lid slam shut. “You’ve let enough slip for me to know you didn’t dream of this life as a kid.”

Stubbs, stay in your box.

Burying the thought, Taya answered, “Am I in good enough shape to hit Dánkoma?”

Sighing, Stubbs turned to her. “Taya, partying right aft—”

“It’s for a job, Stubbs. I just want to make sure I won’t pass out if someone asks me to drink with them.” Taya pulled her jacket on before testing how her pistol felt with her new hands. “My hands feel powerful. Stiff, but strong.”

She checked her account balance. [\$54,787]. The generous bastard had given her a hefty discount, and he would *hate* it if she brought it up.

“New price range comes with perks. As I said, it’s hooked into the power bank in your back. No crushing concrete, but... well, maybe. Weak concrete. The non-Roman kind.” Stubbs came over and scanned her eye, registering the upgrades. “You should be fine. Just don’t overdo it—and take sips. You need to stay aware in case something feels weird. Know what I mean? Don’t want any pins not to take.”

“Yeah,” Taya agreed, examining her hands once more. “Sips.”

The daiquiri tasted magnificent as Taya slurped heavily enough to induce a brain freeze. Groaning, she pressed her free hand to her temple as her system muted the pain. Swallowing the last of her mouthful, Taya showed her tongue to the twink she’d spent the last half hour with. “Is it blue?”

“Mmm.” Robby, at least she thought that was his name, cocked his chin to the side, considering her agape mouth. “More purple actually.”

“Hey! That’s on brand.” She dimly flashed her eyes violet light. “See?”

“Mhm.” Robby made eye contact with someone behind her. “Look, my friends are here. It was really nice meeting you, though!” He patted her hand as he stood from the stool. “I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

“Oh.” Taya reflexively put her drink down. “Let me ping you my contact.”

“Hey, what are you doing?” Robby said with a smile Taya recognized as forced. He pulled his arm slowly from her grip. “Yeah, I’ll see you around.”

Taya turned off the wear she didn’t remember turning on. Blinking, she tried to realize how hard she’d grabbed the man’s arm. Embarrassed, she turned back to the bar, wondering just how long she’d bothered him with her chatter.

I was just using him to take time to survey the crowd. Right.

Taya ordered another drink. A rather pretty bartender with glow tattooed in a smeared style across her face added an extra splash of liquor at Taya’s request. Before Taya could request another lime wedge, the woman became distracted by something within her own hud and excused herself, ignoring Taya’s raised hand.

Despite the relatively early hour, Dánkoma was already teeming with patrons. The dance floor was packed with bodies as citizens from every floor of the megastructure writhed together, sweat-soaked fabrics clinging to their frames. It was the kind of place where people could come to feast on the pleasures of living. Unlike tamer clubs, Dánkoma still used real speakers to pound away at the air. It was intoxicating. From the stage, an artist Taya was unfamiliar with roared the lyrics, “*TAKE YOUR MILLIGRAMS! TWENTY A DAY! TAKE YOUR MILLIGRAMS ’R THE CHILDREN PAY! TAKE YOUR MILLIGRAMS OR THEY’RE TAKEN AWAY!*”

Taya knew if she took the glass elevator up to the second floor, the current mix of rock and rap would be replaced by a steady synth, and everything from the outfits worn to the drugs taken would shift entirely. The stairs, for those too impatient to wait for the lift, spiraled overhead and disappeared into the transparent pane of plexiglass above. Taya always appreciated that Dánkoma had chosen the more risqué route of installing a transparent ceiling. The flashing strobe lights made it almost impossible to see, but every so often, she caught a glimpse of a mass of shuffling feet, briefly illuminated beneath the pulse of neon lights before disappearing once more into darkness. That was the magic of the club. Dánk took full advantage of its massive size and reputation, a celebration of humanity’s lust for life. Despite its height, Dánkoma’s original

owner had made sure the roof of the club did not touch the ceiling that served as the base to the adjacent floor, stopping just a few feet short.

Taya ached to enjoy the club's pleasures, and the dancing couple making eyes at her made the temptation all the greater, but she was on the clock. No matter how badly she wished to party beneath the projections of dancing holomodels draped in sheer fabrics, it wouldn't be appropriate. Taya had allowed herself another drink in addition to some other relaxants, but she had to remain sharp enough to focus on the objective. *Nina—no, dammit—Nita.*

"Hey!" She flagged down the replacement bartender. "Have you—hang on—I'm looking for a girl." Taya pulled out the pocket display she always kept handy "Nita." Taya extended the display, showing the photo Mrs. Carlson had provided.

The bartender, a lean man with aggressively hunched shoulders, shook his head and said, "No kids allowed here," then walked over to another woman leaning provocatively over the bar.

Turning back to the bartender, she shouted, "Have you seen her, though?" Too loud to be ignored, the bartender shot her an annoyed look before shaking his head and focusing on the other customer. The woman began rattling off what seemed to be an entire party's orders.

Taya raised her voice over the music. "Are you sure?" Now it was the woman's turn to shoot Taya an annoyed look, but she ignored this and pushed on. "The police are looking for her."

At this, the customer leaned back and away from Taya, despite the distance already between them. Not wanting to miss out on a tip, the bartender gestured at the woman to wait and walked back over to Taya, the lines between his brows deepening.

"The police?" His deep city accent was near Quinn's own.

"So, judging by the look of recognition I caught before, I think it's safe to say you saw her." Taya took a long sip of her drink after pocketing her display, pinging the man's system for his contact info. "Not a very good way to start a professional relationship, Paul."

Paul pinged her system in return and took a photo of her—or at least she assumed the flash in his eye wasn't just a chance reflection. "Why should I tell an enforcer? If the cops are on this, why're ya here?"

"I'm just doing what my client asks." Taya nearly gulped down the rest of her drink. It was *damn* delicious. If it were any other night, Taya might have given Juno a ring and talked her out of whatever book her nose was buried in. But Carlson was a client, dammit, and that demanded true discipline. "Did you see her, or are you not going to help find a lost kid?"

“Not ta be a fuckin’ ass but, again, why tell you?” Paul asked, his eyes unfocused—a telltale sign of a message popping up to read in his hud.

She paused for a moment, waiting for him to refocus, and used the time to assess the man in front of her. Gaining sympathy from strangers wasn’t exactly in her wheelhouse, but low-level people usually had an inclination to be wary of strangers. Part of how they survived. “Like I said, I’m here on behalf of a client. A family member, one who’s not wanting to rely on overworked pigs to solve her case. My client said Nita was last pinged here.”

Paul waved away the women who had been impatiently waiting at the end of the bar and was attempting to flag him down once more. She huffed at the dismissal before moving on to another bartender. Paul bit his cheek before repeating, “We don’t let kids in.”

“Yeah, you mentioned, yet you know just as well as I do that false pings aren’t a thing. So maybe you can help me find the girl, yeah? You didn’t see her, did you? But you heard something. This is the kinda stuff the feeds eat up. Local bartender helps rescue kid.”

“Ya, I heard something.” Paul’s smirk made his face squish in a distinctly unpleasant way. “But I usually don’t help people who half-ass their job.”

Taya looked down to where he gestured and saw her vape sticking out of her pocket.

“Just taking the edge off.” Taya leaned in close, trying to regain control. The rhythmic light that moved across the space was hypnotic, begging her mind to glaze over and simply *feel*. She muffled the club’s music with her system, trying to focus. “What did you hear, Paul?”

“You’re working a missing persons case with red eyes and a drink,” Paul said, waving off another patron with growing frustration, “and I’m supposed to take you seriously? You’re taking money from someone with a missing kid, and you’re high on the fucking job.”

Taya pocketed her vape. “I’m blending in.”

“Ha! Blending in by *yelling* at me in my bar? What if the responsible party was here? You blew your cover, yeah? Could be that guy right there.” Paul gestured to a man no older than nineteen trying to get the bartender’s attention from a few seats down. The kid was scrawny, all sharp elbows and collarbones. He smiled obliviously when he met Taya’s gaze.

Paul’s eyes glazed over once more as he received another message.

“I think we’re safe.” Taya pushed her drink away. She began to rise, considering whether to wait outside the club for Paul’s shift to end. “Thanks for your help.”

“Wait,” Paul said with a sigh. “Yeah, there was a girl. Appears on one cam or another for a moment for a few days, but she’s always gone before security can find her. You said her name’s Nita?”

“She was on camera?”

Grabbing a new glass from below the bar, Paul began fixing Taya another drink. She watched him pour with a heavy hand, catching his eye when he pushed the drink forward. “A couple of the others think she’s a ghost. Moved about like Satan himself was guiding her.”

“Any chance you’ll let me at those recordings?” Taya nearly forgot the drink that was already halfway to her lips.

Paul sighed. “Kinda sad to know it was a real girl, ya know?”

Taya stared at him. “Yeah, Paul. It’s sad.”

Paul looked at a new group of patrons trying to wave him down. Taya noted their fangs with surprise; the three vampires showed no concern over the mass of people around them.

Heading in their direction, Paul called back over his shoulder, “I’ll let security know you’re coming.”

Taya blinked twice, capturing a shot of Paul’s face before sending it over to Quinn with the message:

Taya: Get info on this guy. First name’s Paul. This case might actually have an end. See what the oinker system’s got on him. I’ll pay you back. Promise.

Taya had a terrible feeling about the combination of Dánkoma serving vampires and Nita, who’d apparently been using it as her own personal hideaway. If she had been taken by a biter, Nita would be long dead. Off-pack vamps never took children to be turned. They were an easy meal, nothing more.

The idea of going after an actively hunting biter positively terrified her, but if circumstances allowed, she *might* be able to properly test her wear on one of the nasty parasites. Fresh off the bag or not, if this creature had switched from packblood to human, it would already possess a formidable amount of strength. The bounty on feeding vampires was tremendous, enough to make Taya’s mouth water. It would certainly dwarf the pay Carlson was giving her. All she needed was proof.

It was an exciting opportunity, to say the least.

The thought wilted as quickly as it had bloomed. Proof would come in the form of finding Nita, dead and discarded, in one of the lower floors. Guilt slammed into her like a train, causing her hands to ball into fists. It wasn't until she felt a warm hand on her elbow that she was jerked from her reverie.

Her eyes focused on the tall form of a security guard in front of her who had been gesturing in the direction of the far wall and a door labeled 'Office.'

Her chaperone, no doubt.

Ignoring a response from Quinn, probably scolding her to some degree, Taya nodded to show she understood and began to trail in his wake, using her system to glance at his contact information in the process.

Once inside the main office, the door sealed behind her with a soft hush, muffling the volume of the music beating against the walls. The guard, whose name she had learned was Jeremy, spun to face her. "No searching about willy-nilly." Jeremy was positively adorable in his attempt to appear threatening. "Our clients like their privacy. Keep that date filter on."

"Absolutely," Taya replied absently as her eyes slipped out of focus, her system automatically recording everything her eyes saw as she scrolled through hundreds of pings from the night of Nita's disappearance. Laws required every system to blink with small lights within the lens when actively recording. Taya had balked at that, so Quinn had supplied her with an unregistered police system to run within her implants and hud. It provided Taya with an incredible list of features well outside the limits and was invaluable in moments like these.

If the vamp is getting into clubs, it's at least trying to maintain a registered life.

As she let her system run, she turned her attention to the guard beside her. "I've got a tough question for ya."

Jeremy blinked at her, and the glow around his eyes pulsed. "What?"

"You hear about the ghost that lives here?" Taya debated planting a bug in the club's system but thought better. They probably cleaned it regularly, and, with digital fingerprints becoming easier and easier to follow these days, it would probably be more of a hassle than it was worth.

"Yeah, what about it?"

Kid's stealing my brand.

Ignoring the guard's stare and suspicious tone, Taya set her system to work, severing the club from the main network and allowing her a window of time before any alarms could be raised. Working quickly, Taya copied the recordings into her own drive, took the picture Mrs. Carlson had provided of Nita, and ran a local scan against the photo. Two recordings came back from the night of Nita's final ping. Taya downloaded them both before opening them within the display.

"Have you seen her?" Taya played both recordings side by side.

"No. But she ain't real. Those recordings are doctored. Gotta be a prank."

The first recording was of a hall connecting a series of admin offices on a middle floor separating the two types of entertainment Dánkoma offered. It seemed unlikely Nita would have found herself in a sterile environment such as this. But then the image of a child flashed across the screen, entering beneath a glowing red exit sign and disappearing through another door before Taya had a chance to blink. She had half expected it to be a false positive, but the flash of blue jeans and a purple shirt were the same clothes Carlson had described. As soon as the girl disappeared from the first recording, she reappeared on the second. The timestamp in the bottom corner indicated this had taken place many hours later. Nita sprinted from a stairwell, crashing into the wall opposite the door she'd exploded from before ducking into an employee bathroom.

"Mmm, don't think so." The recording ended after Nita's disappearance from the frame, but Taya needed to see what happened after. Heartbeats passed as she watched. Nothing. "Looks like a real little girl to me."

"What?" Jeremy asked.

Taya stared at the screen, willing her system to have missed some shot of Nita leaving the toilet. Just as Taya was about to give up, a tall man walked into frame. He paused to glance in both directions before making his way down the hall. As his eyes met the camera, the red within them was unmistakable.

Vampire.

"No, no, no..."

The creature skulked toward the same restroom door. Taya watched in horror as it pushed its way into the room the girl had just entered.

Taya reached out and grabbed the display, pulling it closer on its hinge.

"Hey!" Jeremy grabbed Taya by the collar and tore her from the display. "What's wrong with you?"

Smacking his hands away, she opened the recording within her own system, backed it up on her home server, and jumped to the timecode. The vampire exited the restroom just over a minute later, casually throwing a paper towel to the floor by his feet.

Taya closed the recording. “I have to see the night before. He could have been stalking her. I’ll run the vampire’s face too.”

“What? I mean, no.” While Jeremy struggled to find his tongue, he gripped her arm, forcing her toward the exit. “Seriously, don’t try anything. I’m watching, a’ight?”

“The cops had to have come by and seen this. They aren’t that dim.” Taya didn’t get a reply, just a blank stare from Jeremy. “The cops got this, *right?*”

The guard picked up his pace, pushing open the door and practically shoving her toward the dance floor. “Time for ya to go. I don’t want nothin’ to do with cops.”

The man’s eyes glossed over as he responded to some message, and Taya struggled to stifle her frustration. “No cops have been by? *None?*”

How did I beat the cops here? Wait, where would the body have gone?

Rumors of vampires able to put a trance on the weak-minded haunted Taya’s thoughts. This monster could have made the girl meet him somewhere else or ordered her to hide in the bathroom until he came back for her. It all added up, except there had been no more pings for either individual in the system that night.

“Cops come by here all the time. Keep resisting and I’ll ’ave ’em here again putting a knee in your back!”

“I need to see the pings for the rest of the week,” Taya commanded. “C’mon, man, a girl’s life is on the line.”

“Piss off.” Ignoring her halfhearted attempts to resist, Jeremy gave her one last push toward the mass of gyrating bodies at the center of the room. He had to shout to make his voice heard. “Get lost, enforcer. If I’d have known—” He cut himself off with a shake of his head. “Paul’s done me dirty.”

I can compare the creep’s face to the Public Vampire Record.

“Fine. Just—if you’ve seen this guy, let me know. A’ight?” Taya pulled out her display pad and brought up an image of the vampire she’d kept paused in her hud.

His gaze bounced from the picture of the creature back to her face, clearly annoyed, then answered. “You think the kid’s in real danger?”

Taya motioned pointedly at the display.

Jeremy's eyes lingered on the screen taking in the biter, his brows furrowing almost imperceptibly as he wrestled with some decision. Finally, he closed his eyes, and his shoulders loosened as he released a long breath. "You're just accusing random biters to solve a case. This is a restricted—"

Taya didn't need to hear any more. Turning back toward the intoxicating chaos of Dánkoma, she called over her shoulder, "Thanks for the incompetence!"

Taya stood on the third dance floor of Dánkoma, considering what to do.

Well, go search the bathroom.

Making her way through Dánkoma took her only a few minutes. A small elevator took her to a floor near the room where the public schematic of Dánkoma had the restroom listed. Taya exited the box, leaving two men going at it more than even Dánk would likely allow.

"Security here can suck, and the rooms up top are expensive. Recommend the hotel across the str—all right, never mind." She turned away as the doors closed and took in the hall before her. It matched the recording she'd seen. Walking forward, Taya entered what the camera had been able to see. A stairway was to her left and, further than the lens could see, an exit into a connecting tunnel.

First, she went to the door. It wasn't locked, but as she entered she noticed a lock on the hotel side of the tunnel. It required a guest's keycard. Checking it with her A.I., Taya encountered a surprising level of security. It would take her several seconds to break, though it was still on the connected network. Supposedly, everything on the public network was tracked and traced, meaning people who didn't know what they were doing couldn't breach shit without their system being tagged immediately. Taya knew what she was doing, and Quinn's gifted police-grade system made her borderline untraceable. He claimed it was his way of letting her explore the freedom that came with being an enforcer, whatever that meant.

Heading back into the club, Taya felt the train passing below the tunnel connecting the two buildings. It would go by every few minutes like clockwork, also hooked into the public network so all could see exactly when their trains would arrive.

Looking back down the hall, she watched a server holding a tray of empty drinks enter the elevator she'd come from. By the time she reached the bathroom, two more people had entered and exited the hall. It seemed to be a central place used largely by staff to get around. Still, she

was walking around without eliciting unwanted attention, which meant the predator could have as well.

Reaching the bathroom, she pushed open the door and found a reasonably clean restroom—by Dánk’s standards. It was completely vacant. The trash was empty, and upon giving the stall a look, nothing seemed out of place. Taya wasn’t sure what she’d expected—claw marks, bloodstains, or a note stating, ‘Hey, I killed the kid!’ would have all been nice, but she was forced to leave frustrated.

Chapter 4: No Problem

Outside on the street, Taya strolled beneath a parade of advertisements as bright flashes of neon bathed the entertainment district in a rainbow glow. Floor Fifty-Seven still maintained a decent balance of everyday life, at least for a lower-mid level, but that had begun to shift more and more over the past few years as the floor began to cater to more nightlife. A fairly common occurrence, from what Taya understood. As each generation grew more and more accepting of their life within the megastructures, the world around them grew smaller, and life began to focus more on the simple pleasures. One of the social evolutions everyone knew probably wasn't good for the human condition overall, but no action was ever taken to counteract it. Too much money to be made in shrinking the world down to the display in front of your face and hud within your eye.

Taya stepped onto a grated merchants' walk, feeling the low, ever-present hum of the megastructure beneath her feet. A fragrance seller pumped artificial air in front of her face.

"It only costs—"

"No." Taya pushed past the small man. The artificially produced perfumes were meant to smell of the outdoor world long ago, before the haze had settled and humanity had been forced indoors. Ads were bad enough, but the social discomfort of having someone try to sell something directly to her put a simmer of anger in Taya's mood. It was not helped by the horridly earthy smell the merchant had made her walk through. Attempts at re-creating 'natural' smells often resulted in what Taya considered to be something far worse than the haze—a malodorous mix of grit and rot that set her teeth on edge. *Shit, now it's on my fucking clothes.*

Doing her best to ignore the pungent smell filling her nostrils, Taya rang Quinn. Within seconds, his avatar popped into her lower-right field of view.

"Still working on it, T." Annoyance laced his words. "Why am I checking on a random bartender? I've had Paul serve me, I think. He's fine."

"Hey, you wanted me to handle this. I'm handling. For all you know, he might be my current lead. You saying I should care that you like him?" Taya pulled a vape pen from her pocket, inhaling a drag. "Shouldn't be surprised. Turns out the cops haven't even been to Dánkoma yet. Can you pull up the report? I want to see what Carlson gave them. Might've forgotten something with me. Has to be a reason why they haven't been here yet."

Quinn's avatar bit its lower lip for a brief moment as, Taya assumed, he searched through the police files within his own hud. Even his avatar had been fitted with glow to match his real-life counterpart, allowing the blue of his knuckles to reflect off the platinum chain around his neck. "Can't find the report."

"What?" Taya stopped in her tracks. "Mrs. Carlson isn't a liar. She spoke to the police."

"I don't know what to tell you." The avatar shrugged in her vision. "There's nothin' here, boo. Only the enforcer summons. Didn't go through our system. And Paul has no record. Clean."

Paul Flayer, the good-boy bartender?

"I've got a vamp for you to look into. Profile is in your inbox." Taya took one last drag of her pen before putting it away. "How does a report go missing?"

"Honestly, not a clue. I've overlooked a lot of shady shit in my career, but—"

"Overlooked?" Taya scoffed, setting off for the train station once more. "Quinn, no offense, but I've watched you plant evidence. Carlson wouldn't lie, and she called the police directly. This hit your system, and someone pulled it."

"Only when I *knew* they were guilty. Gut stuff—I got a great gut. It's why they keep me on the beat. It's possible the responding officer just facked it up. I'll check on it." Quinn's avatar had a display pad appear in his hand. "Got the vamp. It's in the P.V.R. I'm going over his profile. Skinny bastard."

"Packblooded ones tend to be." Taya pulled out her pen for a super-quick, definitely-the-last drag. "Sweet-talked my way into security footage."

Quinn tensed. "How'd ya manage that?"

"Dropped your name and claimed to be your deputy, said if they had a problem or anything went wrong to contact you."

Pinching his temple, Quinn seemed stuck between frustration and amusement. "Kidding?"

"Fucking duh. Can you get me the address? We might've caught a bloodsucker slipping into bad habits."

"There's good money in that," Quinn encouraged.

Taya sent Quinn a cut-down segment of the recording showing the vampire following Nita in with one cut and leaving with another. A simple edit to make in a near instant through her A.I.

"Only question left is, where is the body? Could... the trance thing be real? Vampire couldn't eat the whole-ass kid." Taya felt a pang of revulsion. "Ew. Sorry."

“I don’t...” Quinn hesitated. “Kinda dangerous. Carlson would certainly pay in full for taking out the biter with this amount of evidence. I can make sure the follow-up by us *boots* rapidly rules in yer favor.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Taya exhaled. Carlson would be obligated to pay, but if Taya couldn’t even secure a body, she doubted the woman would have closure.

Quinn’s avatar took on a forced cheer. “I’ll report this biter to the hunters. It’ll be added to the hit list with this footage. I’m sure they’ll deploy some kamikaze drones. Not even an old-fashioned door kicking. Just a bot with facial recognition and some boom powder attached to it. No class. No tact. Super efficient.”

Trying to not roll her eyes, Taya’s mind flashed to a memory of overhearing Mrs. Carlson crying in the bathroom. She had been so alone even when Taya had lived with her. The loneliness had filled the apartment like a bad smell.

“Hey, Quinn...”

He looked up from the display in his avatar’s hand. “Yeah?”

“How long is that list?” Taya asked. “Of biters to look into.”

“Grows faster than they can shrink it, so...” Quinn ticked off fingers. “What’s more than infinite? ’Cause it’s growing beyond infinity. Hunting ain’t the profession it used to be, and more vamps are poppin’ up than ever before.”

“One infinite can be greater than another.” Taya imagined trying to console Mrs. Carlson, telling her a drone would eventually kill the biter responsible and to check some feed for updates daily.

Knowing Carlson, she’d check every hour until it was done—if she lived long enough to see it done. Taya had already wanted the bounty for herself—splitting a purse made her want to spit—but this conclusion just felt soulless to her.

“They can?” Quinn was staring at her. “What’s wrong?”

“Get me the file on that biter. I’m going after him. Don’t pass this to the hunters. The money is mine—no split.”

“We’ll get paid no matter what, T. Fat cut off the bounty too.” The display disappeared from the image of Quinn’s hand. He thought for a moment before continuing, “Wait, hold on, whoa, hold up... you wanting a solo biter bounty?”

Taya turned the corner in the direction of the nearest train stop. “Yeah, or take him in.”

Quinn shook his head. “Let me come along, T. This ain’t some creep or thug. He’ll be strong.”

“Stubbs got me patched. I’ll be fine.” Taya’s eyes caught on the bruises littering her knuckles. Purple and blue splotches that stung to the touch, broken by cuts too shallow to scar. Taya liked the pain in a way; it was a sign of power—progress. “I need to do this alone. It’s my big test, right?”

Quinn’s avatar bit its lip again as Taya passed a glow parlor. The woman visible through the window, a bright tiger being added down her spine, looked as if she was just about done with the pain of the process. The artist laid the glow torch onto the tiger-patterned skin, flaring light throughout the entire design in waves as he brushed his way down the tail. The colors pulsed as the torch hissed over the specialized ink.

Quinn’s tone softened. “Taya, I know what you’re ready for, and—”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Hearing a chime toll the arrival of the next train, Taya watched as a flood of people entered the train station. It was possible she’d be able to catch it before it left in a hurry. Reluctantly, she turned from the glow parlor. “Quinn, I promise you, I’ll handle this.”

A passing drone rose above the tracks and twisted sharply toward the ceiling. A tiny pathway, only available to small delivery drones, would open up far above and allow the machine to reach distant levels far faster than any lift.

Quinn’s tone had stiffened back up. “They get strong after feeding on us. This could get straight nightmarish. I should come.”

“*No*, Quinn. I’m gonna have to take the lift low, and you reek of cop. I’d rather not get jumped on the way to his front door, a’ight?” Taya put her pen away, only to pull it out once more for another drag. “Plus, I doubt Nita was turned. Just a meal for the beast... I hope,” she finished under her breath.

Frenzied, freshly turned vampires, created when a victim drank vampiric blood, could overpower with ease even the highest-grade wear an enforcer could access. Taya had seen videos to prove it. The military was often forced to deploy swarms of suicide drones to take them down. No one was sure how long the craze lasted. When asked, biters always replied with essentially an unhelpful ‘depends.’ Whenever it did end, the vampire was required to feed on fresh human blood in order to maintain even half their former strength.

“The idea of a frenzied child... terrifying—oh!” Quinn read something before saying, “‘Oscar’ is what the profile says. Address is in the Public Vampire Registry. Sent your way.”

She blinked. “Oscar? Really? Doesn’t sound like what the dead typically choose when they turn.”

“I dunno what to tell you.” Quinn shrugged, avatar fastening the top buttons on his slightly uniform. “Guess it chose ‘Oscar.’”

“I guess so.” Taya rounded a corner, nearly bumping into a vendorbot offering printMeat. Juices dribbled down identical cuts onto the metal cart. The smell of fresh prints tickled her nostrils. If her stomach weren’t twisted into a nervous knot, she might have snatched a bite.

Quinn’s tension seemed to grow. “Just stay... I don’t know. It’s just important ya stay focused. Earn the title of enforcer. You kill this murderer, babe, and people will talk. I couldn’t keep you as an apprentice if I tried. This is your chance to get off on ya own. I believe you can do this. If he fed just this once, one bullet to the head will do the trick.”

“Thanks for letting me handle it,” Taya said. “And before you go...”

“Yeah?”

“Call me ‘babe’ or ‘boo’ again and I’ll put this thing’s severed head in your fucking bed.”

“Now, *that* will get them talking!” Her partner chuckled before ending the call, his avatar blipping from her vision.

Nerves put a hesitation into Taya’s step. When she finally did get home, two small packages greeted her, resting outside her door.

Extra ammunition for her revolver and a better speaker that she had been saving for.

Kicking the door shut with her heel and entering her home, Taya hooked up the speaker to the rest of her system and began blaring her favorite playlist. Drums began to reverberate in her apartment. Most people were satisfied with their internal system playing audio so as to avoid the possibility of bothering others. Taya wanted to feel it in her chest. The bass thumped against her rib cage as Taya washed her face in the sink, singing along with the few lyrics.

She opened her messages to Quinn.

Taya: zzz any day now zzz

Quinn: Floor 9, N Crown Apartment 1316. Mr. Oscar Ferrer has no illegal bites on file. I don't buy it. Hiding this low in the structure? BE CAREFUL!

Taya: Floor 9?

Taya: That low?

Quinn: Scum likes to be close to the dirt.

Taya: Nice, Officer. Aren't you supposed to view every citizen equally?

Quinn: Vamps weren't citizens when I took that oath.

She checked the time. The structure would have dimmed its lights for late evening, limiting the ad light as well. Only storefronts were allowed to remain at their preferred brightness. It was Taya's favorite time of day, the time when the noise settled a bit before the energy of the night began to pollute even the snootiest of levels. Yes, every microcity had its orientations, but that didn't mean each didn't possess some salacious streets—resulting in every level having areas she wanted to avoid once the lights went all the way down.

If Oscar was going out tonight, Taya would have to move now if she planned to have any hope of catching him. Its type liked the cloak of darkness provided by the designated sleeping hours within the megastructures. It was the only time when seeing vampires became somewhat commonplace.

Do I even want to? Maybe I could search this Oscar's nest for evidence while it's out.

The thought worsened Taya's mood. Was it wrong to not want to devote all of her efforts into capturing the creature? The evidence had seemed mildly damning, but what if it was innocent? She was heading out to kill something, and that rang of a kill job. Something Taya had sworn she'd never do for money.

What are the odds I can take a feeding biter in alive?

Given what was said on the news, the thought rang sour in her mind. On top of that, if she took it in alive, the burden of proof to keep him locked up and close the case rose drastically. The vampire could dispute the charges, and some activist group could even get Oscar a lawyer. It

was part of the reason Taya detested kill jobs. It was a path for lazy or corrupt enforcers to get bags without worrying about any pushback.

Fuck.

But if it was feeding on the living, every hour she let the thing live meant another *child* could die. Feeling a confusing mixture of nerves Taya didn't entirely understand, she began to get ready. She splashed water from the sink on her face and swallowed several gulps from the water-stained faucet, hoping to sober up as best as she could before coming face-to-face with the biter. Cracking a stick of stims, Taya swallowed the powder within, feeling her mind clear while her heart rate rose.

Taya changed into a black shirt, one that she had come to consider quite lucky. It had survived dozens of jobs without suffering a single snag. Stains? Sure. But no rips, yet. Pulling on her white jacket, Taya checked the mirror. Aside from appearing tired, she looked fine. Her clothing was clean and fit well, if a little loose. Her boots, on the other hand, appeared to have been literally run ragged.

Next paycheck.

After snatching up her backpack, Taya holstered her pistol. She had bought the weapon her first day as an enforcer, and her initial love of the matte-white gun had only grown since. The unpainted, underside metal—not printed, completely genuine steel—contrasted sharply with the creamy color of the grip. It was a little front-heavy for her taste, but at the right moments, that made every movement with the weapon feel purposeful.

Moral obligation. That bloodsucker's not been feeding long, so it will only get stronger. Not to mention you have new wear to test. Taya looked at her hands and forearms as she flexed them. *Now is the time to do this. Fight a... member of the undead with stronger... hands. Cool.*

Heading for the door, Taya half zipped her jacket and tightened the straps on her loaded-up pack. The weight of extra ammo and meds made her feel a bit ridiculous, but she'd rather be overprepared than caught out of bullets on a low level.

Once more into the breach, dumbass.

The click of her apartment locking behind her felt oddly final. Her paranoia rose every time she went into the lowest levels. On the lift down, Taya chambered a round into her weapon. It was illegal to do so within the structure without an immediate threat, but who would know? Taya did keep the safety on—she wasn't insane. The printed air-pressure-filled rounds were far less

penetrating than the slug that had split her chest, but they were still designed to kill. Cartridges depending on air pressure instead of powder had become law within the megastructures decades prior, making reinforced printer material enough to stop just about every legal round. Bullets no longer went bang; instead, every shot made a snap, followed by a trailing hiss.

She zoned out within the crowded lift, not bothering to watch the floors of life drifting by. Much easier to do without Quinn bothering her. Closing her eyes, Taya let herself drift.

Taya imagined kicking down this vampire's front door, catching him feeding on a somehow still-alive Nita. She'd blow the creep's head off with a single, perfectly placed round and bring the lost child back to a cheering Mrs. Carlson. Quinn would sign off on her full license, and Taya would have one hell of a reputation if her first solo gig was taking down an active feeder.

Realizing she'd been continually puffing away at her pen, Taya pulled the black tube loaded with a mostly empty cartridge from her lips. Her attempt at dulling her nerves slipped far into numbness, battling the stims still in her system. Cursing herself silently, Taya pocketed her vape as the lift sounded its arrival, *ding*. The gate pulled back, and Taya stepped onto Floor Nine—the lowest she had ever been. Steadily, the crowd within the lift had shrunk until it was just her.

The haze filters had to work double-time down here for half the result. A sludgelike green tinted the world around her. Muted neon colors struggled with the half-seen pollution. The streets were narrow; barely twenty feet separated the lines of shops, bars, brothels, and apartments. This low in the structure, apartment complexes often extended well into the roof and beyond, sometimes even continuing into the spaces between floors and out onto the next. Street gangs utilized such alternative routes to move between floors without being scanned by the lifts. Everything was low and dense. A necessity to keep the structure strong enough to support its twenty-kilometer height.

Dark figures moved about the fog, often shrouded by hoods or full haze-gear. Masks of a thousand different styles covered some faces, glow trailing behind in an effect only seen from within the haze. As Taya stepped onto the street, she donned her own mask, a jagged thing with the rubber seal stopping just above her eyes. Taking a long drag, Taya grimaced at the filtered taste. The sound of her own loud breathing was muted by her system's A.I., allowing her to fully experience the odd stillness of the low floor.

God, even the ads are hard to see.

The whispering that floated in the back of Taya's mind, a constant presence, suddenly pressed forward. She found herself being pitched the cheapest kind of cybernetic enhancements as if they were blessings from the gods above. The pieces were visible and clunky, the kind of attachments and add-ons that had long since disappeared from the higher floors in favor of much more reliable and subtle wear.

They still market like this here?

Within her hud, Taya opened a map of the floor. The complex she sought was only a few blocks away. The pulsing red dot of her location on the map slowly tracked with her as she began to make her way down the street. Faces blended within the mist, often turning to follow Taya's progress as she moved through the microcity. Neon, disturbingly dull compared to that above, shimmered from a thousand different angles. The printed buildings didn't reflect the colors, matte material causing the entire city to appear far darker than she was accustomed to.

A wave of nausea slammed into Taya, her breath coming more rapidly.

Shit.

Cranking her wear, Taya fought to calm the building panic within her. Paranoia painted every curious glance her way in a terrifying light. The densely packed population moved like a body of water, the disorienting momentum of which carried Taya until the red dot within her hud overlapped with her target's at the very edge of the megastructure. An area some considered bad luck. She stood outside an alley adorned with a sign declaring, 'Luxury Apartments Available Today!'

Breaking from the busy street, Taya stepped off into the mouth of an alley, planting her hands heavily on her knees. Walking further from the shrouded crowd, Taya realized she'd been experiencing claustrophobia for the first time in her life. In the narrow alley, alone but for a man further down napping under a blanket, Taya began to feel some relief. The mist stopped swimming before her eyes. Closing them made it worse. Taya grunted as she nearly upheaved in her own mask.

"Damn," Taya said as she got her breath under control. While much of her panic had come from the strange environment around her, the haze within her own mind caused her to further curse her own lack of self-control.

Losing track of how many slow breaths she took, Taya finally stood up straight.

"Enforcer Taya Mint," a voice called. "I come with a message."

Taya froze, turning her head slowly.

A man with dwarfism called to her from across the street. He was inked with a thin, white glow around his eyes and chin, and he did not bother with a mask. At her hesitation, he pulled a messenger badge from his pocket, proffering it as she approached. Impersonating a member of the Messenger Service would result in an immediate sentencing down to One—the prison for those considered too dangerous for standard holding facilities. Those in power had done all they could to protect the guild that supplied the only truly untraceable form of communication. In a world where listening devices could be the size of a pinhead, true privacy became a scarce resource.

In return for taking on the responsibility, the Messenger Service was granted complete access to location data within the structure. Not only did they know where you were, powerful A.I.'s helped them predict where you might go. The Messenger Service was one of the few societies not even the most powerful dared to cross. Those who attempted to violate the rules often ended up dead, regardless of social or economic status.

Taya approached the man leaning against a suit shop, trying to remember the formal greeting used for messengers. His glow was impressive enough to make her almost forget the ceremonial opening for messengers. Streaks of intentionally faded brushstrokes paralleled up both of his cheeks all the way to a receding hairline, letting off a soft white light. “Umm... I heard you bring word.”

“Untrue. Word brings me.” The man finished the ceremony with a joyous tone. He pinged her system, confirming her identity. He didn't wear a mask, so Taya slipped off her own, accepting the slight burn in her throat from the mild haze.

Taya sent over a generous tip. “Having a good day?”

“Well, I don't typically come this low. Not many can afford my service down here.” His grin became strained, the lines of his face growing deeper, yet his voice kept its happy lilt.

“Sorry about that.”

“Don't be. I enjoy the change of scenery.”

Taya looked about as a group of women in cheap, flashing, multicolored glow walked by. Two of them eyed Taya with open suspicion. “How long were you paid to wait?”

“My employer paid for true anonymity.” The messenger pulled a piece of burn paper from his coat pocket and handed it over with a gray, cybernetic hand, a feature every messenger adopted once they began their service. “Aside from that, I can give no other information. Sorry.”

She took the paper with a nod. “Thank you. The guilds remain true.”

“The guild remains true.” The messenger turned sharply and walked off, his business complete. He would have no memory of Taya. No messenger was able to pick out any of their clients from a lineup. The implants of the guild were wired in ways no one outside of their organization could replicate. Rumors ran wild, from technology found in alien ships to dark magics. Most were just grateful the technology had remained behind those walls. The possibility of what the markets within superstructures could do with memory-altering technology scared all, with the exception of those at the top.

Taya: Did you send me a messenger?

Quinn: No.

Quinn: Wait, you got one?

Taya cracked the seal of the burn paper. Black ink scrawled into the paper was embossed in a simple font. It read: ‘j15rj19e00.’

Taya: Yup. It’s a disposable channel.

Quinn: Most are these days. Going to call it?

Taya: How would anyone know I’m on this or that I happened to be on the ninth floor? The messenger was waiting for me.

A vendor propositioned Taya with a bracelet from their cart as she passed by, heading back across the street. Taya gestured a soft no as she considered the message. Pre-established channels could be set up for calls of two or more to jump into without ever having to contact each other’s system.

Quinn: Want me to escalate this to Tier Three? Proof someone is hiring outside help can justify that. It means it will get pulled from you without penalty.

Taya: Nah. Now I'm curious.

Quinn: Sure you don't want backup? You haven't seen the biter, have you?

Taya: Nope and nope. I'll hit you up after.

Quinn: Deal. Keep that pistol loaded.

Taya rang the number, staying on the public sidewalk.

A tattooed, slim woman with a pallid complexion answered Taya's call. Her face was mildly gaunt with a mousy nose. Her visible body glow consisted of venomous emerald lips; tracks of poison, half dried and mimicking tear tracks, dripped down her chin and trailed onto her neck. The woman's hands displayed a remarkably complex lime-colored pattern of overlaid neon, keeping with the green theme. To top it all off, matching dyed fangs poked out as she smiled, capturing Taya's attention.

She glowed her teeth. Who does that?

But it was those ruby-red eyes that kept Taya's attention. The woman had been generous with her eye shadow, carefully crafting two fangs to hang from the clouds beneath her eyes. The vicious-looking design emphasized the vampiric color of her irises while somewhat effectively hiding the exhaustion clear even in the avatar's face. Whether it was an attempt at a convincing fake or the woman's real appearance, Taya couldn't tell.

"Ya know, most of the dead stick with a more black-on-black color palette." Taya's hand unconsciously twitched toward her hip holster. The creature could be floors away, and that still wouldn't have lessened the fear tingling up her spine. Having the undead's attention was *always* a threat. "The green is a nice touch."

"I've found what works for me." Her voice slithered in the way only vampires had. Even through her hud, Taya felt her body loosen at the hypnotic speech. "Helga."

“Had it long?”

Helga cracked a confused grin. “What?”

Taya couldn't stop her hand from unconsciously twitching for the pistol once again. “I just—uh, cause—never mind.”

“My god, you really do work high, don't you?” Helga tilted her head, clearly examining Taya's avatar. “You didn't even come in here with a false face.”

“You hired a messenger to find me,” Taya rebuked. “Doesn't take a genius to realize you'd know my face.”

“Of course, consider me embarrassed.” The woman raised an eyebrow. There was a slight edge to Helga's voice Taya couldn't place. It went beyond the undead's unnatural tones. “Let's just get to it. There is nothing to be gained with what you're doing. This doesn't need to get worse. Stop, please.”

“Why?” Taya asked plainly. It felt like less from her end would be a smart choice for this type of conversation. Let Helga do the talking.

Helga laughed, glowing fangs flaring. “Or... things will get very bad for you.” The vampire was speaking carefully. “Seriously, the players involved are more dangerous than you could possibly understand. You're a child about to step off the ledge and into the deep end of the abyss.”

“So, what's your connection to all of this?” Taya sent her A.I. into the call data, gathering what little it could. “You feed on kids too?”

“What? No. And neither has this Oscar, as far as I know.”

“‘This Oscar’? So you don't know him. Helping a stranger out of altruism,” Taya observed. Watching Helga blink in surprise was quite satisfying. “If you're interested in protecting people, why not help me?”

“I'm trying to stop people from getting hurt on my—I'm just trying to stop more bad things from happening.” Helga's avatar leaned forward slightly, a common indicator that the person on the other end of the call was sitting in the real world. “Everything that's happened here is personal. You're stepping into family business. This won't end with an arrest, it can't. Only blood.”

Taya felt a twitch of frustration. “Fine. So this family of vampires is protecting Oscar? Why shouldn’t I just kill ’im for the money and turn you all in? And, ya know, seems like I’d be making a powerful family happy. That doesn’t hurt.”

“Family of vampires? Good luck with that.” Helga’s eyes narrowed, weighing Taya. ”Also, there are no confirmed kills on your record.”

Shit.

Taya’s shoulders slouched. Taking a deep breath, she tried a new approach. “The report is missing. No one is even looking for Nita right now but me. You want me to just let her go?”

She assumed Quinn would refile the report, but Taya had no idea what the police would do with their original interview with Carlson missing. Boots tended to avoid any situation that could lead to bad press, and Carlson going to the press to drum up interest in Nita’s disappearance would become very easy if it became a story about police incompetence.

Taya was happy to see a pang of concern cross Helga’s face. The look seemed genuine. She hadn’t known the report had vanished.

“I understand you’re an enforcer looking for a paycheck, but you haven’t asked me to pay you off.” To Taya’s surprise, the woman’s words held anxiety. Helga’s eyes narrowed. She leaned back, pointing a finger at Taya. “I can’t, can I? You care.”

Taya shrugged in response but then froze, noticing Helga’s sleeve slip up her arm to expose a small, sketched tattoo of the Cheshire Cat. The lack of glow within the ink was uncommon, especially for such colorful work. Having non-package glow on a burner avatar profile would be like painting a rental drone. Some simple green glow aesthetic to distract would take seconds to put on. Many did it to leave a confusing impression. More difficult to see the details through a lot of flash. An old-school tattoo, though? That had to be manually scanned in. Taya squinted at the feline figure. “Alice in Wonderland?”

Helga jerked at the comment, moving to cover the ink. “Consider me a fan.”

Taya began to weigh the odds of this being Helga’s true face. If Helga had been in a hurry, she may have just layered her existing avatar with layers of glow and other smaller physical tweaks to her face. The tattoo, though, that could be easily overlooked.

She is bad at this.

Helga tried to recover her aura of mystique, looking to end the conversation before another slip could be caught. “I promise you, Taya, you aren’t ready for this rabbit hole.”

“Rabbit hole?” Taya cocked a grin, meeting Helga’s crimson gaze. “You seem nervous. Last chance to just help me. I tend to bull my way through things. Friends say I’m relentless.”

“I’m not too worried about an apprentice enforcer dumb enough to go around shouting names.” Helga’s voice returned to spiced honey. It pleaded with Taya to concede, to give in to whatever Helga wanted. “You’re volunteering to be a pawn in a game you don’t even know how to play. Quit while you can.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Taya’s mind raced, trying to think of a disarming question that wouldn’t scare Helga off. “Vamps can’t have ports or huds due to all that fancy healing, so you’re using lenses. Those are expensive and a bitch to set up.” Taya tried to appear at ease. “We’ve both made mistakes, all right? I just want to help a lost kid. Please, seriously, cut the crap and help me. You cared enough to set this up. Maybe if we work together, we can stop the ‘bad things’ you mentioned.”

Helga minimized her avatar.

Taya pinged the woman to bring her avatar back, spamming her with a volley of requests. “Goddammit! I bet you’re just covering your own ass.”

The call ended.

Taya pushed off the wall she had been leaning against.

The whole conversation put her on her back foot. She’d come down here with intent to kill, and ‘Helga’ had just added several layers of shit. *If* any of it was true. There was a good chance none of it was. It could have just been a diversion tactic from... the vampire Taya was coming to kill.

Could he have heard of her asking after Nita and gotten one of his biter friends to try to scare her off? It would explain the lack of tact in Helga’s approach. But it didn’t explain how the hell some biter on the ninth floor would be able to afford a private messenger. The security guard, Jeremy, had seemed tense; maybe he knew Oscar and had phoned?

Taya cursed under her breath, a fist of worry building in her stomach. The odds of this Oscar knowing she was coming had just gotten way higher. Each of her suspicions was as flimsy as the last.

It didn’t change what she needed to do, none of it. No vampire was going to distract her from resolving this for Mrs. Carlson, so she headed back across the street toward the complex.

Noticing a message had come in, Taya clicked on the notification and smiled at Juno's contact photo floating in her hud.

Juno: Late dinner tonight? I know you haven't eaten.

Taya: Sure. 9 at yours? Weird day. Green female biter warned me off this case. Alice in Wonderland fan.

Juno: Bring wine. Sketchy green vamp with excellent taste, got it. I'll order extra garlic. Are you safe?

Taya: Yup. Just still at Dánk, doing some investigating.

Juno: So you know I still have access to your location, right?

Minimizing her messages, Taya shoved open the front door to the apartments. It seemed absurd, in her opinion, to have the entrance to the residence within the alley. It wasn't until she was halfway down the hall that Taya realized why the entrance had been so hidden. The complex, a halfheartedly renovated office space, wasn't up to even the most outdated codes for a living space. The housing crisis had made that type of risk necessary for the less fortunate.

Finding the stairs took a frustratingly long time as none of the doors stood out from the rest. Cheap printWood doors only differentiated themselves with degrees of scuffing. It wasn't until she blindly tried one slightly wider than the rest that Taya was able to ascend to the second level and onto the third, a level that was even darker than the hall she had entered from. Only a single bulb far down the hall flickered in the darkness.

A door opened and closed around a nearby corner.

The oppressive atmosphere of it all sent a shiver tickling slowly down Taya's spine.

Taya pulled a flashlight from her pack's side pocket and snapped it to her pistol.

I'm the hunter here. I'm in control.

She pressed the button on the flashlight, and blinding light burned away the shadows before her. Apartment thirty-two was directly to the right of the stairs.

Taya's heart began to pound, her hands suddenly feeling slippery on the weapon.

Taking a final moment to dig out the silencer from her pack's side pocket, Taya snapped the cylinder onto her weapon.

He's already dead. You're not even really killing someone if it comes to that.

Taya knocked before stepping back.

I won't start with violence. This isn't like breaking into some creep's place. He will be dangerous, and I want answers. If I'm forced to kill him, I may never get answers.

No sound came from within.

After several moments, Taya let out a breath as her wear powered down. "Thank god."

As Taya finished lowering her weapon, the sound of a latch being pulled gave her barely enough of a warning to raise the pistol right back up, wear whirring to life as her glow flared to peak brightness. Three rings on her back blazed to life, causing light to spill from beneath Taya's jacket. The entire hall was consumed in violet as Taya's very gaze became a torrent of violet light.

The door paused on its squeaky hinges before being pulled the rest of the way inward, revealing an imposingly tall figure. Taya raised her gaze, revealing a gaunt face squinting at the beam of light tinged by her own glow. He was lean—black hair, an angular face, and dark skin. His lack of shirt allowed Taya to see lean, wired muscle highlighted by black glow flowing in a thick, angled, woven pattern along his collarbone and chest. The distinctive color only enhanced the aura of the vampiric man.

"So the wild card arrives, and—" Oscar raised a hand with black glow nails, looking down at her. Recognizing what was being shoved in his face, the vampire flinched before resuming a cooler air, slowly raising his other hand in surrender. "I think there has been a miscommunication."

"Back up," Taya commanded, careful to keep her pistol out of his reach.

The creature obeyed, keeping his eyes trained on Taya's weapon—no, her trigger finger—as she backed him into his apartment.

It was cramped. The abundance of furniture resulted in an overstuffed feel to the one-bedroom living space. A massive display screen almost completely consumed the wall to Taya's left. It hung adjacent to a mismatched wooden desk, comically overflowing with monitors. An

open door showed wrinkled sheets on an unmade bed and framed posters of several popular holomodels.

“Oscar,” Taya said as she kicked the door closed behind her.

“She said you’d come.” Oscar’s words slithered into her ears, gnawing deep at her subconsciousness the way only an undead voice could. Taya noted the difference between Helga’s and Oscar’s tones. They were both tempting in the darkest way, but where Helga’s held seduction, Oscar’s pulled into darkness.

Bullshit virus.

“Helga isn’t that smooth a talker.” Taya worked to ignore the calming sensation in her mind, keeping her tone as harsh as she could. “Where’s Nita?”

The vampire froze, taking her in anew. “Nita? Wait, Helga? Uhh, I don’t—”

“I know you were at Dánkoma,” Taya interjected. “Five.”

Oscar blinked at her. “Wait—yeah. You’re an enforcer right? You can’t shoot me. I’m legal. Registered with the P.V.R.”

Taya said. “That doesn’t matter with the recording I got. Four.”

“Recording? Of what exactly? I feel it’s fair I get context before being murdered.” His eyes narrowed. “Don’t worry, I got it. Three.”

Taya’s index finger moved from the guard onto the trigger itself. “I saw you hunt her into a bathroom. If she’s dead, tell me where the body is. My employer deserves that much. Two.”

“You don’t even want to see my side of things?” Oscar’s voice draped over Taya like silk. She had a sneaking suspicion he was doing it on purpose. “I can play you—”

“One.” Taya jerked her weapon to the side, firing a round into the massive display just behind the vampire’s shoulder. Despite her silencer muffling much of the round’s *hiss* from the gas-filled cartridge, the weapon still made a loud *snap*, causing Oscar to jump. A spiderweb break split the display, running from one corner to the other. “Holy hell! Are you insane?” Oscar’s tone instantly rose into something much less alluring. “That was a gift! I have neighbors!”

Taya aimed the pistol back at the vampire. “She was just a girl. Zer—”

“I can prove it!” Oscar shouted with a slight shake of fear. “I can prove I haven’t drunk human blood.”

“I saw the footage.”

Oscar dropped his hands, frustration winning out over his fear. “I. Can. Prove. It.” He pointed over Taya’s shoulder. “Enforcer, you’re on camera. Shooting an unarmed civilian—even a vampire—in their own home won’t make your life easy. Your *murder* will be recorded on an outside system. You made an accusation, and I denied it. Despite whatever you may try to report, I have not made any threat toward you or your,” Oscar glared at the gun still pointed at him before looking back at her, “property.”

She’d heard it all before. Not from a corpse, but the words were all the same. With him being one of the dead, she did find herself asking an off-the-book question. “Would anyone bother to check for it, though?”

“Lovely,” Oscar said, sinking back into a cool tone. “If you don’t trust me to drop my records to you, just breach the network and find it yourself.”

Unable to think of a reason not to give it a try, Taya brought up the home system, her police-grade A.I. easily smashing through his security. All at once, multiple cameras became available to her. Taya brought up a feed marked ‘Living Room’ where she could see herself standing in real time. The lower-quality footage looked terrible, even in the small portion of her vision Taya had relegated it to. She turned off the cameras—just in case.

“All right, I got it.”

Looking through the home database, she quickly found and opened a Guardians report. The volunteer-run Guardians checked on registered vampires and administered in-person testing for fresh human blood in their veins. The report was glowing, showing zero signs of human consumption or even drug use. Given Nita’s timeline, it would have been impossible for Oscar to have fed on her. Taya looked up the volunteer who’d signed the papers and sent the report pin to verify its validity. Unfortunately, everything checked out. “You still could have killed her.”

“So your accusation against me is now that I am a vampire willing to kill a child in a public bathroom but wouldn’t risk feeding on it?” Oscar picked up a gray shirt from the back of the couch and tugged it on. He did an impressive job of ignoring Taya’s barrel now as it followed him across the room. “Certainly never thought I’d be accused of being a serial killer.”

Skipping ahead in the saved recording from the club, Taya snagged the vampire’s contact without permission and sent him the footage. The man’s expression fell as he watched the girl run into the restroom moments before he approached.

“Most certainly didn’t happen like that,” Oscar said. “I believe you’ve been given doctored footage.”

Taya tightened the grip on her pistol. “How’s that?”

“I did go into that restroom, but—Helga? Nita? Okay, Nita—Nita wasn’t in there. Simple cut and edit,” he insisted. “I would have smelled any human in a room that small. But I don’t remember there being any windows or... no, not even a vent big enough for a kid.”

Taya’s intuition said Oscar was telling the truth, but it didn’t make sense. “What were you doing at Dánkoma?”

His hand pointed to a small fridge in the corner. “Making a living.”

Taya stepped over to the fridge and pulled it open with her free hand. Red bags of real human blood shone softly under fluorescents.

“You deal in human blood?”

“Call the police and have the boots pick me up. But put your weapon down, please. I’m not a feeder. I’m a dealer. The living donate for cash, I resell to those struggling with their burden. Understandably, the former don’t like to be in the room with the latter.”

“You don’t eat but you sell?” Taya’s mind whirled to make sense of how this all connected. “Why?”

“I might again someday, and I certainly have before.” Oscar walked over to his desk. He sat in a roller chair, the wheels not budging at his smooth movement. “Right now I don’t.”

Taya shuttered at the calm admittance of past crimes. “So you didn’t even see the girl?”

“I didn’t smell anything but dried urine, soap, and citrus freshener in that room. That room was empty.”

No bounty for a clean vampire. FUCK!

If she had killed Oscar, a basic feeding test would likely have never been done on the accused feeder *if* there hadn’t been a Guardian report that contradicted her. But the report’s existence meant the test would have been done and come back negative. Taya would have been just the latest in a long line of enforcers-in-training forced to restart their apprenticeships after a bad kill. She supposed it was good to be wrong. Being wrong meant the vampire in front of her was harmless. But the knot in her gut redoubled for a reason Taya couldn’t place.

Taya refocused, trying to figure out what the hell to do next. “So you weren’t *struggling* that night?”

“I’m not killing, and I don’t sell to active killers. Those in need come to me for doses. I reduce it over time. Always. My work saves human lives.” A tinge of pride slipped into the vampire’s now relaxed voice. “It’s the only way. If they go straight to packblood—like your government demands—it can become overwhelming. I make *your* solutions possible. The gun, please.”

Taya lowered her pistol and glow. “Who did you piss off enough to make them frame you for killing a kid?”

“Could I show you?” Oscar gently gestured toward his desk. “It doesn’t take much to prove footage is doctored. I got a friend who can run it for a small fee. Get it back to you this afternoon.”

Finally holstering her weapon, Taya waved him on. “Sure.”

Spend your money. See if I reimburse you.

Oscar’s eyes unfocused for a beat as he began to process the footage. Taya tensed as he picked up a display from his desk—currently showing an ad for several tiers of packblood of various colors, a large red bag bearing the slogan ‘Better Than Fresh!’—and began working on, she presumed, sending the file. After he finished, the vampire turned back to Taya, tilting his head. “If you ping me your contact, I’ll get it to you.”

Taya realized she was just openly staring at a man within his apartment after discharging a weapon and all but verbally threatening to kill him. To make it worse, she was sitting on the back of his dirty couch slouched in frustration. She might as well call in a pizza delivery and kick her feet up on the nonexistent coffee table. He may be a vampire, but if Oscar hadn’t hurt Nita, she had no reason to make his life any worse.

Why the fuck am I still here?

“Well, I think as of last week you can legally sue me over the display, so I’m gonna go.” She made for the door.

Oscar stood. “Don’t tell the police. Packblood only sustains us. It doesn’t entirely numb the actual cravings. It doesn’t even prevent us from going through withdrawal.” He gestured to a window shadowed by the thick wall of haze consuming the outside world. “Imagine breathing that air. It wouldn’t kill you, not quickly anyway, but you would still *need* something else. The kind of need that feels wrong to ignore.”

Taya took a breath, itching to leave the creature’s apartment.

Oscar continued what sounded like a practiced speech. “We are trying to bridge that gap. We don’t want anyone to get hurt, but we do need human blood. A lot of it. The way I make my living helps my kind every day.”

“I won’t turn you over to the police. Just tell me if you know who Helga is and what family this is all about.”

“I don’t know a Helga, but—”

Taya took a step for the door. “Green-glowed vampire. Beautiful in a nasty way. Something posh in her voice.”

Stupid smiling cat face on her wrist.

“No idea.” Oscar pointed to the shattered wall display. “Are you going to pay for that?”

Taya rested a hand on her pistol.

The vampire’s shoulders slumped.

She gave a thin smile.

“So, this kid is still missing?” Concern overcame Oscar. He stood up. Yup, *tall*. “That was the last she was seen?”

Turning for the exit, Taya exhaled. “Why do you think I came here, Sherlock?”

“Wait.” Oscar followed Taya. “Look, you can’t leave. I have—”

Taya flared her glowing eyes briefly as she pulled open the door, illuminating the hall almost as well as her flashlight. “Unless you’re willing to sell me something with a bit more kick than blood, yeah, I can.”

As they stepped out of the apartment, several concerned neighbors frantically closed their doors, undoubtedly looking to avoid any confrontation.

Silencer, my ass.

Oscar’s cold hand grasped her own as she reached for the stairwell door. “Look, you know I can’t call anyone about this. You win.”

“Whoa, back off.” Taya elbowed the man and turned threateningly. “We going to have a bigger problem?”

The biter’s fangs glinted under her dulled violet glow as he gave an angry smile that was quickly controlled. “You’re not good at listening.”

“Try something a bit more direct.” Taya raised the power on her wear, bathing the door in intense violet light before yanking it open. She didn’t need to fear a packfed. “Fucker, shithead,

asshole. Maybe try a threat if you're feeling tough. Or would you need to crack that fridge before you'd have balls to do that?"

Oscar backed away, raising his hands in a calming motion. "I'm not trying to insult you. I'm trying to help you."

As he was about to speak, Taya raised a specific finger and hip-checked open the door into the stairwell.

Just before the door shut, a question slipped through: "You haven't bothered the owners of Dánk, have you? Rather dangerous family."

The loud clang of the door behind her punctuated the statement.

Taya froze, the echo of the door shutting seeming to hang in the air for longer than should be possible. Taking one breath, she turned and found Oscar smiling down at her as he pulled the door open. "What? Who are the owners of Dánkoma?"

"Mhm." Oscar pulled the door the rest of the way open, meeting her frustration with his own. "Seems strange you received doctored footage. Assuming you trust the word of a blood-dealing vampire."

Taya smirked. "Haven't ruled you out. You're also a litterbug."

"Litterbug?" Oscar asked. "You said there was one of my kind named Helga? I can look into it for you, *Enforcer*. I know a lot of people with low body temperatures. Especially the ones who operate in darker corners. Not many undead I can't find."

"Suddenly feeling very invested in a lost child?" Taya crossed her arms and met the man's cold, red eyes. "You sure do care a lot about your cattle."

"Jesus. It's a missing kid. I'm not a monster. I want to help." Oscar's red eyes narrowed.

Taya stepped even closer. "Excuse me? You just admitted to selling human blood."

Oscar didn't back down. "Do you have *any* other leads? Do you have *any* better options?"

"I could."

"Do you?"

...*Fuck*.

Chapter 5: The Fallacy of Innocence

“You made me come back to your place just to tell me to head back to Dánkoma?”

Taya considered just how strong Oscar was. Packblood kept vamps powerful, but not at full strength. He would probably heal just fine if she beat him around a little. A biter certainly couldn't call the cops on her for use of excessive force. “Not buying you a new display simply 'cause you advised me to ‘check again.’”

“It's about going back with a target.” Oscar walked toward his cluttered desk. “I saw him there that night. The owner.” Oscar picked up his display again, unlocking it. “Here.”

Taya took the display, meeting Oscar's eyes. She didn't look away until the vampire did. Finally, she lowered her gaze to the screen. “‘Discontinued’?”

“Not the worst band name.” Oscar leaned back in his desk chair.

“Not the best.” Two men and one woman dressed in a retro gothic style flipped Taya off from the display. A time and date matching the night Nita had last been seen flashed up at her from the ad. “You're a fan?”

“No. Not my taste.” Oscar sat at his desk, a mixture of concern and eagerness battling on his face. “But they played that night. And the owner of Dánkoma just so happens to be their manager.”

“...So?”

The vampire blinked at her; it was hard to miss, given his bulging eyes. “Enforcer, please read the flyer. You'll know the name.”

Her eyes drifted down to the smaller print at the bottom of the poster, which stated details about the show. “Doubt it. I don't know much about the music industr—oh.”

Oscar crossed his legs. “You're looking for Robert Labór. Youngest son of James Labór. Bishop of the Crusaders and well-known billionaire—or wait, no, yeah, they're trillionaires.”

Her body went numb. Helga had been absolutely right. Taya wanted absolutely nothing to do with this.

The Labór family was in the energy business. For generations, they had helped build the infrastructure required to power the megastructures that housed New Yorkers away from the haze. Their net worth was speculated to sit comfortably in the high billions along with a hefty number of *powerful* connections, but with two headlines, they had gone from famous to

infamous. The patriarch of the family, James, had completely disappeared from the anti-biter talking circuit after his oldest son, Stewart, had been found guilty of myriad financial crimes. Days after Stewart's arrest, it was announced his stepmother had gone missing. Sarah, a woman closer to the sons in age than to the father she married, had disappeared without a trace. Gossip feeds ran wild with speculation after the Labór family's team of lawyers released a statement saying neither James Labór or anyone else in the family knew anything about Sarah's sudden disappearance. Gossip columns still ran wild, speculating where the missing wife of the religious radical could be.

The fire of scandal only grew larger when James became an avid supporter of the Crusader Party, a group whose platform dripped with revitalized spiritualist fearmongering aimed mostly at the infected community. 'Demons from hell' was a common phrase to hear from members of the organization. Taya being sent after a biter after asking too many questions at a Labór-owned property seemed to fit in a puzzle she hadn't seen the full picture of.

"So why were you sent here, Enforcer?" Oscar prodded, reflecting her thoughts.

Taya met those red eyes again. "You think Nita was taken by Robert Labór?"

"I'd bet my soul on it, Ms. Enforcer." Oscar leaned back, pushing dark curls from his face.

"Just call me Taya," she said, terrified of the shit she had just stepped in. "I gotta go."

"What?" Oscar said with just slightly too much interest for her taste.

Taya extended the handheld display back to him. "What do you mean, 'what'?"

"That—" He stood, coolly indignant once again, pausing as her hand went to her pistol.

"That is at least worth paying for the damage you caused."

"*If* I solve it, you'll get your money for a new display." The words sounded stupid as they left her mouth. Taya didn't want to set one more toe down this path. The Labórs had access to resources well outside her or Quinn's depth. If she continued on, looking for Nita would churn from a simple missing persons case into a fight for survival she had absolutely no chance of winning.

"Solve this?" Oscar's fangs flashed as he smiled. The humor in his voice didn't seem sincere, almost more a warning for her. "You think you can 'solve' all of this?"

Even if Robert had nothing to do with Nita's disappearance, the family would squash any investigation as soon as they got wind of it. Powerful families came down with hammers to stop even the smallest controversies. The Labórs would already be on edge due to their tabloid-

grabbing year. This had just exploded from a molehill into a mountain. Taya was dangerously close to several leagues out of her paygrade.

“The white-haired enforcer, taking vengeance on the rich ne’er-do-wells,” Oscar mocked. “I daresay, the revolutionary this megastructure needs.”

“Good luck with the cops.” Taya turned from his mocking tone and headed out of the apartment for the second time.

Maybe letting Quinn escalate this away from me is a good idea after all.

The problem was that escalating a case with the Labór name attached meant the case would get swept directly under the rug. She’d either need to omit the lead entirely or risk putting a powerful name on file that would result in a drone waiting silently under her bed one night. The Labór family might have to pay a large stack of cash, and nothing more would come of it. This wasn’t a large-scale financial crime of the sort that had done in Stewart. There were no victims with immense bank accounts here. This was a kid no one gave two shits about vanishing without even a body to point to. She would have to let it all go.

A realization hit Taya. She was supposed to kill this vampire so this case would be resolved, *for the Labórs*. Without even knowing it, Taya might have already been working for them. Any enforcer that got this handed to them and ran in, overeager to collect a bag on a feeding vampire, would go home thinking they saved the day. She’d been aimed like a bullet at Oscar. Whichever Labór had done this hadn’t done their due diligence to see Oscar had just been cleared. If she had fallen for it... No. If she had killed Oscar and the vampire was cleared of wrongdoing after the fact, it would be easy to pay off the right lab tech or—well, fuck, a hundred other simple ways for someone with resources to bury things behind closed doors. That’s if they even bothered to. Taya didn’t think many cops would be eager to pick up a missing persons weeks or months out from the initial report.

What will they do when they realize their patsy is still alive? What if I am just believing a goddamn undead creep and I...

Taya stopped at the doorway and turned back to look at where Oscar sat in his chair, watching. He cocked his head again at her hesitation. She dismissed the idea of killing him. He was innocent. No matter what was sent after her as a result, Taya couldn’t murder in cold blood. Not even a vampire.

“Fuck,” she breathed.

Her alert box chimed, indicating he'd sent her his contact info. She was tempted to reject it, but instead sent her own. He could be useful.

While corpses couldn't use wear but could glow—something to do with vampiric healing abilities—contact lenses allowed them to access simpler systems of their own without implants. They could order food at a restaurant or access the digital markets no problem. The interface was just far less smooth than the mental implants living people could have installed.

"I'll ask around for you, how about that?" he offered. "About Helga."

She nodded. "Yeah, sure. Do that. Find her, and I'll buy the biggest, latest display on the market."

"Seems totally fair. I work for you, *then* you'll replace what *you* broke," Oscar said.

Taya asked, "You really care about humans?"

He quirked one of his thick brows. "Yeah, I care about my fellow chin-bearers."

"What?"

He seemed eager to inform, saying something about humans being the only animal to have chins, but Taya was tired of being in the cramped home.

The door squealed on its hinges as she pulled it shut behind her. Loosening the straps on her pack, Taya tucked her shaking hands into her armpits, wishing it was only the stems making her shake.

Hours later, as the lights from the ceiling began to dim for late evening, Taya stepped from the train platform onto the street to Juno's. Trying to force down a spike of anxiety, she called Mrs. Carlson.

The woman answered on the first ring. "Taya. How are you? Did you manage to make it to the campus today?"

"No, Mrs. Carlson, I managed to get to Dánkoma. I talked my way into accessing some cameras. I'm happy to say I found footage of Nita." The panicked relief of Carlson's gasp had Taya worried she'd overexcited the woman. "I've gotten some information that makes me think someone tried to send me down a false trail."

The anxiety in the elder woman's voice reached a level Taya had never heard before, and she blinked rapidly. "I don't understand."

"I had a contact of mine check in on the open investigation into Nita. The files disappeared. No trace of it in the police database."

To her credit, Mrs. Carlson sat and thought for a long while before responding. Taya had almost reached Juno's complex, working her way through the grad student housing—far more faux greenery than she was used to—as the ceiling above projected near-perfect evening light.

“Taya, I want you to be careful. This is scaring me.”

“Mrs. Carlson, I need to know if you have any connection to the Labór family.” It was a long shot, but Taya was at the point of grasping at twigs. “Would they want to hurt you for any reason?”

Shaking her head slowly, Carlson seemed uncertain in her answer. “A lot of people hate what I was a part of, but I haven't ever had an issue with Crusaders. Let alone James or—wait, isn't he the one with the missing wife? Taya, could that be connected?”

“Honestly, I have no idea. Though I'm looking harder at Robert, his son and owner of the club Nita was last seen at.” Taya's determination sank, the hope of having a clear motive handed to her evaporating. Making an enemy of a family like the Labórs wasn't something someone did without noticing.

“Mrs. Carlson... this is going to dark places, and I need you to be prepared for that.” Feeling the guilt solidify in her core, Taya fought through the next question. “Do you want me to continue on knowing where it might go?”

The older woman stiffened and her gaze narrowed. “I understand, Taya.”

She'd felt Taya's own hesitation. Shame freezing into a desire to flee, Taya tried to regain her professional demeanor. “I'll come by in the morning to talk over how we will move forward.”

“Thank you, Taya.” Carlson ended the call.

Taking a minute to calm her nerves with several drawn-out hits, Taya's numb finger rang Juno's door and shoved a red bottle toward the bell's camera. “I bring the key to your heart.”

Juno's voice over the speaker bore a grin. “You brought cheese?”

“I said key, not battering ram.” Taya lowered the wine and smiled too wide at the lens. “Open up.”

“Open up? I swear, some people. What happened to may I come—”

“Open the door, Jun!” A smile tugged at her lips at the sound of her friend's lame cackle.

Juno's apartment had the same layout as Taya's studio but with far more lighting and modified pastel plant life. Juno had added LED strips along almost every inch of trim, the

expensive, system-integrated kind. A decent-looking dining set divided the kitchen from a makeshift living room area, which also served as a bedroom. In the corner, a pane of tempered glass separated the bathroom from the rest of the apartment. It was extremely luxurious for a student, but Juno had earned it through grades and volunteer work. The university hadn't even charged her for the upgrade.

Juno wore her typical attire—professional yet *extremely* flattering. Her pants were perfectly tailored printLinen to match her button-up blouse, all of which were dyed in soft shades of green and pink, complementing her bright, flamboyant glow.

“Smells great. What are you cooking?” Taya put the bottle on the counter, her eyes darting to the figure on the couch. Upon seeing Quinn, Taya felt a knot build in her gut. She had hoped to not have to deal with the case until morning. “Hey, Q.”

Quinn lifted his drink. “Hey, Squirt.”

He wore his uniform, black from head to toe, clashing with the apartment around him in an almost comical way.

Glancing at Quinn's drink, Taya's tongue froze in her mouth as the smell hit her nose. It was bold, with a hint of sweet earthy tones. Coffee with sugar and cream steaming in a hot mug. Without missing a beat, Taya's mouth began watering. She turned on her mentor. “Is that *real* coffee?”

Quinn shook his head. “Uhh, no. Printed. Just needed a pick-me-up. Long shift.”

“Juno... had...” Gears turned in Taya's mind as her nose confirmed her suspicion. “That's real. Quinn... are you hiding *real* coffee from me?”

Juno's cackle cut through the air again. “Told you she'd be able to smell the difference.”

Quinn scowled. “You gave her some?! She'll drink it *all*.”

“You son of a bitch!” Taya leapt over the coffee table that separated them—wear mildly surging—raining a series of slaps onto Quinn's shoulders and arms. “Dozens of jobs! A hundred late nights! And you had *coffee*?!”

“I only got it last week, ya ass!” Quinn laughed, trying to grab Taya's playful hits. “Ow!”

“A full week?!” Taya lightly slapped him on the ear. “How did you get it? Did you steal it? How'd you get Jun to keep it from me? Did you pay her?!”

“Uh—okay, really—ow.” Quinn looked to Juno for help. “God, Taya, you made my earring stab me. Jun, help me out!”

“Feed him those rings.” Juno picked up a roll of paper towels and tossed it to Taya. “Leave marks, T.”

“Cop trash!” Taya tried to catch the soft club, but Quinn snatched it first, throwing it back across the room.

“Fine! I’ll give you some!” Quinn rubbed viciously at his ear as Taya climbed off the laughing man. The age lines in his face always sank deeper when he smiled wide. “Fucking hell.”

Taya marched up to Juno, flaring her glow. The colors of the apartment were bright enough to actually minimize her intended effect. “You’re only getting out of this ’cause you shared.”

Juno brought Taya in for a hug and kissed her cheek. “My way of telling without telling.” Her voice dropped too low for Quinn to hear. “He’s trying to bond. The better you’ve gotten, the less he and I have to talk about. Hence the invite.”

Taya sighed. “Fair enough.”

Quinn stopped rubbing his ear and kicked his feet back up on the coffee table. “Neither of ya can keep a fucking secret.”

“It’s almost like we’re friends,” Taya retorted. “Trying to wedge secrets between us. Horrible.”

Quinn’s pitch rose several octaves. “I’m offended by the accusation.”

“You get off on it,” Juno teased, nose wrinkling in a way Taya adored anytime she talked trash.

Taya nodded. “He’s a drama hound. Old dogs always enjoy small fights.”

“I’m barely fifty!” Quinn said.

Juno nodded with Taya. “Gives him a sense of power.”

Looking between the two of them, Quinn’s eyes narrowed. “Like we don’t all enjoy a bit of the poke and prod here.”

Juno began walking back to the kitchen to tend to a noisily boiling pot. “To betray one’s friend is a social sin.”

Quinn smiled in return. “To sin is fucking human.”

A little over an hour later, after wolfing down the meal prepared by Juno, Taya filled them in on the events of the day. She left out some of her own mistakes, of course, but under Quinn’s expressionless gaze, Taya found it difficult to lie. Juno nearly leapt out of her seat hearing how

low within the megastructure Taya had ventured, but it wasn't until she mentioned the family now positioned at the center of the investigation that Quinn reacted.

Taking up the dinner plates, Quinn blinked at her. "No shit, Robert Labór? *Really?* You think Bobby boy killed Nita?"

"Maybe, could've been Robert. All we know is that she disappeared in his club. Or was last seen there." Taya rolled her shoulders and cracked her neck from side to side. Resting a satisfied hand on her stomach, Taya felt more grateful for Juno's cooking than ever before. After hard days, Juno's cooking went down like a soothing hug. "I looked into the band on the way over here. They're a synth-punk style, that sort of heartache junk you hate to love."

"Sorry, but I never looked into the family. I just know they're rich and that their eldest son's currently proudly behind bars." Juno sipped a vodka tonic. "Why do we care about them?"

Taya inhaled slowly, accustomed to Juno's aversion to staying up-to-date on current celebrity culture. The woman could recite entire fictionalized histories from obscure books, but structure-shaking business developments? Juno's eyes would glaze over far longer than it took to send a message. "Vampire bashers and energy moguls. James—big daddy—used to go on the debate shows all the time, trashing the dead. Family has enough money to be all but untouchable. Stewart did shady business shit, no killings—well, no killings the public knows of. Anonymous hacker dumped a truckload of evidence to nearly every reporter over Floor Fifty."

"Mhm," Quinn agreed. "They got the best lawyers for Stew, and all they could do was try to argue incompetence. Didn't work. Too much of a detailed record of how he did it all. Price he pays for being meticulous."

Juno's brow furrowed. "Sounds a bit out of the job description, Taya. Is this safe? Families like that hit back hard."

"Top-tier dangerous," Quinn said, switching on a dishbot. "You've officially been assigned the gig, but you could ditch this one without penalty, T. I could hand you another that would get you the badge by next week."

Juno scowled. "Quinn, I asked Taya."

Quinn rolled his eyes. "You didn't even ask a question."

"Yes I did!" Juno turned to Taya. "What's the plan?"

Taya met Juno's eyes, wanting to avoid the question. "Coffee won't taste as good knowing it's coming from him."

“But Quinn doesn’t want you drinking it. It’ll taste even better now.”

“Genius brain there, Jun.” Taya tapped her temple and got up to refill her drink. “But, yeah, the younger one—Robert—owns Dánk. Something to keep him busy. Gotta put forward the illusion of a productive life, I guess.”

“Why didn’t you just kill the vamp, T?” Quinn’s eyes seemed unfocused, his fingers twining around the gold chain he always wore when off duty. He took the open seat next to Juno. “You’ve stepped in shit, and this could have all been tied up by now.”

Taya opened and then closed her mouth, in shock.

“What the fuck, Quinn?” Juno said. “The guy’s innocent.”

“C’mon. Girl’s surely dead by now,” he said. “Carlson would at least get *closure* with a lie. And—ya know—Taya’d already have the promotion. Doubt the old bag will get anything close to that now. Telling her Labórs are involved? How will that *really* help her?”

Taya’d lied claiming the undead dealt coke, not blood. Something Quinn wouldn’t care about. Oscar had seemed genuine in his belief that he was working for the greater good. Who was she to tell a cop? If Quinn found out, he’d throw Oscar into Floor One where he’d remain for years. Or he’d just execute him. Vampires had only recently been granted the right to due process, and to claim the justice system wasn’t adapting well to the change would be an understatement.

Why keep at this? ‘Helga’ was probably right, and Oscar can be left pissing in the wind for all I care.

“I already told her, Quinn.” She sighed.

“Idiot.” Quinn finished off the dishes.

Juno glared at the officer’s back.

Taya hid her hesitation by uncorking the tequila. “I don’t want my first solo solve to be willfully bogus, all right?”

Quinn took a long drag of his drink, finishing it before coming to join them at the table.

“So let’s say Robert’s involved. Somehow, a little girl gets hurt. He covers it up for someone, setting up some biter to take the fall.” Quinn’s worry seemed to dissipate a bit. “Ya shoulda blown the dead creep’s head off the moment you realized what was happenin’. You’re now a target of one of the most powerful families within the structure because some vampire doesn’t get taken off the street. Okay, what’s next? Going to break into Robby’s home and get killed by

his security team? I can't save you from that. Take the evidence to the press? This ain't Stewart-solid. Flimsy and circumstantial. Trust me, I'm speaking from experience. Greater good can rest in a lie."

Juno's glare could freeze hardened men in place, Quinn included. "Wow, Quinn. Can you let off? You're acting like you have this solved."

Taya finished making another tonic, the tiny cart squeaking on poorly printed wheels. "No one said Nita is dead, Quinn. Even if there is a one percent chance she's not."

"There isn't, Taya. This won't have the happy ending you're thinking." Quinn pointed one of his beringed fingers at her. "Did you promise Carlson you'd get the girl back? Christ, did you tell her *all* of this?"

"N—a little. I only asked if she has any connection to the family." Taya struggled to inject strength into her words.

"On the word of a corpse?" Quinn's voice mellowed slightly under Juno's judgmental stare. "Seriously, I'm not sorry. I'm pointing out the obvious. This is way out of line, Taya. You don't tell clients shit until you have solid proof or the job is done. What's going to stop her from hiring some other asshole who'll get in your way?"

Juno crossed her arms, pointedly not looking at Quinn. "So, what's next, Taya?"

"Oh, please," Quinn sneered, tipping the front legs of his chair back off the ground. "She doesn't have a choice."

Nice to be reminded why I hated you before—GAH!

Quinn had deemed Taya unworthy of handling a case with such a high profile. The fact that Taya had come to agree made it sting in a way she hadn't expected. With a long breath, Taya made her wounded ego accept what Quinn was saying as the truth. She *hated* it, but what could she possibly do against the Labórs *and* the Crusaders who acted as their lapdogs?

"Taya won't quit." Juno's faith in Taya caused the pain to sharpen. "She'll track down this Paul guy again, for one. He handed her dirty evidence. He's gotta—"

"I'm out, Jun."

Both of her friends' gazes burned as they looked at her. Taya had spent hours mulling it over, but there was no safe way forward. The chance of finding anything close to justice wasn't worth risking her life. It would have to be handed off. Maybe someone more qualified would have the

resources to really find out where Nita was. Taya was disgusted with how badly she wanted to believe that lie.

“They’ll already know I didn’t off the biter if they arranged all this, which means I’m facing people out of my league.” Taya had to force the words from her throat. “If Oscar did kill her, he’ll have already disappeared, not risking me returning with Quinn and a couple of his buddies. I don’t have any advantage here, none. Mrs. Carlson will understand when I tell her, or she’ll hate me. I’ll help find someone who can help her, or—probably for the better—” The silence from her friends weighed on Taya’s shoulders. She had to stop tears of frustration from forming. “Talk her into letting it go. Quinn, I wasn’t ready for a T-Three. I’m sorry. I botched this.”

Juno stood, closed the gap between them, and wrapped her arms around Taya. “I’m proud of you. That couldn’t have been easy to say.”

Taya settled into her friend’s embrace just as Quinn broke the peace. “Smart woman.”

“Fuck off, Quinn.” Juno turned toward the man. “Can you just be decent for one evening?”

Blowing out his cheeks, Quinn stood and joined them by the bar cart. “A’ight, fine. Taya, you boned this.”

Juno shifted. Taya recognized the movement and snatched Juno’s arm as her friend prepared to throw a fist.

Quinn pretended not to see the threat. “And I am proud of ya. *You* may have even solved this thing—we’ll never know. The lead isn’t enough to move on with the level of pushback ya’d get, but it’s there. You found the right trail, and I’m impressed. More than a lot can say about their first cases. And, more important, you’ve realized it’s over your head. It’s the best survival skill an enforcer can ’ave. Realizing that takes,” he raised a hand and gestured to his own bobbing head, “brains. Better brains than I got most the time. You shouldn’t have told Carlson, it puts her in danger, but that’s out of yer hands now. What you need to realize is I woulda never given this to you if I’d known what you’d find. My biggest fear of letting you off the leash was you bitin’ off more than you could chew. That fear’s been put to rest. Blame me, okay?”

Taya let Juno’s arm go and slowly gave Quinn a hug, using the proximity to hide her grinding teeth. “That really, *really* sucked, but thank you for trying.”

He patted her back with his free hand, a fat ring thumping against her shoulder bone. “How do you still manage to sound mad while givin’ me a hug?”

Taya leaned back. “‘Cause you’re worth being mad at and appreciating for now.”

Juno barked a laugh. “You sounded angry with me, too.”

Taya broke the hug and headed back to the kitchen. “And what’s that tell you?”