

# DUST

an urban fantasy novel  
by

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DUST

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# 1.

The monster chased him from the castle's tower, down the winding stone steps, through the iron gate, across the moor, and out of the dream.

He tumbled from bed, the terror still fresh in his mind; so much so that when he found his limbs tangled in the sheets, he believed the creature had pursued him from that somnambulant realm into the waking world. A raucous soundtrack of alarm filled his head. Cursing and sweating, he squirmed his way across the floor. His escape ended when a wall pressed against shoulders; he could flee no farther. Only then did he realize that earthly cloth bound him, not a snarl of noxious tentacles.

Gradually, his panic faded and sanity restored a modicum of clarity to his thoughts. Despite the room's darkened condition, his familiarity with the chamber attributed details to the vague forms. The bed he had just evacuated, barely visible shorn of its cheap cotton sheets. The monolith that had to be the dresser. The table that served as his desk, its rectangular edges illuminated by the tiny red LED numerals of a digital alarm clock. The mound of clothing in the corner that was his hamper. Shadows veiled everything, muffling light and sound. Only the whisper of the ceiling fan marred the nocturnal silence.

Laying there, swaddled in bedsheets, he gasped away the residual traces of his terror. His face reddened with embarrassment over his childish behavior. As his breathing finally settled into a smooth and gentle exchange of air, he watched the monster emerge from under the bed.

Propelled by a horde of chitinous legs, the creature scuttled forth. In violation of the room's overall gloom, the thing was clearly discernable. Its gooey tentacles reached for him. The beast's luminous hundred eyes expressed its vile intentions.

Still half-cocooned in the bedsheets, he kicked out to ward off the monster. His bare feet slapped wetly against its imminent flank. This maneuver did little to slow down the thing's approach.

With the beast's slaving maw barely a meter away, he managed to untangle himself from his linen prison. Acting more in desperation than anything, he flung the sheet at the creature. As the white curtain drifted in the air, he scrambled to his feet. He didn't get

far. Slimed by his contact with the creature, the soles of his feet skated out from under him. As he hit the floor, he felt a rope of jelly encircle his ankle.

He kicked again, with similar futility. Moving in surging waves, the monster swept over him. Only the thin fabric of the sheet separated him now from the ghastly predator. Its putrid breath oozed through the weave, basking his face. He gagged. He flailed to prevent the creature from mounting his prone body.

This time, his contortions succeeded in extricating him from beneath the monster's vile bulk. Leaving the thing pulsating on the floor, he fled. He reached the door, yanked it open, and stumbled out into the hallway. His feet still moistened with slime, he skittered along the corridor's wooden floor. He collided with the closed elevator door, but promptly discarded it as a route of escape. If he waited for the elevator to come, the monster would certainly catch up to him. Already he could hear its gloopy passage into the hall behind him. He condemned himself for not slamming the door behind him, sealing the creature in his apartment. The stairwell offered his only speedy exit.

His slippery feet impaired his stability as he descended the steps. More than a few times he fell, spilling down to crash on the landings. He struggled to ignore the aches and bruises, to continue his plunge, but each footfall sent agonizing pangs up his legs, teasing his already-tightened spine with fresh waves of pain. At one point he had bitten his lip upon impact, and the coppery taste of blood tantalized his tongue, adding tangible nausea to his suffering.

Still he ran, wildly, undaunted by any discomfort, unmindful of any obstacle. Above, he heard the beast scuttling in pursuit, its spiny legs tapping out hideously complex rhythms on the steps.

Bursting from the stairwell, he crossed the lobby at a mad pace. His dash spared no time or effort to avoid a pair of ladies loitering just inside the entrance. He unceremoniously raced past them, knocking one on her ass and sending her scantily clad companion staggering back against the wall of letter slots. He stiff-armed the tenement's entry doors open and stumbled outside. The night air immediately chilled the perspiration that covered him.

At this late hour, there were few people on the street to witness the half-naked man's deranged comportment. He moved too fast for anyone to catch a concise glimpse of his face, but even a sharp observer wouldn't have been able to report on his appearance with any accuracy, so twisted with terror were the man's gaunt features. He was clearly pale-skinned, thin, long-limbed. His drab

brown hair trailed in sweaty strands from his high scalp. He wore only boxer shorts.

He didn't stop on the sidewalk, but sprinted across the street and toward the park opposite the fleabag hotel. He tripped on the curb and went tumbling, leaving a smear of bloody skin on the coarse pavement. Panting through teeth clenched in agony, he came to rest between the stone columns that flanked the park's entrance. There, he rolled onto his back and, half-sitting-up, crab-crawled back against the base of the nearest stone column. From this vantage, he fought to catch his breath and ignore his numerous injuries, while blearily gazing back at the hotel's red-brick edifice.

The pair of prostitutes had followed him out onto the street; they stood on the sidewalk across the way, cursing him and waving their diminutive fists in the air. An drunken pedestrian, misreading the situation, jeered at the fleeing man's adulterous plight.

Within seconds, the monster blasted through the hotel's doorway—quite literally “blasting,” shattering the panes of glass and tearing parts of the frame from its setting. By some quirk, the creature was still enshrouded by the bedsheet, making it appear as if some vaudevillian ghost had just hurried into view.

Seeing this apparition, the prostitutes' cajoling rose into a pair of shrill squeals. Moving surprisingly fleet on their absurdly high platform heels, the ladies bolted. Within an instant, they each vanished in a different direction along the sidewalk. The drunk did not fare as well. Too inebriated to fully comprehend his peril, the drunk cackled at the shrouded figure and stamped his feet in glee on the pavement. This noise momentarily distracted the beast from pursuing its original intentions. Veering toward the drunk, it aggressively pounced on him. The man went down, his cries of surprise (and then his blood-curdling screams of horror and agony) swiftly muffled by the bedsheet that suddenly swallowed him.

Across the street, the half-naked man clambered to his feet. He made no move to rescue the drunk—a futile move at this point, judging from the gout of blood that gushed from under the shroud. Instead, he turned to flee into the park.

Ten meters in, the cobblestone path curved to the right. As the fleeing man took that turn, he caught a brief glimpse of the street behind him.

Having finished with the drunk, the monster abandoned the mutilated corpse. During the lethal struggle, the sheet had become dislodged from the beast and now covered the body as if spread by a medical examiner. A red stain expanded across its cotton surface.

Meanwhile, the creature headed across the avenue in pursuit of its primary prey. Midway, a car careened into the beast with a wet thump. The crash did scarce damage to the thing. Its glutinous anatomy absorbed most of the impact. The car sank into the monster's flank, bumper, hood and fenders crumpling and tearing. Adhering to no distinct physique, the monster flowed over the wreck. Its tentacles oozed through the shattered windshield to engulf the driver. Mortal shrieks revealed that the driver had survived the collision only to perish in a far more terrible fashion.

The fleeing man did not pause to witness the driver's demise. He raced on, desperate to find safe shelter from the monster's wrath. Just as in his nightmare, the creature had chased him from home out into the cold night; only this time waking from the dream offered no potential escape. He knew in his heart that running was fruitless; tireless and bloodthirsty, the monster would continue to chase him no matter how far or long he ran. But standing his ground and facing the thing was suicidal, and so far the fleeing man's state of mind had not reached that level of despair. So he stumbled through the park, each footfall triggering a chorus of aches throughout his body. There was no point in avoiding the circles of pale light cast by the lamp-posts, for the creature had already displayed its keen night-vision.

His haggard progress brought him to an ancient fountain located at the center of the park. Any water its marble basin had once contained was long gone, replaced over time by matted leaves and windblown dirt. At first it seemed to him that a swarm of fairy lights danced in the twilight air above the derelict fountain, but then he realized they were only fireflies broadcasting their urge to mate. The man circumnavigated the littered basin.

As he reached its far side, he saw the monster scurry into view. The structure presented no obstacle for the creature; it climbed the fountain's carved lip and scuttled through the arboreal debris.

As the monster advanced on him, the man's efforts to maintain cerebral clarity failed him and panic bullied its way into a command position in his head. He backed away from the creature, his hands raised in valueless defense. A moan rose painfully in his fear-constricted throat. Moving backwards, he failed to see the park bench behind him until the edge of its seat jarred him off-balance and he collapsed across the wooden slats. There was no time to regain his feet.

In seconds, the monster loomed over him. Its maw stretched wide, revealing a thicket of snaggly fangs. Several tongues extended, their multi-pronged tips writhing like prehensile

appendages. A multitude of fierce eyes glared down at the man. The beast spread its tentacles to form an organic cage in the air. In unison, mouth and cage rushed to encompass their prey.

The man cringed. Although hysteria dominated most of his synaptic activity, he managed to utter a coherent (if monosyllabic) word: “No!”

And the monster was gone.

His dementia took a few moments to subside. He sprawled panting on the bench. He gaped at his surroundings—the darkened park. There was the cobbled path, the neglected fountain, the troupe of fireflies dancing in the night air...but no monster.

It was gone.

But not its mayhem.

The wail of a police siren jolted him from his horrified daze. He fumbled to his feet and hastily moved off along a path different than the one he had used to reach the abandoned fountain. It delivered him from the park, down the street from his initial entry point.

Pausing there on the distant sidewalk, he saw a crowd forming around the disfigured remains of a car. Someone (probably a man who crouched nearby, emptying the contents of his stomach onto the pavement) had pulled aside the bloodstained sheet, revealing the drunk’s mangled corpse. With lights flashing, a police car squealed to a halt at the edge of the scene. Two cops stepped from the vehicle, but their attention was focused on the crowd and they never noticed the half-naked man.

With a sigh of regret, Dusty turned away from the ruckus and retired into the calmer night.

## 2.

“So...there were no witnesses?”

The detective shrugged and confessed, “No reliable ones.”

Special Agent Frederick Synder arched an eyebrow and leveled a frown at the police detective. “Which means there *were* witnesses, but you simply don’t like their accounts of the incident.”

Again, Detective Sampkin shrugged. “It’s all in the report.” He was a short pudgy man whose slumping shoulders communicated his undriven character. It was obvious that he wanted no part of this

outlandish incident, but then he resented the Feds for poking their nose into his business.

Synder leaned forward, bringing his impressive linebacker shoulders to loom over the cop. “You weren’t there, were you?” His bulk gave him a sense of puissance, one he often used to trample any opposition. You knew before he flashed any badge that he was a figure of authority. His powerful physique was no masquerade, his muscles were honestly earned from hours in the gym and a strict adherence to healthy nutrition. Just as the brain within this buff anatomy was equally honed and sharp. An eidetic memory filled his head with scores of facts and techniques. He’d be 43 in a few months. His angelic face strangely contradicted the collective bluster manifested by the rest of his attributes. His eyes were tiny, but intelligent. His brow was bony and bulbous. His lips were almost effeminate. His hair was buzz-cropped. This baby-like visage served to fool the lowlifes he encountered in pursuit of his job. Suspects took him for a bulked up imbecile and never noticed how he cunningly manipulated them.

“I got stuck with the case...” bridled Detective Sampkin.

“And you’d rather ignore the report than conduct a competent investigation.”

This insult made the detective square his jaw. He openly scowled at the FBI man. “If I gave any credence to the report, I’d never put this one to bed. It’s unsolvable.”

“Because you don’t like the evidence...?” taunted Special Agent Dexter Durne. In every way different from Synder, Durne achieved the same imposing personality with a tall gaunt look. The skin on his face was stretched tight over its skeletal structure, giving him a deathlike appearance. When on-duty, he affected a permanent scowl: furrowing his bushy eyebrows and drawing his thin lips into a stern grimace. Off-duty, he played the part of a goofy farmboy—much to Synder’s pique. It was difficult to gauge Durne’s age; he could’ve been a weathered thirty or a mummified forty.

Detective Sampkin threw back: “Because the facts don’t make any fucking sense!”

Leaving his partner to distract the detective with additional digs, Synder reopened the folder the cop had offered him and once more reviewed the account.

One man mauled and another eviscerated while still behind the wheel of a Taurus hatchback. The car itself had suffered severe damage, but not from any collision; according to the report the wreckage looked more like it had been torn open. Most of the witnesses claimed they hadn’t gotten a good look at the culprit; a



few were daring enough to blame an enormous dog. A pair of women (whom the reporting officer had noted were scantily dressed and wore extreme amounts of makeup, as if he'd been afraid of outright calling them prostitutes and thereby undermining the credibility of their stories) had professed that a half-naked man had been involved, by virtue of the man knocking them down as he'd dashed from the hotel entrance. One of the ladies-of-the-night asserted that an octopus had followed the half-naked man out onto the street to perpetrate the ensuing havoc. Whatever it had been, it had possessed enough bulk to smash the hotel entrance to bits. On one point, everyone agreed: the beast had vanished into Edgely Park.

Paging through the report, Synder reached the part that covered the results of a search of Edgely Park. No sign of any dog nor octopus had been found. There were, however, a few smears of blood on the pavement just outside the northernmost entrance to the park, which lay across the street from the hotel. Samples had been taken, but they didn't match either of the victims.

Needless to say, the Baltimore police were stumped—with good reason.

The facts were certainly outlandish, but that was what had attracted Synder to the case.

After copying a few particulars to his own notebook, Synder handed the folder back to Detective Sampkin, rescuing him from Durne's further verbal denunciations.

"The car," grunted Special Agent Synder. "It's in your motor pool?"

"Yeah." Clearly, Durne's dressing down had alienated the detective, destroying any chance of the man's willing cooperation. Not that it mattered. Sampkin hadn't been on the scene, had only inherited the case hours later. His knowledge was no more hands-on than Synder's.

Well, actually, the comparison wasn't entirely fair. Special Agent Synder was no stranger to outlandish cases—much to the exasperation of his partner. The facts might've seemed sparse and puzzling, but they presented a strange logic to the seasoned investigator.

Synder was especially interested in this half-naked man who had supposedly fled the scene before the outbreak of any atrocities. He suspected they were old acquaintances...of a sort.

After some terse pleasantries, the FBI men left the squad room and took the elevator down to the sublevel location of the

precinct's motor pool. There, a grease-smeared technician showed them the remains of the car from the outlandish incident.

Synder chewed on his lip.

The descriptions in the report hadn't done justice to the actual damage. Even the photography had failed to capture the wreck's horrific nature. Those pictures had made Synder suspect that an internal explosion had sundered the automobile—but an eyes-on examination of the car revealed otherwise. The contours of the bent metal indicated that the fuselage had suffered an external assault.

"Those look like teeth marks." Synder pointed at one of the torn edges.

"I don't think octopi have teeth," remarked Durne.

"Actually, they do, Dex, and beaks that can tear."

"Tear up metal like that?" Durne tilted his head toward the wreck.

"I guess not," conceded Synder.

"So—it must've been a dog..."

"A dog that can rip apart a car? Get real, Dex."

"So—what *could*?"

"I think we need to question those ladies-of-the-night. They appear to be the only ones who got a close-up look at our beast."

Following Synder from the motor pool, Durne grumbled, "Tell me again why you think this incident warrants FBI attention?"

"It definitely has *my* attention," asserted Synder.



The address given by the ladies-of-the-night led downtown to an empty lot snuggled between a pair of long-derelict warehouses. This daunted neither of the FBI men, they'd half-expected the address to be bogus. But it did give them a starting point, for the odds were good that the ladies knew that lot was empty because they frequented the area, whether on business or pleasure or just crashing after a long night's work.

They settled into a surveillance of the region. Synder nursed a cup of wretched java and a stale donut in the windowseat of a corner cafe. Durne hunkered down in their black Impala which was parked beneath the soot-covered buttress of an elevated train route, affording him a clear view of all four roads leading to the intersection.

While he waited, Synder reviewed the outlandish facts. The beast and its ferocity were new, but they definitely fell under the

classification of inexplicable events. Not paranormal events, for Synder's analytical mind had no patience with mystical fancies. He did not believe in ghosts or demons or witches or telepathic cultists. Everything in his world could be scientifically explained. Everything except the half-naked man, who Synder suspected was the person of interest he had stalked for nine months. As yet Synder had no concrete fix on the man, he habitually used false names, but he always seemed to be around when things got weird. Or at least someone like him. Sometimes the man was thin, sometimes heavysset, sometimes fair-haired, other times dark-haired, once he'd even been bald (although not elderly). His age was one of the man's few stable attributes: always early twenties.

Initially, it hadn't been the man who'd attracted Synder's interest; it'd been the strange nature of the seemingly unrelated incidents.

An overturned gasoline tanker that had exploded but left only one side of the street burned.

A shark (specifically a 30-foot Great White behemoth) that had interrupted a children's birthday party at a small ice cream parlor in Duluth—by suddenly appearing out of thin air. Fortunately, the creature's disorientation had prevented it from mauling any of the kids, and soon after everyone was evacuated, it had perished the fate of all fish out of water.

A baby thrown from the ninth floor of a burning tenement by a desperate mother—and the infant had landed safely and unharmed with no obvious intervention.

The transformation of a swimming pool full of chlorinated water into tequila at a hoe-down in New Mexico. Apparently it had been high-end, expensive booze; the local cops had even found a worm when they'd drained the pool.

A single factor had surfaced regarding each of these fantastic events: the presence of a twenty-something man who had deftly eluded questioning by any on-the-scene authorities. Something in Synder's gut had assured him there was a connection between this mystery man and these fantastic incidents. Even now, though, after nearly a year of diverse investigations, he remained at a loss to offer any credible evidence to support his suspicions.

The only reason his partner didn't think he was crazy was that most of Synder's other hunches paid off. The conventional cases he handled were all punctually solved.

Despite the absence of any breakthroughs in these investigations, Synder never doubted his subconscious conviction

that these fantastic events were all linked. And his gut assured him that the twenty-something man was central to this intricate mystery.

He resisted the urge to give this mystery man a moniker, fearing that any convenient identification, however trivial, might taint his objectivity regarding the subject.

Durne was not so strict about such things. He (and others in the department who knew of Synder's obsession) took to calling Synder's mythical culprit Mr Fox (a snide reference to Agent Muldor's fanaticism in *The X Files* television series). One day, a matronly filing clerk in the Washington DC office had told Durne about an old foreign comedy film called *After the Fox*, in which European forces of law enforcement had pooled their resources to track down a famous international criminal called "the Fox." When Durne had shared this information with his partner, Synder had promptly pointed out that there was no evidence that Mr Fox was engaged in criminal activities. "You're devoting an awful lot of energy to hunting a bystander," Durne had remarked.

Now, as then, Synder found himself muttering to himself: "He's more than just a bystander."

Forgetting how wretched the drink was, Synder took a healthy sip of his now-cold coffee. He grimaced.

With this recent incident, things had escalated from curious weirdness to murder. This alarmed Synder. Were future incidents going to maintain this heightened level of bloodshed?

Suddenly, tracking down Mr Fox was more important than ever.

*We need to locate those two ladies-of-the-night*, Synder fumed. A firsthand account of their encounter with the man might provide a crucial fragment of data that could lead to finally identifying him.

After twelve years with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, one would've thought Synder had learned the futility of impatience while on a stakeout—but no. All the time spent sitting around, waiting, was time wasted, time that could have been best applied to other pursuits. Frustration was quick to set in, especially on occasions like this—linked to hunting Mr Fox.

A sharp sound jarred Synder from his frustrated reverie. Once his eyes refocused, he saw his partner standing outside the cafe. Durne tapped again on the glass, then, seeing he had Synder's attention, he jerked his head toward the intersection.

Abandoning his post, Synder hurried outside.

"Did you spot them?"

“No, but I’ve got a lead on their real address,” Durne replied. “I got tired of being cooped-up in the car, so when I spotted a few ladies working a corner down the block, I took a stroll and had a chat with them.”

Synder fell into step beside Durne as his partner led him around the corner.

Dusk waited at the edge of the world. Soon it would sweep through Baltimore, triggering a transition from daylight business to glittering neon festivities. Right now, though, the streets were all gray. Drab and almost sad. Hardly any traffic moved along the roads, and few pedestrians were out and about. Heavy clouds created a colorless overcast. If it didn’t rain later on, Mother Nature was just screwing with humanity.

“It seems that the ladies we’re looking for are not well-liked by the local girls. Apparently they used to work locally, but lately they’ve moved uptown, seeking johns with bigger wallets. The locals called them ‘snooty ho’s’ and were more than willing to snitch them out to me.”

“Ah.” While Synder was a fountain of potentially relevant facts and techniques, Durne was better at working people. Synder could intimidate information out of suspects, but Durne could charm the same info out of them and leave them feeling glad they’d shared.

“It’s just down this block,” offered Durne. “Their apartment.”

“It’s kind of early for them to be there.” His watch told him it was six o’clock, the cusp of evening.

“Maybe we’ll be lucky and catch them on their way out.”

Which—surprisingly—was exactly what happened.

As Synder and Durne approached the designated building, its door opened and a pair of ladies appeared. Their skintight attire and flamboyant cosmetics matched the vague descriptions in the police report. By the time they had descended a steep set of steps, the men in their dark overcoats were waiting on the sidewalk.

“Evening, ladies,” Synder addressed them.

They ignored his salutation and tried to veer around the men. But Durne calmly moved to block them.

“We’d like a few words with you,” announced Durne as he displayed his badge.

“You’ve got nothing on us, officer,” one of the ladies snapped. The other added: “We’re just two women heading out for a party.”

“This will only take a moment, ladies.”

“We’re interested in what you saw last night,” Synder added.

The ladies’ faces hardened with distrust.

"We already told the cops what we saw," the blonde grumbled.

"Indulge us, please," cooed Synder. "We're only trying to bring a murderer to justice."

"Wasn't no murder," snarled the redhead. "It was a slaughter."

"And that guy didn't kill anybody," the blonde added. "He was rude, but he was long gone by the time that thing killed those people."

"It was some kind of wild animal," the redhead qualified.

"Tell us about that animal." Synder took out his notebook and waited with pen poised.

"I...I dunno..." mumbled the redhead.

Closing her eyes and shaking her head, the blonde declared, "We'd rather not think about that."

Stepping forward, Durne put a reassuring hand on the blonde's bony shoulder. He smiled. "Come on. It's not here now. A memory can't hurt you, can it?"

The ladies shared a desolate expression.

"You won't believe us..."

"The cops didn't believe us..."

"Ladies, we're federal agents," Durne confided. "I assure you we are more sophisticated than local police."

Synder remained ready to jot down anything of value the ladies told them.

"It had teeth," blurted the redhead.

"Canines like a dog?" Durne inquired.

"More like a shark," confessed the redhead.

"And there were hundreds of them," added the blonde. "The thing's mouth was jam-packed full of teeth."

Durne nodded, not in acceptance, but to urge them to continue. Synder scrawled a line in his notebook.

"It was big."

"How big?"

"Oh hell, I dunno."

"Bigger than you?"

The blonde dragged her face into a frown. "Damn straight—it was bigger than us."

The redhead bobbed her head in concurrence.

"I understand one of you told the reporting office that it looked like an octopus?"

"No, that's not what I said. I told him it had arms like an octopus."

“Tentacles.”

She nodded, then slowly shook her head. “No, not exactly. Octopus have those suction cup things lining their tentacles.”

“And this beast didn’t.”

“No. They were all goopy...like taffy.”

The redhead nodded. “Yes—like taffy. The whole thing was like that.”

“Like taffy.” Synder made notations.

“It had a lot of eyes too.”

Synder allowed his eyebrow to arch with skepticism.

The blonde supported her associate’s description. “Way too many eyes.”

“More than...four?” Durne interjected.

“A lot more than four.”

“More like hundreds!” exclaimed the redhead.

“Hundreds of eyes,” commented Synder, his head lowered to study what he was committing to his notebook. “And hundreds of teeth.”

“It had a lot of legs, too—like a centipede.”

“Hundreds of legs?”

“Hundreds,” asserted the blonde, although the redhead pointed out, “It ran by us so fast, we didn’t really get the chance to count legs or eyes.”

“Or teeth,” grunted Durne.

“We’re telling you it had way too many teeth and eyes and legs—way more than I’ve ever seen on anything in a zoo.”

“Exactly how close were you to this thing?”

The ladies floundered. The blonde fluttered a hand down the street. “About as close as that brown van.”

Synder glanced at the vehicle. It was parked about two car-lengths away on this side of the street. “About twenty meters?”

They shrugged. “I guess,” mumbled the redhead.

“What color was it?” asked Durne.

“Pale, like an eggshell.”

“Kinda blue,” the blonde disagreed. “I think it was kinda bluish.”

“A soft blue—like a robin’s egg?”

The ladies laughed. “Mister, we’re city girls. We ain’t never seen any bird eggs—other than the kind you cook.”

Synder nodded and gave them a knowing smile. “I hear you.”

“What about odors? Did the thing have a particular smell?”

This brought vacant expressions to their faces.

“Uhh...I can’t recall any kind of odor...”

"A thing as disgusting as that, you'd expect it to stink...but Eve's right, officer. It didn't have any smell."

The FBI men overlooked the ladies' persistent misidentification of them as "officers" instead of FBI Special Agents. They were more interested in their account of last night.

"Did it make any sounds?"

Again, confusion clouded the ladies' painted faces.

"Grunting? Or snarling?"

They shook their head.

"Now that you mention it, all those spiny legs it had clattering away at the pavement...but there wasn't any clattering noise..."

This piece of information made Synder furrow his brow. He probed: "You're certain of that, Miss? No noise at all."

"Nothing that I heard..."

"Maybe you didn't hear any sounds it made," remarked Durne. "After all, you claimed it was twenty meters away."

"Well yeah, but it ran past us when it burst from the lobby," the redhead added. "We were close enough then to hear any noise it might've made."

"Ah." Synder nodded. "And you caught no smell at that point either, right?"

The ladies nodded, but still looked befuddled.

"That can't be right, officer, can it?"

"You were there, Miss, not us," Durne stated in a sympathetic tone. "If you didn't hear or smell anything, then we have trust your account."

Flipping to the next page of his notebook, Synder continued writing. After a moment, he peered up from his notations and asked, "What about the half-naked man?"

Confusion turned to rancor on the ladies' painted faces.

"That bastard!" exclaimed the redhead. "He knocked me down!"

"You have my sympathies," Durne vouched

"He almost knocked me down too," asserted the blonde.

The redhead turned on her. "*Almost*, Eve! He *bumped* into you—he put *me* on *my* ass!"

"So—hate me because my balance is better than yours," Eve snarled back.

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

Synder exaggeratedly cleared his throat, then prompted them, "The half-naked bastard, ladies?"

"Him, we saw up close," grunted the blonde.

"Way too close," growled the redhead.



“Can you give us a description?”

They shrugged.

“He was...kinda plain...”

“Yeah...a bit on the thin side, but not all gawky.”

“A white guy.”

“Pale white.”

“Sandy hair, I think. Cut short.”

“His hair was brown.”

Synder inquired, “Any scars? Or tattoos?”

Expressions of retrospective concentration came across their faces, then they shook their heads.

“Not that I noticed.”

“He knocked me down before I got a good look at him, officer.”

“Did he say anything to you?”

“What? Like ‘excuse me’? Ha!”

“He came out the stairwell and bolted across the lobby, headed for the door. He was in such a hurry he ran right into us before he left.”

“Did you follow him outside?”

“Damn straight we did,” growled the redhead. “Bastard knocked me down. We went after him to demand an apology.”

“So—” Synder’s face light up. “—you spoke with him?”

Their angry fizzled out, replaced by annoyance.

“Naw...he was already across the street by the time we got outside.”

“This was before or after the goopy thing with too many teeth appeared?”

“Before.”

“So, would you say the goopy thing might have been chasing the half-naked man?”

Again, the ladies went pensive.

The blonde shrugged. “I guess...”

“So—did the beast chase him into the park?”

“Uhh...eventually...”

“First it pounced on this drunk that was laughing at the half-naked man.”

“Right. When it burst through the doorway, it seemed as if it was going to chase after the half-naked man...”

“But then the drunk’s cackling distracted it.”

“Then it pounced on him.”

“That was when it lost its sheet and we got a real look at it.”

“Sheet?” Durne tilted his head.

“Oh, we didn’t mention the sheet, did we?”

“At first the thing was wearing a big white sheet, like it was dressed up pretending to be a ghost.”

“We’re talking about a bedsheet?”

The ladies nodded.

“Cotton? Or satin?”

They shrugged.

“Why would this beast be wearing a bedsheet?” mumbled Synder, half to himself.

“Maybe the half-naked guy was having sex with some chick and she turned into this beast with too many teeth? So he was running away from her and she was chasing him... That kinda shit happens all the time in Japanese manga...”

“Why kill the drunk, though?” remarked Durne.

“Maybe she thought the drunk was laughing at her...”

“I’m not buying the lovers’ spat theory, ladies. After all, this is the real world, not some comic book,” Synder announced. “Let’s go back and see if you can remember anything distinctive about the half-naked man, okay?”

Their faces went blank under their gaudy makeup.

“How about this,” interjected Durne. “If this beast was chasing the guy, did he try to warn you that it was coming?”

The ladies considered this possibility, but swiftly and derisively denounced it.

“That bastard didn’t warn us at all,” grated the blonde.

“He just ran us down,” Eve complained.

“I don’t mean to dwell on the more gruesome aspects of the incident, ladies,” Durne spoke softly, “but how did the car become involved?”

“That was right after the thing killed the drunk.”

“It tore him to pieces—it was awful!”

“It was headed across the street—“

“Finally going after the half-naked man?” inquired Durne.

“I guess...”

“And the car ran into it,” declared the redhead.

“A traffic accident...” Durne’s tone was utterly deadpan.

“Yeah.”

“Was it possible the driver saw the beast and was attempting to run it down?” asked Durne. “An attempt to put an end to its rampage?”

The ladies shrugged.

“I have no idea what was on the driver’s mind.”

“It looked accidental to me.”

“And what happened then?”

The ladies adopted a surly reluctance to finish their account.

“The cops last night didn’t believe this part either...”

“Have we shown you any disrespect, ladies?”

“No...”

“Then please tell us what happened then.”

After a deep sigh, the blonde told them: “It proceeded to tear the car apart.”

“The impact didn’t stun it?” Synder asked.

“Not in the least.”

*Interesting, Synder mused. A collision between a car and “goopy” beast—and the car suffers more damage than the beast.* But he refrained from vocalizing this evaluation.

“It—the beast-thing—it smashed its way through the windshield and—did things to the driver...”

“When it was finished, it went after the half-naked guy. That’s the last we saw of it—disappearing into the park.”

“Good riddance,” muttered the redhead.



Together in their black Impala, driving back to their hotel, the FBI men discussed the ladies’ account.

“Highly dubious,” Durne proclaimed. “They were probably spaced out on Ecstasy. A big dog killed the drunk, but the drug made them see a nasty monster with too many teeth.”

“And yet, the hard evidence clearly supports their story. There were teethmarks on the fuselage, but they weren’t made by any dog. Whatever tore that car apart was no natural animal, Dex.”

“What are you suggesting? Some alien monster?”

“Of course not.” Synder shook his head. “This incident doesn’t fit the profile of a Close Encounter.”

Durne shot him a suspicious frown.

“I’m kidding. But not about the beast being something unlike anything in the books.”

“Maybe we’re dealing with some creature that escaped from an experimental laboratory...”

“That’s possible...”

“That would implicate Mr Fox as one of the scientists working in those labs. Maybe he took the mutant beast out for a test drive.”

“What? To test its murderous potential?”

“Organic experiments by some secret branch of the Defense Department?”

“God, I hope not.”

“Yeah. The last thing we need is a hit squad after our asses for just doing our job.”

They arrived at the hotel and Durne parked their car in the outdoor lot. They took a side entrance and the freight elevator to the second floor where their rooms were located. As they strolled along the auburn wallpapered corridor, Durne remarked:

“He’s changed his physique again.”

Synder nodded pensively but offered no reply.

“Last time he was overweight. In New Orleans.”

“People can lose weight,” Synder muttered.

“And this time he lost his clothing too.”

As they approached their rooms, Durne fished his key card from a pocket. He was reaching to insert it into the slot beside the doorknob when Synder froze in midstep.

“His clothing,” whispered Synder. “What happened to his clothing?”

“Left behind somewhere.” Durne shrugged.

“In the hotel.”

This made Durne lift his head. He stared at the as-yet-unopened door. “Oh!” he grunted.

Together, they both turned away from their rooms and hastened back to the Impala. Within minutes they were headed across town to the scene of the incident.

“The police concentrated their investigation on the two murders,” commented Synder. “They never looked into what the half-naked man was doing prior to the incident.”

“He was in his underwear,” Durne remarked. “His clothes have to be somewhere.”

“He was fleeing the tenement house, so he must have come from one of the rooms in the building. Visiting someone, perhaps? Or maybe the apartment was his.”

“Either way, there’s a good chance that further clues about Mr Fox might be found there.”

It was pushing 9PM by the time they reached the tenement house. The building bore no name, only the number 1255 etched into the stone above the entrance. Cardboard sheets had been jury-rigged to temporarily remedy last night’s damage. Inside, the lobby was mostly empty. One wall featured an array of letter boxes for the tenant’s mail; the other was occupied by an elevator and an archway that gave onto the bottom of an ascending stairway. A single doorway was located at the rear of the lobby, presumably the residence of the building superintendent.

When Synder knocked, the door opened to reveal a pudgy African American man of advanced age. He wore a pair of extremely wrinkled slacks and a wife-beater T-shirt. Suspenders hung uselessly from his waistband. The remains of his hair stood out from his scalp in puffy disorder. He held a slice of pizza in his hand. He chewed his mouthful and swallowed before inquiring what the gentlemen wanted.

Durne flashed his badge. "Good evening, sir. Sorry to disturb you. I'm Special Agent Durne, and this is my partner, Special Agent Synder. You are?"

The man took another bite of pizza and answered around it, "My name's Strickland. I'm the building superintendent. What's this about?"

"We'd like to ask you a few questions about last night's incident."

"Can't help you. I wasn't here." He started to close the door.

"We're actually more interested in the man who was involved."

The oldster frowned. "What? The two dead guys? I don't know anything about them."

"No, sir," Synder offered. "The half-naked one."

The oldster shrugged. "Wasn't there. Didn't see any of it."

"We were wondering if he was one of your tenants," persisted Durne.

"He was a lanky fellow, early twenties, with light-brown hair."

"Does that sound like anyone in the building, Mr Strickland?"

The oldster barked a hoarse laugh. "Hell, that could be anybody."

"Were there any complaints last night? Before the incident outside?"

"I got a complaint," the testy black man snarled. "Who's gonna pay to fix the front door?"

"You'd have to talk to the landlord about that, sir."

"Getting back to this individual, Mr Strickland...we'd appreciate any help you could provide in locating him."

"Why? What'd he do? He isn't dangerous, is he?"

Synder smiled. "That remains to be determined, sir."

"We suspect he might be one of your tenants."

"What—you think he's running a meth lab out of my building?"

"That's doubtful, Mr Strickland. Meth labs produce an amount of noxious fumes. You'd notice the stink right away."

“Think again, sir. Lanky build. light-brown hair. Pale skinned. A somewhat nondescript face. He probably kept to himself.”

The oldster rolled his eyes with exasperation. “You guys ain’t leaving until I help you, huh?”

Both agents wore grim smiles.

With a weary moan, Mr Strickland shoved the remains of his slice of pizza into his mouth, then turned to retreat into his domicile. “Okay, hang on, dammit.” He left the door open.

Neither Synder or Durne made a move to follow him.

A few minutes passed. When the superintendent reappeared, he had donned a loose sweater that hid his paunch and the free-for-all of his wispy hair had been dampened against his temples. He was fingering a large ring bearing an abundance of metal keys.

“Okay,” the oldster sighed. “Follow me.” He led them past the elevator to the stairs. “Damned elevator takes forever,” he grumbled. “If it works at all.”

“We appreciate this, Mr Strickland,” Special Agent Durne told the man.

“Yeah yeah,” the oldster muttered.

He took them up three flights.

“Keep in mind, officers, I didn’t see any of what happened. The only reason I even know about this is because Mrs Dirwitz told me about it. She lives down the hall.” He nodded in a vague direction. “Here we are.”

Leaning forward, Synder took the key ring from the old man and urged him to move aside. As Synder unlocked the door, Durne took a .28 Glock from beneath his jacket and clasped it aloft in a two-handed grip.

Once unlocked, Synder eased the door open all the way with his toe. Durne entered, flicking on a light switch mounted on the wall just inside. With gun ready, he swiftly surveyed the interior of the apartment, then called back to his partner: “Clear, Freddy.”

“Exactly what did Mrs Dirwitz tell you, sir?” Synder asked the uneasy superintendent.

Torn between his desire to be back with his pizza and wanting his keys returned, the oldster had moved off a bit, but still lingered within the immediate proximity of the apartment. “What? Oh—she reported Mr Gray left his door open.”

“When you came up and closed and locked the door, was there any sign of Mr Gray?”

“The place was empty.”

“That was the name he gave you? ‘Gray’?”

"That's the name he gave the landlord. I'm just the super."

"Did you touch anything inside?" Durne inquired as he came to stand in the open doorway.

"No—of course not!" the oldster responded with earnest indignation.

Synder handed the keys back to the nervous superintendent. "Thank you, sir. We'll lock up when we're done."

Clasping the key ring to his chest, Mr Strickland started down the hall. After a few steps, he paused to turn and ask: "So—what's the deal with this guy? Is he coming back? If he's skipped, what should I do with his belongings?"

"For the time being, you should leave everything as it is," replied Synder. "The police will notify you when their investigation is concluded."

Stepping inside, Synder closed the door. He exchanged a rueful smile with his partner.

"So?" he ventured.

Durne held up a tan leather wallet. As Synder examined its contents, Durne verbalized what he saw. "There's one of those non-drivers license IDs in there. He's getting sloppy. He's lost weight, but his face is the same. Pretty thin moniker, though...again."

"John Gray."

"Not particularly inventive when it comes to selecting an alias, is he?"

"His talents lie elsewhere," muttered Synder. On earlier occasions, Fox's IDs had been under the names "White" and "Brown." The rest of the wallet's contents offered little in the way of promising clues. There were two twenty dollar bills, a McDonalds coupon, two still-sealed wet-wipes, and a generic packet of "super" hot sauce. There was a picture of a pretty blonde woman, but Synder had seen it before. It was cut from a clothing catalogue and other copies had been stashed in Fox's wallet on the two previous occasions that the agents had unearthed such solid evidence. Apparently, the man had some sort of crush on the model.

"Kind of a slob..." Durne indicated the loose clothing piled in the corner. One by one, he opened the dresser drawers, grunting "Empty" each time.

"We knew he travels light."

Durne laughed, "Even more so this time, eh? Last night he only took his underwear with him."

"Sheet's gone," Synder pointed out.

"So...this would be where the chase started."

They both scrutinized the room.

“He was in bed...” Synder mused aloud, “and something woke him.”

“An intruder...”

“A goopy intruder with too many teeth.”

“Chased him around, but then he managed to get the door open and escaped.”

“If he’d lived here for more than a few days, he’d’ve learned how unreliable the elevator was...so he took the stairs.”

“And the intruder followed in pursuit.”

While they traded steps of their recreation of the night before, Durne circulated around the room, probing here and there. The bedside table offered nothing telling, just a cheap wristwatch and a plastic hair-comb. Upon examination, no hairs clung to the comb’s teeth. The tablet of paper sitting on the desk was half-used, but those pages had been torn away and were nowhere in sight. There was no pattern or significance to the discarded clothes, all of which looked as if they’d come off Goodwill racks. A denim jacket hung on a hook on the inside of the door, its pockets were empty.

The bathroom was small, making them suspect the landlord had simply stuck a toilet and sink in a closet, then walled off half of it to function as a puny shower stall. A shabby mirror hung on the wall above the chipped sink, but it harbored no medicine cabinet. A perfunctory assortment of toiletries were stacked in a shallow cardboard box atop the toilet’s tank, all of it too basic to reveal anything about their user.

“Well...” sighed Durne. “Whatever he was up to here, he didn’t leave any trace of it...”

“As usual.”



As they left the tenement, they paused to regard the street itself. In their own way, both tried to picture the course of events that had played out last night.

The main difference in their mental images lay in the intruder/beast/thing’s appearance. Synder’s imagination adhered to the witness’ descriptions: the result was horrific and monstrous. Still convinced the ladies had been tanked up on Ecstasy, Durne filled the role with a large dog.

No one had gotten around to hosing down the pavement stained by the drunk’s spilled blood and viscera. There was a similar disturbing blot on the asphalt not ten meters up the avenue.



They crossed the street and surveyed the stone arch entrance to Edgely Park. Synder took out a pocket flashlight and scanned the pavement. "Look." He held the beam on a dark brown smear, roughly six inches long and no more than two inches wide.

Crouching down, Durne studied the smear. "I think it's blood." He took out a pocket knife and secured a sample in an evidence baggie.

Glancing back across the street, Synder reflected aloud, "He came dashing out of the tenement doorway and ran right across the street. He knew the thing was chasing him, so he ran as fast as he could..."

"And he fell and suffered a bad scrape." As Durne rose from his crouch, pocketing the baggie, he added: "He must've tripped on the curb."

Synder stared on into the darkened park. "He was in a real hurry to escape the thing."

"Gotta wonder if he did," Durne remarked. "Police found no trace of either our Mr Fox or his goopy pursuer."

"Let's take a look," suggested Synder. He certainly didn't want to consider the possibility that he'd tracked Mr Fox for nearly a year only to have his elusive target get eaten by some inconceivable monster.

They searched the park as best they could in the dark. There were few working lamp posts to provide adequate illumination.

The only suspicious thing they discovered was a trail crossing the dead-leaf-filled fountain.

"He ran around the fountain."

"But the dog plowed right through it," Durne surmised.

Synder was too distracted by private elation to be bothered by his partner's persistence in blaming the mayhem on an enormous animal. After all this time, they finally had some tangible evidence proving the existence of Mr Fox: a sample of his blood. Once they got it analyzed and ran the findings through the system, hopefully they'd score a solid identification of the elusive mystery man. Synder had waited a long time for a break like this.

If any further clues lay in the park, the darkness hid them too well for either of the men to spot.

Abandoning their search, they swung by the police precinct and dropped off the blood sample before heading back to their hotel for a much-needed rest.



Bright and early the next morning, Special Agents Synder and Durne were back at the police station. They knew it was far too soon to expect any analysis report on the blood sample, they'd only dropped it off seven hours ago, but they hoped their friendly-but-imposing presence might spur the police technicians to speed up the process.

Before they reached the police lab, though, they ran into Detective Sampkin. He was not happy to see them.

This morning, the pudgy detective's shoulders were hunched with anger instead of ennui.

"You two have been stirring up a mess," he informed the Feds.

"Oh?"

"The Chief got dragged outta bed last night to deal with complaints about you guys. You were hassling some poor building super—who ratted you out to Hector Lane, the building's landlord—he's a City Council member and his wife's real palsy with the Chief's wife."

"I think 'hassling' is somewhat of an exaggeration," Durne mildly protested.

"The super helped us track down the identity of the half-naked man," Synder offered.

"You're still chasing that case? I told you to leave it alone. You're wasting your time."

"We're pursuing a federal investigation, detective," Durne sternly reminded him.

"Which ain't gonna get you anywhere," scoffed Detective Sampkin. "It's obvious your naked guy was strung out on PCP when he killed the drunk and the driver."

"How does that fit any of the witnesses' accounts?" Synder asked with mock innocence.

Sampkin threw him the kind of look one gives a brat who's just stuck their finger up their nose at the dinner table. "Don't tell me you believe what those hos claimed they saw! You expect us to start combing the streets for a killer octopus? Haw! Stupid Feds—all that bad Washington air's scrambled your brains."

They saw no value in reminding him that no man could tear a car apart like the wreck down in the motor pool. As Synder had pointed out, their investigation was federal—separate from that conducted by the local authorities. The cops were stymied by this gruesome double murder. The Feds believed the only way to discover what had really happened last night was to find Mr Fox.

“Y’know what I think?” Detective Sampkin tipped his head back and showed them a toothy grin. “I think your naked guy killed those people, then he ran off into the park to escape. We’ll never find him—because it was dark and he didn’t see where he was going and he ran right off the embankment on the east side of the park and drowned in the river.”

“That’s a rather farfetched scenario, detective,” taunted Synder, “but we’ll keep it in mind if we run out of plausible theories.”

They moved on, leaving Sampkin to stew in his own indignation.

“Looks like the locals are going to wrap up this case with a bogus explanation,” remarked Special Agent Durne.

Synder lifted his broad shoulders in a shrug. “Then they won’t be trampling on our investigation.”



Alas, circumstance trampled their investigation.

Backed up with other matters, it took the police lab two days to get around to checking out the blood sample the Feds had left in their hands.

Rather than haunt the station, Synder and Durne tried to keep themselves busy.

Although neither of them placed any credence in Sampkin’s theory, they searched Edgely Park again. Daylight was no help, the area was devoid of any further clues. The embankment mentioned by Sampkin did indeed border the eastern side of the park, but a tall chainlink fence ran along that flank. They found no breaks or gaps in the barrier. No way Mr Fox could have pitched off the precipice in the dark, no matter how fast he’d been running.

They visited a score of McDonalds and flashed Gray’s ID around, but no one remembered seeing the man. It’d been a longshot, but they had time to burn while waiting for the police lab to get to their blood sample.

They retired to their hotel rooms, but Synder was too restless. He ended up going out and revisiting the tenement house. Armed with apologies and a pepperoni pizza, he cajoled the address of the building’s landlord from the now-placated superintendent. From there, Synder drove over to Mr Lane’s mansion, where he wrangled a brief audience with the man’s wife. He charmed her with repentance for hassling the super, confiding to her that he and his partner had only been following the advice of a detective they’d met at the station. “I think his name was Sampkin.” During the drive back

to his hotel, Synder couldn't help chuckling as he remonstrated himself for indulging his mean streak.

When the police lab finally called them, the news was not good—in fact, the tech's tone of voice was clearly insulting as he chastised them for wasting their time.

"That sample you dropped off wasn't blood," the tech informed them.

"It looked like blood to me," grumbled Durne.

"It was just dirt."

This news drastically deflated the Feds' spirits. They returned to Washington DC with their tails between their legs.

### 3.

Three months later, Dusty found himself falling in love in Philadelphia.

Determined to avoid any recurrence of what had happened in Baltimore, he began spending a lot of time at the library, reading book after book on psychology and the workings of the human brain—more specifically, the human *mind*. He would show up soon after the library opened just before noon and sequester himself at a secluded table with a stack of medical tomes. Around three in the afternoon, he would take a break and grab a sandwich from a deli just down the block. Having replenished himself, he would return to the library and resume his studies until closing time at 5PM.

He spent his evenings at home, digesting his daily dose of information and struggling to stifle his imagination.

Dusty was cursed with an overactive imagination.

During his childhood, his parents had dismissed his recurrent hallucinations as the antics of their son's imaginary friends. They were proud of the boy's fertile imagination, and predicted he was destined for a career as a writer. (Well, Mom had been supportive. As usual, Dad hadn't been around much.) The boy suffered the blame of any household damage generated by these phantoms, for sometimes his imaginary friends got rambunctious. Attendance at school was spotty, and even when he was there, his mind was preoccupied with netherworld dramas. Fortunately, inspired by his parents' literary hopes for him, Dusty read voraciously, consuming half an encyclopedia by the time he was eight. Consequently, his dismal grades were no reflection of his true intelligence.

By his teens, Dusty had learned the wisdom of secrecy. Despite his efforts to be sociable, friendships were rare and short-lived, for most kids developed a low tolerance for the weirdness that followed him like a cloud. This friendless state earned him the reputation of a misanthrope, which only intensified his solitude. He finished that encyclopedia and went on to plow his way through hundreds of classics and technical manuals. Although he enjoyed science fiction, he tended to avoid fantastic literature, for it often fueled his own imagination, and sometimes the subsequent consequences were harrowing.

He found a modicum of relief in yoga. By focusing his thoughts on an abstract point, he could empty his mind, thereby depriving his imagination of any potential inspiration. He strove to employ this state of mind when out in public, sparing everyone the risk of exposure to any weirdness. The practice was generally successful, radically reducing the frequency of bizarre incidents. Unfortunately, it left him spaced out and hampered his ability to function.

His first afterschool job as a janitorial assistant in a nursing home had ended badly, leaving a score of catatonic oldsters in its wake. From that point on, Dusty sought jobs which would put him out of direct contact with other people. A stint as a latenight clerk in a convenience store would have lasted longer if his unconscious perception of his boss' trollish habits hadn't brought about a gruesome transformation in Mr Snood. A security guard on the night shift would've been perfect, but Dusty was too young at that time for any employer to risk giving a kid such responsibility. Once he moved out of his parents' house, they were frequently called upon to cover his rent during his long stretches between jobs. (It had not gone unnoticed by him that all of those checks had borne Mom's signature, never his father's.)

His sad grades kept him from getting into any respectable college. His youthful appearance undermined his status as a real adult in most people's regard. And the prevailing climate of weirdness that surrounded him alienated anyone quirky enough to try to overlook his eccentric ways.

Determined to achieve a normal life, Dusty had left San Francisco on his eighteenth birthday to seek his fortune on the road. Wave goodbye to Mom; Dad wasn't around to see him off. Initially, as a lark, he'd used false names in this nomadic life, but eventually the wisdom of this had become fortuitous, foiling anyone from connecting him to the unnatural residue of his overactive imagination. One after another, these instances had undermined his

new lives, forcing him to move on. With each subsequent relocation, he grew progressively more secretive.

Two years later, he was still on the move.

This last manifestation worried him, though. Rarely had his imagination produced hazardous phantasms, never before had it called forth anything as dark—or bloodthirsty—as this last one. And *never* before had *he* been the endangered one.

When he hit Philly, Dusty decided to change more than just his appearance and name. Gone was his lanky, mundane physique. He gave himself some muscle and an extra two inches in height. Kinky ebony tresses replaced his stringy brown hair. His face became more angular, his chin more charismatic. His ears flattened against his temples, his fingers grew slightly longer.

He also altered the basic pattern of his existence. He foreswore finding employment; instead he simply imagined the funds necessary to cover food, utilities and rent, including the background data to validate the authenticity of his latest bogus identity (Chuck Green). If anyone were to question his neighbors, they could attest that Chuck left Gramarcy Hall early each morning and returned around dinnertime—as if he worked someplace. When in actuality, he spent his days at the library.

This reflected another change in his lifestyle. All along, he had vacantly accepted his curse, concentrating on learning to live with it and avoid any culpability in the weirding outbreaks. No matter how outrageous things got, after the thousandth aberration they lost their novelty and became commonplace nuisances. But a monster with so many teeth was slightly more than a nuisance. Only now did Dusty begin to question the how and why of his curse.

His imagination possessed a potency that was lacking in other people. He needed to be able to control this talent instead of letting its involuntary outbursts ruin his life. Only through understanding would he achieve any chance of muzzling his imagination. The yoga helped, but one simply couldn't live in a perpetual zen vacuum.

He needed to understand the human mind. This research brought him to the library on a daily basis.

Indirectly, that was how he met Joan Brenner.

And meeting her changed everything.



It was Wednesday. Once upon a time, Dusty had heard someone refer to Wednesday as “hump day.” Without much of a

work history, he'd failed to get the joke; instead he thought the term was vulgar.

Upon finishing *A Solipsistic Review of Modern Psychology*, Dusty solemnly closed the book, then sat back from the pine table. The stiff-backed wooden chair creaked under him. The clock on the wall read 2:35. Although it was somewhat early to take lunch, he thought, *What the heck*. This would give him a chance to think about what he'd just read. He wasn't particularly sure he agreed with the scribe's general doctrine.

According to the author, humanity was divided into two basic psychology groups: the extremely egocentric and the just slightly egocentric. All needs and desires were governed by self-serving motivations. Survival, love, hate, ambition, even despair.

Dusty felt this was an unfair simplification. He'd traveled across this country, thumbing from town to town, lingering where he could, and he had encountered more than a few genuinely altruistic people.

Granted, he could see a hint of egocentric behavior in his own desire to master or be rid of his overactive imagination. If he could conquer his curse, then maybe he could rejoin the human race and finally make some friends and live a normal life. These were all self-referential goals...but other people would benefit too. Nobody would have to worry about being freaked out by wild animals galloping through a school playground. No more innocent bystanders would get mauled by monsters. His desire wasn't *entirely* ego-driven.

So—if the information contained in *A Solipsistic Review of Modern Psychology* was built on a flawed presumption...how many other books harbored misleading data? Suddenly, he couldn't trust anything he'd read. He would have to apply common sense to weed out the valid information from the warped opinions.

Lost in these thoughts, Dusty walked to the deli on autopilot. Inside, he took up position at the end of the line standing at the counter. A grimy man in a wool overcoat bought beer with a pile of nickels and dimes. Then the girl in front of Dusty moved to pick up her order, a ham-and-cheese hoagie and diet soda.

"\$5.36 please."

She rooted through her oversized embroidered purse, then exhaled a frustrated, "Oh..."

It took Dusty a few seconds to recognize the girl. He was at the library to learn, not socialize, so he rarely paid any attention to the people. She worked there. He'd seen her tending the checkout desk and returning books to the shelves.

She was kind of cute. Roughly 5-3, plain, petite, thin, under-developed. Around his age. Heavy bangs of mousy dirty-blonde hair hid her eyes. She wore a floppy plastic raincoat like a billowy tent. He found himself wanting her to like him.

He heard her soft voice inform the cashier, "I can't find my wallet. It must've slipped from my purse back at the library."

"\$5.36," insisted the cashier.

"Can I owe you?" she whined. "I work at the library, and—"

"\$5.36, toots." This time the cashier's voice adopted a hard, uncaring tone. He was young, probably just out of high school, probably hated his job and his life and hadn't been laid in years—if ever. With his chinless jaw and receding forehead, was it any wonder? He was trying to grow a mustache to look older, but so far his sparse whiskers only made him look mangy.

*What a prick*, thought Dusty. He suppressed the mental image of the cashier's nose suddenly elongating into a dangling penis, after which it would start spewing urine all over everything.

"But surely you know me by now. I'm in here everyday getting my lunch..."

Prefaced with a harsh sigh: "\$5.36, toots."

"But—"

Dusty softly cleared his throat and waved over the girl's shoulder to catch the cashier's attention. "I'll cover it for her."

The cashier squinted with disapproval at this interruption.

Dusty's hand dipped into his empty pants pocket and came out holding a ten dollar bill and two ones. Reaching past the startled girl, he dropped the ten and a one on the counter.

Meanwhile, the girl's face reddened as she protested, "Wait, I can just dash back to the library and fetch my own money..."

The cashier scowled at the currency. Clearly he was unhappy that someone had intervened with his snotty treatment of this customer, but on top of that his math skills had apparently completely failed him. He grumbled, "It's only \$5.36."

"Then give me back a five and change," Dusty instructed him. He struggled to keep his voice even, soft, showing no trace of the disdain he felt for the idiot.

"Huh?"

"I gave you eleven bucks for a five thirty-six bill, so you give me back five sixty-four."

While the idiot fumbled with the cash register, Dusty plucked the bag containing the girl's order from the counter and handed it to her.

"No, really, thank you, but..."



“Don’t worry about it.” He forced the bag into her hands.

The cashier placed a five dollar bill and change on the counter.

Dusty picked it up. He pocketed the fiver, but held the coins up on the open palm of his hand. He showed the cashier the two quarters and four pennies.

The cashier glared at the coins, but made no comment.

“You shorted me,” Dusty announced.

“Did not!”

Dusty lifted his hand to show him the coins.

“You pocketed the rest,” the cashier griped.

“You’re going to make me call your manager over ten cents?”

Dusty replied with terse calm.

The cashier’s glare intensified, but after a few seconds he popped the register and took out a dime. He slapped it on the counter, flashing a grimace of defiant compliance.

Nodding pleasantly, Dusty plucked the coin from the counter and pocketed it. By the time his hand reappeared, the pocket had reverted to its empty state.

“Umm, well, thank you...” the girl muttered. Lost in her own embarrassment, she seemed unaware of the confrontation that had played out between the cashier and her benefactor.

As she shuffled away, the cashier snarled, “And I suppose you want to order something.”

Dusty swiveled his head from watching the girl leave to gaze passively at the idiot. “No, actually I’m just here to pay for her meal.” He no longer had any desire to order a sandwich for himself. The idiot would probably spit in it anyway.

Bustling forth from the rear of the deli came a middle-aged man in a stained apron. His face showed a melange of expectation and disappointment as he bumbled, “Was that Joy? Oh, I missed her, didn’t I? Did you remember, Petey, to give her an extra pickle like I told you to?”

The cashier greeted the appearance of his boss with a disinterested shrug.

“Such a nice girl,” the boss chattered on. “She comes in everyday. She works at the library down the street. Libraries are important establishments. They store society’s knowledge so everyone can access it.”

Ignoring his boss’ florid babble, the cashier turned to glare at Dusty before busying himself with reorganizing a selection of beef jerky packages on a shelf behind him.

With a sad shake of his lowered head, Dusty took his leave of the deli. He would find somewhere else to eat.

Outside, the girl was laying in wait to ambush him with another dose of gratitude.

“It’s okay,” he assured her. “Really.”

“Would you like half of my sandwich?” she asked. “I see you didn’t get anything.”

“I’m okay...” He buried both his hands deep in his pants pockets.

“No, I insist. It’s the least I can do.” Her smile was fascinating. “After all, you paid for it.”

When he tried to move away, she hooked her arm through his. It had been a long time since he had let anyone get close enough to touch him.

She deflected his mild protests: “It’s ham-and-cheese. Do you like ham-and-cheese? There should be no dressing. I always say ‘no dressing, please,’ but sometimes they forget and put mustard on it. A lot of people like mustard. Do you like mustard?”

“Sometimes...” he answered.

“My name is Joan.”

“Uh...I’m Chuck...”

“I know you from somewhere,” she ruminated aloud. She guided him along the pavement and as the library came into view, she exclaimed, “The library—you’ve been coming every day for a few weeks.”

He nodded. “I’m doing some...research.”

A pair of stone benches accompanied a bus stop outside the library. She escorted him there. Once they were settled in, she opened the bag and took out a wrapped cylinder. She peeled back the paper wrapping, exposing a sandwich that had been cut in two sections. Tongues of pink ham and light green lettuce poked from between the sliced kaiser roll.

“Aw,” she purred. “Sorry, there doesn’t seem to be any pickle.” She raised her face to peer at him. Smiling, she brushed her bangs aside, revealing a pair of tiny but sincere brown eyes. “There’s usually a pickle on the side.”

So... Dusty mused. *The cashier didn’t give her a pickle, even after his boss told him to give her extra. And this was before the idiot learned she didn’t have her wallet and couldn’t pay.*

She was such a nice person, yet for some reason, Petey the cashier had it in for her. He was more than an idiot—he was a prick.

Unleashing his talent for but a brief instant, Dusty pictured the next time the cashier would go the bathroom to take a leak. He

would saunter up to a urinal, unzip his pants and whip out a bright green pickle. How fitting.

Dusty glanced at the open bag where she'd set it on the bench next to her leg. He focused his imagination on the bag.

"Maybe they wrapped it separate," he muttered.

She dug into the open bag and withdrew a can of diet soda, a small wad of paper napkins...and a small plastic ziplock baggie. Inside the baggie gleamed two richly green pickles.

"Ah!" she chirped.

"An extra one. The owner must like you," Dusty remarked. *I think I do too...*

Opening the baggie, she took a happy sniff, then held it out to Dusty. "One for each of us. Unless..." She paused, the baggie slumping in her grasp. "Do you like pickles?"

He smiled. "Yes. Thank you."

She took the now-empty paper bag and ripped it down its side to form a makeshift place-mat which she set on her lap. Transferring one of the sandwich halves to it, she handed him the remaining half cradled in its unfurled wrapper. He took it and rested it on his own lap.

For a while they sat and ate their meal in the afternoon sun.

She popped open the can of diet soda, but stopped just shy of taking a sip. The traces of frown dragged at the corners of her thin lips. "Do you mind sharing?" she asked him.

His mouth full, he gave a slight shrug and shook his head.

She offered him the can so he could take the first gulp.

That was when he fell in love with her.



Afterward, back in the library, Joan found her wallet behind the checkout desk. When she tried to repay him for the sandwich, Dusty gallantly refused.

"I ate half of it," he reminded her.

She pouted, then promptly brightened up. "I know, we'll go out and I can pay for dinner. Fair enough?"

Her offer caught him off-guard. Dusty wasn't used to being around girls. He blushed. He'd have loved to accept her invitation, but his knee-jerk reaction was to politely decline. However, his mouth suddenly had a mind of its own. He graciously accepted.

She wanted to know if tonight was good.

Again, here was his chance to avoid an embarrassing situation. All he needed was an excuse—a flimsy one would

suffice—*sorry, can't do dinner this evening, I'm taking a real estate course and there's a class tonight...and every night for weeks—yes, that would do...* But again, his traitorous mouth followed his heart, not his flustered head.

“Yes, tonight would be perfect,” he told her.



At quarter-of-seven, the librarians hurried everyone out so they could close down. Dusty waited on the bus bench outside.

Every few minutes, he peered over his shoulder to see if Joan had yet appeared. It seemed to him that she was taking a long time. He began to feel nervous.

The entire time, from their deli encounter and through the meal they'd shared on the street bench, stress had gnawed at Dusty's gut. He was unused to close proximity with someone—especially with a cute female someone. Yet at the same time, he'd been relaxed, almost preternaturally calm. Her presence had had a soothing effect on him.

But now, alone, doubt began to nibble at the edges of his newfound serenity.

What could she possibly see in him? He was plain and boring. All he'd done was pay for her sandwich...and then he'd eaten half of it himself. In retrospect, despite the fact that sharing had been her idea, he felt as if he had intruded on her lunch.

She'd only been polite, nothing more. No romantic overture had dawned between them, that had existed only in Dusty's imagination.

And now that she was gone, his influence on her had waned. By now, she'd have forgotten all about him. He was, after all, easy to forget—by his own design. A nondescript appearance had become second nature to him—a survival measure to maintain his anonymity.

Again, he threw a needy look over his shoulder. Still no sign of the girl.

He'd been alone too long. He'd lost the capacity to accurately read people's natural inclinations. For that matter, he was so preoccupied with maintaining the integrity of his isolation that he'd become alienated from fundamental human needs, like companionship. The strongest conviction in his head right now was uncertainty.

But if he really thought about it, he *wanted* her to like him. He liked her, and without reciprocation, his sentiment was pointless.

So easily he could imagine that she liked him, that she'd fallen wildly in love with this stranger who'd bought her a sandwich.

*No!* Dusty told himself. If there was any validity to the affection he had for her (and it definitely felt real to him), he would never force her to like him. Her emotions were hers, not his to play with. If anything, he had fallen under the thrall of *her* charm.

He started to look back again, but restrained himself at the last second.

*She's going to come, he assured himself. Soon...you need to be patient. She's worth waiting for...*



Technically, Joan Brenner was the second girl Dusty had fallen for.

His first love was not something he liked to remember. It had ended badly.

He'd been seventeen.

That year, Dusty had tried to break out of his antisocial reputation. Admittedly, his primary motivation had been teenage angst. Like any healthy youth his age, he ached to lose his virginity. And it might be nice after all this time to make a few friends, kids who'd stick with him through mundane and weird times.

He decided to expand his social curriculum by joining the Theater group at school. Professing stage fright, Dusty was assigned to painting scenery. This put him in regular contact with a selection of youths, boys and girls, prudes and teases, straight and gay, one of the girls was actually a cheerleader. Like any rutting juvenile virgin, he fixated on the buxom cheerleader.

Her name was Stephanie Bismark, and she was endowed with all the excessive curves necessary to stimulate a teenage lad's libido. She was clearly aware of her seductive attributes, wearing tight sweaters and teeny skirts. Sometimes Dusty found it difficult to concentrate on the inanimate scenery while she was around. She'd scamper from backdrop to backdrop, offering suggestions but rarely engaging in any real manual labor. Her nervous energy put her in constant motion. Even when standing still, she'd bounce on her heels. She knew how this made her breasts jump under her tight sweater. She obviously enjoyed every male eye tracking her jiggling ass.

Unworldly in such affairs, Dusty came to believe her antics were performed solely for his appreciation. All it took was a random

flutter of her eyelashes in his direction to convince Dusty he was the target of flirting.

Unwittingly, he imagined her flirtatious behavior growing more aggressive—and so it did. One afternoon, Stephanie dragged him behind a piece of scenery set aside to dry and had her way with him. It was amazing. In his naivete, he fell in love with her.

Their onetime tryst became hot gossip around school. Finally, Dusty was being accorded some respect. Other guys cheered his score to hide their jealousy. Girls wondered what Stephanie saw in him. Unaware of everyone's actual sentiments, Dusty thought he was popular. It was a thrilling high after playing the misanthrope for so long.

Things went bad when the quarterback for Oceanfront High School's Fightin' Flounders got wind of Stephanie's latest indiscretion. Danny Blowhard lusted after Stephanie Bismark. Outraged that someone else—much less a dweeb like Dusty—had tasted her delight, Danny sought out the lucky lad with the intention of beating Dusty to a bloody pulp.

As far as Dusty was concerned, this assault came out of nowhere. He had no knowledge of Danny's unrequited passion, no one had warned him there might be unpleasant repercussions to tapping the sexiest student. Consequently, Dusty just stood there as the quarterback stormed up to him and delivered a powerful sucker-punch to his gut. By the second punch, Dusty's dumfounded mind spewed a different scenario all over the schoolyard.

Thundering from out of nowhere, a rhinoceros barged its way through the crowd of student spectators. The mob scattered with cries of surprise, giving the beast a clear run at the aggressor. Only dumb luck prevented Danny from getting trampled or gored. Unaware of the bestial intervention or the loss of his audience, the quarterback took a step back to allow his victim to crumple to the playground's asphalt. Before he could dive in to resume his punishment, the beast stormed past between Danny and the fallen Dusty. The rhino's savage passing sent Danny staggering back. Shock sabotaged his balance and he ended up on his ass.

As the beast rounded the playground to make another pass, its terrible bulk caught several fleeing students and sent them flying. Among those who sustained broken bones was Stephanie Bismark.

Gawking in stunned disbelief at the oncoming beast, Danny failed to scramble out of the way in time and the rhinoceros' second pass trampled him down. Bones snapped, skin tore, and intestines spilled forth to be pulverized into mush by stampeding hooves. But first, the beast's lowered head caught Danny's upper torso, the horn

gouging a gruesome hole in his chest and carrying away a bloody shred of his football jacket.

The school grounds reverberated with the horrified outcries of the wounded and those who escaped physical injuries. Many of the kids would suffer psychological traumas regarding the incident well into adulthood.

Eventually recovering from the quarterback's onslaught, Dusty discovered the schoolyard's transformation into a battleground. Students were running in all directions, most avoiding the fallen, some stumbling over the wounded. His assailant was sprawled on the ground, his body ruptured and leaking blood and viscera. Pounding its thick legs against the asphalt, a rhinoceros was retreating from the trampled figure. Everyone was screaming. Dusty immediately guessed what had happened. His imagination had rescued him from a severe beating, meting out inordinate payback to his attacker and to those who had cheered on Dusty's plight.

By the time a few teachers had ventured from the school buildings to investigate this cacophonous disturbance, the rhinoceros was gone, leaving only formidable misery to document its presence.

Not that any adult put much faith in the witnesses' babbled accounts. As far as the authorities could surmise, some wild animal—perhaps a horse—had gone on a rampage before disappearing into the nearby woods.

At no time did anyone attribute any blame to Dusty. While normal etiquette would have prevented anybody from snitching, the horrific results of the stampede had loosened many tongues. Several students explained how Dusty had been set upon by the bigger Danny Blowhard and beaten down before the beast had appeared.

It was just awful that Danny had been killed by the wild horse. Oceanfront's football team might not recover from his loss before the end of the season.

After a long stay in the hospital, Stephanie Bismark was sent north to recuperate on her uncle's ranch. As result of her injuries, she never rejoined the cheerleading squad.

It took Dusty weeks to convince himself that he wasn't to blame for the quarterback's death. He never really reached a point where he could completely deny his culpability. The best attitude he could achieve was: *the meathead deserved it*. And even that was a feeble excuse, and he knew it. Nobody deserves to get gored and trampled by a rampaging rhino, no matter how much of a jealous

rage they could muster. But then, Dusty had to remind himself: had the imaginary rhino not shown up, Danny would probably have beaten Dusty into a coma. Could he really fault himself for having self-preservation instincts?

If only he'd been able to turn to his mother for solace, but an auto accident had taken her from him years ago. Ever since the calamity, his father had become a maudlin alcoholic, some days he couldn't even dress himself. Dusty wasn't about to turn to *him* for advice. This left the lad to work through his trauma on his own.

Soon after, a month before he would have graduated, Dusty left San Francisco and hit the road.

It seemed like the simplest way to guarantee that his overactive imagination wouldn't harm his friends or loved ones.

Not that he really had any loved ones.

Until he met Joan Brenner.



He thought their first date went well, but then he wasn't exactly an impartial judge. Besides being smitten by this librarian, every second was a monumental struggle to keep his talent in check.

A few times, he failed.

She took him to a Denny's, apologizing that her budget really wouldn't tolerate anything respectable.

He assured her it was okay. "This place is distinctly posh compared to the dives I usually frequent."

She wanted creamed corn with her fried chicken platter, but the waitress informed her they were out of corn. "Pick something else." Joan settled for string beans as her second vegetable.

When their orders came, her fried chicken shared the plate with a mound of mashed potatoes and a dollop of creamed corn. Neither Joan nor their waitress batted an eye over this development.

After all of his soul-searching, Dusty couldn't see anything wrong in giving the girl a few nice things.

While waiting for their food to arrive, they swapped personal histories.

He learned that Joan liked romantic comedies and fusion jazz. She had a degree in Fine Arts, which had turned out to be utterly worthless when hunting for decent employment. Luckily, she'd padded out her class roster with an Office Management course. While her typing skills left a lot to be desired, she showed an aptitude for filing. A friend of her mother had arranged an interview



with the library, and they'd hired her on a temporary basis. "That," she revealed with a grin of pride, "was six months ago."

"Lucky girl," he commented.

"Talented girl," she corrected him. "What about you? What are your talents?"

*Sweetie, you wouldn't believe what I can do.*

But Dusty couldn't tell her that. Instead, he colored fact with fiction and told her he was "still finding himself." He revealed he'd hitchhiked across the country after high school. He entertained her with tales of rustic America and the quaint, often endearing people he'd met during his travels. Her interest didn't seem feigned to him, apparently his anecdotes delighted her.

"So, all this research you've been doing at the library," she remarked. "You're trying to pick a career, huh?"

He gave a slight shrug.

"I couldn't help but notice that most of the books you pull are medical textbooks."

"Umm..." A spark of suspicion tightened the muscles in his back.

She held up her hands. "I wasn't spying on you or anything. It's just that I know what's where on the shelves."

Yes, familiarity with the library's organization of topics was part of her job.

"So," she continued when he had no reply, "you're thinking of being a doctor, huh?"

"I'm interested in how the brain works..."

"Oooh!" she squealed. "A wannabe brain surgeon!"

Their waitress appeared with their meals, sparing Dusty any further Q&A.

Over desert, before she could resume their earlier conversation, Dusty asked her about her raincoat. "Is there a storm coming that I don't know about?"

She smiled. "Could be, Chuck."



It turned out she was right.

Within minutes of them leaving the Denny's, a light drizzle started.

"So," he remarked once they'd found shelter under a bus stop kiosk, "is this another of your talents? Like Spider-man's Spider Sense?"

She laughed, then demurely assured him there was nothing mystical about it. "I can just tell when it's going to rain."

As they discussed this, the drizzle escalated into a downpour.

"You're a witch who can predict the weather," he joked.

"Not always. I guess today I got lucky."

She looked up at him. He gazed back at her.

Before Dusty knew it, their lips were locked. He couldn't recall who'd made the first move. Her arms slipped around his neck, pulling herself up into a more intimate embrace. His hands lifted to cup her back, holding her close.

Enthusiastic bliss enveloped them.

The rest of the evening was hazy in Dusty's memory. There were flashes of him—no, *them*, for Joan raced alongside him—pelting down rain-swept streets. He didn't seem to mind that the downpour drenched him, plastering his hair against his prominent brow. Joan's prescient raincoat kept her relatively dry., but at one point she stopped and threw back her hood to engage him in another passionate embrace. He liked that part and was thankful it remained intact in his otherwise spotty memories of the evening.

In other parts, they clattered up a narrow staircase, then they were in an tiny apartment. Hers, he assumed. Once inside, she stripped off his wet clothes and her dry ones—that was another nice bit.

As was the shower they shared. They seemed to spend hours lathering up each other. Her body was nicer than he'd expected. Her dress had made her seem boyish, but its absence revealed an assortment of subtle but pleasant curves. Her limbs were long and skinny. Her hips narrow with prominent pelvic bones, her bust diminutive but he really liked the feel of it cupped in his eager hands. The soap made them both slippery.

Out on the street, in the shower and later in her bed, her kisses were hungry. She gave herself to him with zest. Her clumsiness was endearing and short-lived. His own naivete evaporated just as quickly. Primal instincts kicked in for both of them, turning virginal fumbling into exploratory tenderness. At no time did Dusty's imagination come into play; she was more than enough to dazzle him. As their pulses raced, their caresses grew more urgent. They finished quickly that first time. His nimble fingers made her exhale a soulful moan. He spilled his seed across her taut belly. Then they sprawled in each others' arms, drained, elated, content...until subsequent urges instigated more coupling.

Unprepared for such an evening of ecstasy, Dusty was forced to conjure himself a few condoms.

He recalled few details of this seventh heaven. Mostly there were transient snippets of physical contact. Lacking sequence, they bobbed in his mind as jumbled scenarios...but he didn't care. Their gestalt was intoxicating.

Dawn's glory spilled through an open window. The bed was warm. The pillow against his cheek was rich with the smell of Joan's vanilla-flavored hair.

At some point during the evening—the one he couldn't clearly remember—Dusty had realized he loved her.

He told her as much when she appeared bearing a tray of coffee and pastries. She blushed, then carefully set the tray atop a dresser across the room. Within seconds, they were in each others' arms, cooing endearments when their lips weren't exploring carnal terrain.

This time they didn't bother with a condom.

This time Dusty remembered every glorious instant of it, in sequence and in panting color.

## 4.

A commercial flight brought Johnny Wolfbreath to Baltimore. He would have preferred the privacy of a charter plane, but his budget did not allow for such extravagances.

Upon debarking his flight, Johnny lingered in the airport terminal.

He cut a striking figure. His suit was expensive and perfectly tailored to his tall, limber physique. His skin was a reddish mahogany. His long jet black hair was pulled back into a braided ponytail that dangled at least twelve inches down his back. With his square jaw, his straight nose, his piercing eyes, his high forehead—he was very handsome. No woman could pass him by without a longing scrutiny.

While females travelers checked him out as they hurried by, he watched a short man in a blue suit fetch luggage. The man walked from the sliding ramp to a public lavatory. Johnny followed him.

During the flight, the man had occupied the aisle seat next to Johnny. A gregarious fellow, the man in the blue suit had engaged Johnny in unwelcome conversation.

“You’re Injun, ain’t you?”

From the onset, Johnny had sought to dissuade the man from social interaction. He hadn’t responded except to narrow his eyes and slide his vision in the man’s direction.

Ignoring the brush-off, the man had persisted, “It’s okay, Kemosabe. I got no problem with Injuns.” He had leaned forward to privately share: “Or blacks or Ricans, either. Got no problem with them. Those Vietnamese, though, they can be snotty. Hey? Y’know what I mean?”

The man was in his forties, overweight, but not obese. Although Caucasian, his face was flush and perspiration twinkled on his low brow. The man clearly had a metabolism problem, a malodor of stale sweat surrounded him like a palpable cloud. His hair was thick and lurched into an enormous wave atop his head; its color did not match the thinning hair on his temples. An NRA button was pinned to his lapel. The breast pocket of his jacket bulged with literature he would soon whip out.

“They don’t even belong here, huh? They’re not *real* Americans like us, right? Know what I mean?”

Johnny turned away to stare out the window at the landscape of clouds below. He felt like William Shatner in that episode of *The Twilight Zone*—the one where Shatner keeps spotting a monster perched out on the wing of the aircraft. Only here and now, the gremlin sat next to Johnny aboard the plane.

Oblivious to Johnny’s disinterest, the man introduced himself and, without waiting to get Johnny’s name, launched into a ribald tale about visiting a Vietnamese lady with the intention of selling her insurance. “That’s my biz—insurance.” He wagged his eyebrows. “But this little lady was interested in something else, y’know what I mean?” He guffawed and proceeded to regale his captive audience with unnecessary details about his amorous exploits. He repeatedly used that word—“exploits”—to describe his debauchery. “Y’know what I mean?”

When the man started to get graphic about his exploits, Johnny rose to seek refuge in the toilet—but the man wouldn’t get up to allow him to pass.

“What—you don’t want to miss this—it’s one of the best parts. Those slant slits love to be treated like dirt—“

It seemed as if the torture would never stop.

Fortunately, it had only been a three-hour fight.

Waiting until they were alone in the terminal bathroom, Johnny took up a position behind the insurance salesman as he stood at a urinal. Johnny took out a pair of plastic gloves and inserted his hands into them. After a few seconds, the man peered over his shoulder. Instead of objecting to this violation of bathroom etiquette, he grinned and gabbled, "Hey, Kemosabe. What's the matter? You never use a proper toilet before? Lemme guess, you're used to pissing outdoors, huh?"

Johnny strangled the man with his own blue tie. He would have liked to take the man's bad hairpiece as a scalp, but knew better than to leave the police anything they could mistake for a clue. He took the man's wallet, so it would look like a simple robbery.

With his honor restored (and the honor of everyone else too, even the poor Vietnamese woman the man had abused), Johnny Wolfbreath left the terminal and caught a bus into town.

If everything went according to schedule, this would not be the last person to die by his hand today.



This proved to be accurate, but his next victim was not his assigned target.

Scarcely a week ago, Baltimore had suffered a terrible tragedy when two men had been killed by a wild animal. From all the way in Cheyenne, Johnny had recognized Mr Black's taint in the incident. It had taken a few days to convince his employers to send him east.

Being unfamiliar with the city, Johnny decided to acquire some local knowledge, especially as it pertained to the tragedy. A few inquiring calls later, he was headed for the police station where the detective in charge of the incident's investigation was stationed.

Posing as an agent from Federal Animal Control, Johnny conducted a perfunctory interview with Detective Sampkin. The hunchbacked detective was surly. He complained about yet another federal agency poking their noses into matters best handled by the city's own. Johnny agreed with him. "I'm just doin' my job, pal. They told me to check out this matter. I did—an' the inquiry's closed. You guys got everythin' under control." By way of an apology, he suggested they visit a bar down the street. Somewhat mollified, Detective Sampkin followed Johnny to his death.

On the street, halfway to the bar, Johnny fell out of step with the detective. From this rear vantage, he deftly snapped the man's neck and shoved the body into a convenient alley. Johnny had

scouted the area before entering the precinct house. The alley ran between two shops (now closed) to a small courtyard where a shed was located. No lit windows looked out onto the courtyard. Containing only a small selection of gardening tools, the shed offered enough open room for Johnny to conduct his real inquiry.

He lay the detective on the earthen ground. Before Johnny began, he stripped naked and secured his clothes in a plastic bag he carried for just such purpose. Moving methodically, he peeled away the man's jacket, shirt, skin, and then the muscle wall of his belly. His bloodied hands plunged deep into the corpse's torso and fished forth an assortment of vital organs. He lifted the spleen to sniff it. He examined the intestines, unraveling them like a pulpy garden hose. He sampled the heart and nibbled on a few neurological strands pried from the detective's spinal column. Inserting a curved ceramic straw up the nose and into the depths of the cranial cavity, he tasted some of Sampkin's brain.

By the time Johnny was done, he knew every detail about the double killing.

He washed himself down using a water spigot mounted outside the shed. Once he was clean, he dressed and left the door of the shed open so that local stray dogs could reduce the mutilated cadaver to scattered bones.



Johnny Wolfbreath was a man of many talents.

Among them was necromancy: reading the dead, deriving intimate information through ritual examination of the subject's visceral organs. It was a skill passed down to him by his maternal grandfather, against the wishes of the tribe. His father had been a deadbeat (for more reasons than just his white heritage) who'd skipped out long before his kid was old enough to know what a dad was; consequently Johnny was considered a half-breed, not entitled to basic respect from his peers.

It was no wonder that once he'd become an "adult," Johnny had abandoned the reservation and sought a life and employment elsewhere. Curiously, although his own people had condemned him for the white taint in his blood, most white men seemed to envy his partial American Indian birthright.

For the first twenty years of his life, he'd been Henry White Owl. Part of turning his back on his kind had been abandoning that name. He'd chosen Johnny Wolfbreath not out of any homage to his

ancestry, but more so because strong Amerindian roots impressed the white fools who ran society.

Basically, Johnny didn't owe loyalty to either ancestry. He thought of himself as a self-made man. This attitude did not prevent him from playing the race card, though, if it suited his purposes.

The air of disapproval that had harried his youth had undoubtedly contributed to his decision to become a hired assassin once he reached adulthood. He held no esteem for his own kind, and viewed everyone else as no better. As long as there was a price on someone's head, everyone deserved to die.

Although he'd taught himself to be a warrior, his skill for murder was actually secondhand, such skills having been assimilated (via necromancy) from a rival assassin he'd been hired to take out early in his career. In this manner he had gained expertise in all the nuances of death.



For almost a decade Johnny operated as a freelancer, until the League found him.

At the time, a conglomerate of callous financiers wanted to level the pastoral town of Glendale in Illinois and build a super shopping mall designed to cater to the nearby cities of Serendipity and Boonesville. As it happened, neither Serendipity nor Boonesville needed a super mall; several large shopping complexes already adequately serviced the needs of those towns' populations. But none of the group of financiers behind the super mall saw any profit from those meager shopping centers; they wanted to lure the people of Serendipity and Boonesville to *their* mall, where a healthy percentage of revenues would find its way into *their* pockets. America was full of such small-town tragedies.

But a minor nuisance had become a major obstacle to these financiers' greedy ambitions. A real estate broker in Glendale by the name of James Grady had united a coalition of local businesses to oppose the buy-up and demolition of their town. A laudable move by civilized standards, but quite suicidal once you factored in the ruthlessness of these financiers.

While launching a media assault tailored to change public opinion, the financiers secretly took more proactive measures: they hired a hitman. Once the opposition's figurehead was removed, the movement would lose momentum and die out, leaving the way clear for the financiers to finish appropriating the land rights to every square foot of Glendale.

Johnny took the job; it had all the earmarks of being a cake walk. After his close call in Tunisia last month, he wanted to play it safe and do a few cushy jobs. Icing a small-town real estate broker in his fifties fit that bill perfectly.

Casing the target was ridiculously easy. Mr Grady lived by a rigid schedule that consisted of ten hour work days, often spent sitting in his one-room office, waiting for callbacks that never came, then home to a diet of TV dinners and television. His interactions with the businessmen opposing the construction of the super mall were conducted primarily over the phone. Grady had never been married, and there was no girlfriend, not even any pets to complicate his routine.

It was almost too easy, but Johnny had no objections to that. The quicker Grady was dead, the sooner Johnny could return to his penthouse condo in Santa Fe and his stable of voluptuous babes.

Johnny decided to do it on a Friday night. He would brain Grady with a baseball bat while the man sat watching his vapid TV shows, and then ransack the house to make it look like a home invasion.

He parked his rental car blocks away, and remained unseen while crossing the distance to Grady's home by keeping to neighboring backyards. Breaking in was easy: the backdoor was unlocked. He'd brought his own bat, but look—Grady owned one too, there it was propped beside the refrigerator by the doorway that connected the kitchen to an empty dining room. Setting his own bludgeon aside (he'd reclaim it on his way out), Johnny took Grady's bat and hoisted it aloft in his gloved grip. Doing him with his own bat would better fit the profile of a home invasion gone bad.

Most of the house lay in murky darkness. Grady had retreated to his den for the evening. There, he slumped like a fat lump on a sagging sofa, sitcom scenarios flickering across his glazed eyeballs. So transfixed was Grady by the asinine show, he never sensed Johnny slip into the den.

Not that anyone would have detected Johnny's approach, his progress was like the passing of a shadow. A natural skill that often came in handy.

He was able to get within touching distance before Grady noticed him. The man lifted his corpulent profile to gawk at the dark intruder that stood over him. Without wasting any time, Johnny hefted the bat over his shoulder, then brought it down at a severe velocity to crash into Grady's stupefied face. The blow caved in Grady's skull—and should have killed him instantly. But it didn't.



A penumbral environment prevailed in the den, the only illumination spilling from the television screen. In this semi-darkness, Johnny failed to immediately discover that his robust strike had failed to kill his target. Now the Grady was supposed to be dead, Johnny had little interest in him. His gaze traveled over the den, taking in its bland decor. Clearly, James Grady had been an individual who'd embraced tastelessness. The art hanging on the walls (Johnny's eyesight was exceptionally keen) could have been bequeathed from grandma: innocuous landscapes in which the dappled trees blended together into formless lumps strewn along unremarkable lakesides.

He almost had a heart attack when Grady lurched from the sofa and stumbled toward him, arms waving and mouth dilating. One eye was completely gone, having been smashed back into his head along with the rest of his receding hairline; the other flopped on his cheek like a flaccid sausage. His forehead was gone, a gaping hole now, through which one could see the pulverized mess that was left of the frontal lobes of his brain. Despite these grim handicaps, Grady groped at Johnny with more than a little coherent wrath.

A backswipe was enough to send the fat man back onto the couch. There, he flailed and gibbered things that were probably supposed to be angry words.

"What the hell—" gasped Johnny.

The hole in Grady's head was big enough to stuff in a grapefruit. In its recesses oozed the wreckage of his cerebral cortex.

"What the hell are you doing moving around without a brain?" Johnny growled.

When Grady made to clamber from the sofa again, Johnny smacked him back down with another harsh blow to the head—or at least what was left of the head. After two more hits, only shards of scalp and a fatty slab of chin remained above the neck.

But still Grady kept kicking. Literally. The should-be-a-corpse lashed out and a slippered foot caught Johnny in the shin.

"Ow!"

This was not the cake walk it was supposed to be.

He discarded the borrowed bat. It bounced into a corner, leaving a pinkish gray smear on the carpet. From a sheath strapped to his left forearm, Johnny withdrew a knife. He held Grady down with a foot firmly planted on his stomach and plunged the needle-like blade deep into the man's chest. With the blade embedded to its hilt, he gave it a few nasty twists to maximize the internal damage. When he withdrew the spike, a flood of blood gushed from the wound.

Finally Grady's corpse stopped moving.

Whatever Grady was—had been—his survival had relied more on his heart than his brain.

“Just what the hell are you...?”

His curiosity won out over any professional caution. (But then, considering Grady’s nonexistent roster of close friends, there were no worries that a visitor would show up to discover the murderer standing over the body of his victim.) The fat man might have been beyond answering any verbal inquisition, but Johnny had other ways of dragging secrets out of people.

He didn’t bother to shed his attire, his black slacks and pullover were already spattered with blood and gore. He knelt right down and proceeded to soak himself in Grady’s viscera. Ignoring the primary chest wound, his angular hands tore their way into the belly. But what he pulled forth were not conventional entrails. The lumps clutched in his fists looked more like...brains!

Grady had two brains?

Since bashing in the upper one hadn’t stopped him, clearly that had been a decoy organ. The man’s intellect had resided here...in his stomach. This accounted for his overweight appearance; it wasn’t excess fat, it was an extra brain.

“What the hell...”

He really didn’t know what to make of this. It was his first experience with something not even remotely human.

He was leery of tasting this corpse. What if it was so unhuman that it possessed toxic properties?

He settled for a tactile examination of Grady’s intestines.

The identity that seeped from the gore into Johnny’s awareness was definitely not human. Grady had been some kind of genetic mutation. His internal organs were all rearranged. Even his heart was positioned higher than normal—revealing that Johnny’s initial stab had completely missed the pulmonary pump, slicing it in half only during the angled removal of the blade. Somehow, Grady had become aware of his aberrant physiology, perhaps during a medical check-up. Desperate to preserve his terrible secret, he had gone to great lengths to isolate himself from other people. In fact, his efforts to rally local businessmen against the town’s inevitable demise had been Grady’s premiere social activity.

“You weren’t even human like the rest of Glendale’s populace,” he remonstrated the finally-really dead man. “You got stupid. You made the mistake of caring what happened to them, and that got you killed.”

Sitting back on his heels, Johnny evaluated his present situation.

Faking a home invasion was no longer a practical option. Besides the eviscerated condition of Grady's carcass, his anatomical differences were certain to draw unwanted attention to his murder. The den was a mess—more than a mess, it resembled an abattoir. He had to think of some way to clean it up, disguise it...or destroy the evidence. Yes, that sounded ideal.

He searched the house. In the basement he found a metal can filled with gasoline—and three sticks of dynamite! *What were you planning to do with these?* Johnny wondered. Well, it no longer mattered. The explosives would do the job, totally eradicating the defiled mutant's gutted corpse. And the gasoline would help bring the whole house down as a crypt for the unholy remains.

Back in the den, he liberally doused the room with the gas. He tossed a few splashes of it down the hallway, to coax the fire to spread to the rest of the house. Gathering Grady's remains, he stabbed the dynamite deep into the fleshy lump.

*Okay...all set...*

In the hallway, he lit a match and dropped it into the wet trail that led back into the den. The TV was still blaring its nonsense, casting flickering light across the horrific tableau of Grady's untidily assembled cadaver.

Before the match reached the ground, Johnny was fleet of foot in his departure. As he raced through the darkened house, a burst of orange radiance blossomed behind him. In the kitchen he remembered to retrieve his own bat. Besides not wanting to leave any potential evidence behind, it was his only bat and he didn't feel like buying a new one. He burst from the backdoor and dashed across the back lawn.

Halfway to the bushes that marked the perimeter of Grady's property, something bit Johnny on his back. He barely had time to grunt "Wha—" before an electrical current made him grit his teeth and dance. As he flailed and twitched, an explosion rocked the neighborhood. Just before he passed out, Johnny watched a section of Grady's house erupt and spew fire and debris across the backyard.



When Johnny Wolfbreath woke, he remained unmoving, vigilant. To no gain.

After a few seconds, a voice informed him, "We know you're awake."

*Alright...* Johnny reflected. *Whoever's captured me has called my bluff.*

Carefully, he cracked his eyelids to assess his status.

Captured: that much he knew.

Bound: this much he could tell from the restraints digging into his wrists, elbows, neck, waist, knees and ankles—they really had him secured tight.

Whoever “they” were...

Opening his eyes more, Johnny surveyed his immediate predicament. The room was dark, but its dry odor hinted at a location other than a police station. He saw no cobweb wisps lurking in the corners where the walls became ceilings, so that ruled out the room belonging to some abandoned warehouse. The chair to which he was fastened and the apparatus that surrounded him were not regular law enforcement equipment, nor was any it the kind of gear used by criminal lowlifes. For an instant he wondered if he'd been captured by some mad dentist...then he caught a glimpse of the instruments lined up on an elevated tray to his side. Those nasty utensils were definitely not standard materials, at least not for the police. Such blades and serrated tweezers were employed more commonly by terrorist cells.

*Who the hell's captured me?*

“Are you ready to answer some questions?” the voice inquired. It came from behind him, beyond Johnny's field of vision. He found he could not turn around, some kind of metallic helmet firmly held his head in place.

“I'm getting a negative response,” announced a second, gruffer voice.

The first speaker sighed, then assured Johnny that resistance was fruitless. “I'm not just saying that, either. We've attached an assortment of electrodes directly to your brain. We can read your thoughts with a fair degree of accuracy.”

Johnny formulated a mental obscenity.

“Like that,” remarked the first voice. “Cursing us will not make this any easier for you.”

Johnny fumed, but kept his thoughts unspecific. Under the circumstances, anyone could accurately guess he was going to mentally curse at this point; it proved nothing. “One of the electrodes is implanted in your pain center. Would you like to see what it can do?”

Johnny offered no response.

A second later his right arm felt as if it were on fire. After initially squeezing his eyes closed with agony, he pried them open to

look down at his raging appendage. There was nothing wrong with his arm; no scorching, his red mahogany skin wasn't discolored in any way. The agony vanished abruptly, as if canceled by a switch.

"Gave him a level two jolt," the gruffer voice declared.

"Unpleasant, hmm?"

Johnny felt a hand come to rest on his shoulder.

"You can avoid any further doses by simply answering our questions. They're not very hard, the questions, that is. You should have no problem with them...if you are honest with us."

Johnny concocted a mental image of repulsive implications.

"Shall I—" asked the gruff voice, obviously belonging to the tech at the machinery's controls.

"Not just yet. I see no value in damaging our subject."

Johnny grated, "I won't talk."

"That's the beauty of this apparatus," proclaimed the interrogator. "Verbal responses are quite unnecessary. It can read the truth in your cerebral electrical activity."

"Right..." Johnny had never heard of any devices that could accomplish such things. The man was obviously lying—a feeble attempt to soften Johnny's tongue.

"Here's our first question. Pay attention now." The interrogator paused, then continued in a neutral voice: "Why did you kill James Grady?"

*Because, Johnny thought, my granny asked me to...*

After a moment, the tech related the machinery's analysis: "He's a freelance hit man. Somebody hired him to kill Grady."

"Hmm." Johnny imagined the interrogator giving a pensive nod before drawing a deductive conclusion. "Probably hired by those financiers behind that super mall development that Grady was publicly fighting."

Johnny inwardly gasped. *How the hell did they learn any of that...?*

The tech chuckled and declared, "He's freaking out."

"I warned you how efficient our apparatus is," the interrogator reminded Johnny.

"Damn," Johnny mumbled under his breath.

"Okay, here's our next question, Mr —uhh— Actually, before we get to that, it would be helpful if we had your name."

*There's no way you're getting that—*

After another brief pause, the tech announced, "Henry Pale-Bird...or something like that..."

Johnny's eyes shot wide. Against his strongest resistance, their machinery had succeeded in dragging a name from his

consciousness. And it'd been the one he was born to, not the one he went by. Johnny felt a surge of snarky satisfaction. For all its apparent omnipotence, their mind-reading machinery had some bugs in it.

"Something's amusing him," the tech revealed.

"Pale-Bird doesn't sound right," the interrogator mused aloud. "Indian names are usually more specific. It's probably something like White-Eagle...or White-Hawk."

Defiant resistance ebbed out of Johnny as if he had become a punctured balloon. His enemies' machinery was too much for him. He had rallied his most formidable mental resources...and the machinery had effortlessly penetrated his defenses to pluck forth facts from his personal privacy lockdown. Nothing could be hidden from this devilish scrutinizer. So why bother with any pretense of insubordination?

"Henry White Owl was the name my parents gave me," Johnny muttered. "I don't use it anymore. Ever since I left the tribe, I call myself Johnny Wolfbreath."

"Ah," grunted the interrogator. "Very helpful, John. Thank you. Although my name has no bearing on our little discussion, you may call me Victor—if you want."

Johnny made no reply to this. He was instantly dubious of any efforts the interrogator might make to establish a friendly link between them. That was standard interrogation protocol; he wasn't going to fall for it. Johnny was their prisoner, they were in charge—for the time being. No matter how desperate a situation became, the scheming part of Johnny's mind was always ready to act if things suddenly turned in his favor.

"Well," sighed Victor, "getting back to our next question: how did you discover that James Grady was not human?"

Ah—so these people knew Grady was...whatever he'd been. That meant they had known beforehand, since the explosion set by Johnny would have destroyed any evidence of the real estate broker's unique physiology.

"He didn't know," the tech revealed before Johnny had the chance to speak.

"That's right," Johnny weakly agreed with the man reading the machine's output. "I thought he was just a regular guy...until I bashed in his head and he didn't die."

"Interesting," chirped Victor. "If you don't mind, John, could you walk us through your encounter with Grady?"

Reluctantly, but knowing the futility of holding anything back (the machinery could be relied on to unearth any secrets he tried to

keep), Johnny related the details of the evening to these two unseen men. Neither of them seemed shocked by anything he told them.

When his tale reached the part when he had eviscerated Grady's corpse in order to learn its biological secrets, Johnny paused. Never before had he revealed his necromantic talent to anyone. But—again—nothing was liable to remain covert with their electrodes buried in his brain, sucking out every one of his private peculiarities.

Once he had revealed his arcane ability, their inquiries centered more on Johnny's talents than on his murder of James Grady.

Their questions didn't followed a logical pattern, at least not one Johnny could fathom. Even more unsettling: they did not seem too upset that Johnny had killed Grady—if anything, quite the opposite. Almost as if he'd done them a favor.

At some point, the tech ceased confirming Johnny's statements. The two men, still unseen, hung on every word of Johnny's account.

Finally, Victor adopted a stern tone for a poignant question: "Would you say this necromantic talent of yours is a psychic ability? Or a learned skill?"

"Umm, my grandfather showed me how to do it," was Johnny's careful answer. Suddenly, alarm bells were going off in his head. A shift in the inquisition's mood had occurred, hardening his interrogator's congeniality into sinister mistrust. The source of his skill seemed important to them. Johnny fretfully realized that he was on thin ice. No matter how grateful they might've been to him for killing Grady, abruptly they were treating him as a potential threat.

"So you could teach this skill to someone else. They'd need no special aptitude."

Johnny would have shrugged, but the straps held him too firmly in the chair. "Possibly... My grandfather claimed it was a tribal talent."

"Meaning one needs Indian blood to do it?"

"I don't know..."

Clearly talking to the interrogator, not their prisoner, the tech pointed out: "The League ran tests years ago which have proven that Amerindians fall into the acceptable spectrum of humanity."

Victor made a "mmm" sound.

It was nice to hear that these fanatics (for they were clearly extremists of some kind) thought Indians were human. The tribes could rest easy, they would not be the target of any genocidal assaults by these wackos—not that Johnny really cared.

“Just to be on the safe side,” mumbled Victor, “let’s check John out...and make sure that *he’s* human.”

A switch was flipped out of view and Johnny lost consciousness.



This was a matter that had never crossed Johnny’s mind: was he a human being? Or some aberrant mutation?

That appeared to be his captors’ primary concern.

Whatever tests they subjected him to, the results verified Johnny’s fundamental humanity.

That was fortunate, for in his heart Johnny Wolfbreath doubted he was entirely human, at least not according to whatever definition was adhered to by these fanatics. His necromantic talent had been taught him by his maternal grandfather, but the old man (a shaman in his own right) had revealed that no “normal” person could apply these gruesome teachings. A true necromancer was *different* from other people. At the time, Johnny had assumed his pawpaw was only calling him “special” to make the child smile. Now, though...Johnny had to wonder.

Apparently, these fanatics’ mind-reading machine was not perfect, for Johnny had been able to sidestep these notions in his thoughts, hiding them by omission. And he’d gotten away with it.

Otherwise he’d be dead by now.



In the public eye, the Environmental Purity League fought industrial polluters and championed the plight of endangered species. In secret, however, they funded a department devoted entirely to guarding the racial purity of human beings. Neither color nor religion nor sexual preference were involved in the League’s definition of “humanity.” Their sole criteria lay in genetic parameters. Their primary concern was the preservation of mankind against the threat of mutations that might eventually unseat homo sapiens as the planet’s dominant species.

For over two decades, the League’s Dark Department had hunted and eradicated thousands of creatures that had failed to measure up as *normal*. Sometimes the difference was subtle (like an extra junk chromosome) and other times it was hidden but severe, as in the case of James Grady. Often the mutants were detected early and infanticide was easy. Other times, a monster



might hide its deviant nature well into adulthood. On those occasions, the Dark Department required agents to hunt down these deviants and dispatch them.

That was where Johnny Wolfbreath came in. The League needed an expert assassin, and Johnny was exactly that.

Once they had affirmed his humanity, the League promptly made Johnny an offer he could not refuse. The salary was lavish, the benefits extravagant. He'd have been a fool to pass up on this golden opportunity.

Besides, this new job would offer him an array of exotic targets. Hunting the League's mutant creatures would be far more interesting than the snitches and business rivals who made up his usual assignments.

The Dark Department believed they were getting more than their money's worth by hiring Johnny. His skills as a killer were important, but his necromantic talents would provide the League with a means to study the habits of the unpure, creating behavioral charts to track future deviants. After each kill, all Johnny had to do was sit for half-an-hour in the mind-reading chair and directly debrief his findings into the machinery.

He was careful to shield certain thoughts that might upset his employers.

For one: Johnny did not share his employers' radical dedication to human genetic integrity. Johnny was an equal-opportunity killer; it didn't matter to him if they were human or mutant, they all died just as easily.



Sometimes the League's criteria for non-human were somewhat elastic, as evidenced by the poor sap Johnny had killed just a few months ago. A certain artist going by the name Ned Gland had been becoming too influential with his high-profile work. Gland's work promoted independent thinking. Somehow, the League had decided that excessive creativity was a deviation from the norm, and Johnny was sent to put Ned Gland in the morgue.

Johnny didn't object to these off-center assignments. He honestly didn't care what his employers' motives were. Johnny's job was to kill, and he always got his man—or mutant, as the case now was.

But then Johnny's perfect score had hit a snag with Mr Black.

Initially, that had seemed like a routine assignment. Although the background file he was given remained typically vague, the

League had linked this Black guy with several strange occurrences. Hints were made that some kind of psychic ability might be involved. This didn't bother Johnny, he had faced foes wielding almost paranormal defenses—and he'd always won. The League were especially keen on Johnny killing Mr Black—but more so in him employing his necromantic talent to learn exactly what type of creature Black had been. Johnny had no problem with this. The League frequently called upon his necromancy to learn useful secrets.

Confident about success, Johnny had flown to Denver—where failure darkened his life. Not only did Johnny fail to kill Black, he couldn't even find him. The man had lived a reclusive existence, and had recently vanished from it. There were no clues that might have guided Johnny to track the bastard. Instead, a sullen Johnny had returned to report his failure to the League.

They were not happy.

Neither was he. This had been his first failure.

Failure would revisit Johnny's life on several occasions, and each time the target he could not kill would be Mr Black. With each near-miss, the target changed his name, but his head seemed stuck in a crayon box, for each new name was just a different color. At least this made it easier to spot him the next time he popped up on the League's radar.

Failure after failure transformed Mr Black from a routine hit into an objective of obsessive magnitude. Even though Johnny successfully completed his other assignments, he was left with the stigma of his multiple failures with Mr Black. The bastard became Johnny's nemesis. Johnny literally daydreamed about spilling Black's blood. Johnny was going to relish tearing apart his corpse and squeezing each and every trivial secret from the spirit embedded in Black's viscera.

But...it looked as if this trip to Baltimore was going to have zero payoff. Johnny had arrived too late. The double killing had happened days ago. Unless Black had changed his ways, which Johnny deemed as highly doubtful, the man would've left town immediately that night. There'd be no clues; there never was.

Despite this rueful conviction, Johnny stuck with his hunt.

Among the data stolen from Detective Sampkin, Johnny had learned the location where the killings had occurred. Now infused with a townie's familiarity with the city, Johnny headed there. No matter how unproductive this was going to be, his investigation had to play itself out.

The stretch of street outside the tenement at 1255 Heath Avenue bore no signs of the double killings that had occurred there. Traffic had undoubtedly worn away any traces left on the asphalt, and someone had probably hosed down the sidewalk, washing away the large bloodstain that had sickened Detective Sampkin. There was nothing strange about the scene now. Cars moved along in an orderly fashion. Pedestrians strolled the pavements. Squeals of childhood glee drifted from the park across the road.

Ignoring the idyllic late afternoon tableau, Johnny went inside the tenement to question the building's superintendent.

Johnny had no interest in the two killings, and he hardly believed in the "wild beast" blamed for those deaths. He was certain, though, the half-naked man from the policeman's account had been Mr Black. Common sense dictated that Black had been residing here, so Johnny might as well see if he could divine anything from whatever Black had left behind.

When Johnny asked the building's superintendent about the incident, the elderly black man rolled his eyes and gave an exasperated sigh. "Jesus—how many times are you lawmen gonna hassle me about that night?"

Adopting the stern attitude of a law enforcement official, Johnny told him, "Until the case is solved." Although he knew the cops would never reach a rational explanation for the double killings. "Wild animal" indeed—ha!

It did seem significant to Johnny, however, that people had lost their lives this time. Of all the past weird occurrences that the League had linked to Mr Black, none had involved fatalities. So—what had changed? Was Black's mutant ability becoming too difficult for the fugitive to control?

Whatever that ability was.

Finding an answer to that point was part of Johnny's assignment. Killing Black would remove another unwanted deviation from the population's gene pool, but the League was more interested in what Johnny would learn from a necromantic examination of the corpse. Black's entrails would reveal the truth to Johnny.

If he could only get his hands on them.

"I understand one of your tenants was involved," Johnny told the super.

"That'd be Mr Gray," Mr Strickland wearily replied. "The police already went through his stuff."

"His 'stuff' is still in his room?"

A petulant sigh prefaced Strickland's retort: "Yeah yeah. The cops warned me to leave everything the way it was. We're not allowed to clean it out and rent it to anybody else. Mr Lane, the landlord, he don't like that part. He was gonna file a complaint with City Hall. He's a Council member, he's got clout. If those politicians know what's good for them, they'll let us dump Gray's junk and put the apartment back on the market."

"But Gray's 'stuff' is still there," Johnny repeated.

"Yeah, I just told you so."

Johnny decided he really didn't like the man's attitude.

"What's the apartment number?"

Strickland sagged as if a monstrous weight had been suddenly strapped to his already stooped back. Grumbling, "I'll show you," he drew a ring bearing many keys from his pocket and moved to do so.

"No, I don't think you will." Pressing a hand to the super's chest, Johnny guided the old man back into his apartment.

"Hey—what—" squawked Strickland. "No—"

He was an old man, easily broken. Depositing his body in a well-used armchair, Johnny left with the keyring.



Upstairs, apartment 314 offered nothing in the way of insight into the elusive Mr Black, just as Johnny had expected. The man never left anything behind. Black was such a cipher, sometimes Johnny wondered if he had any personality or interests.

According to Detective Sampkin's assimilated memory, Gray's apartment had been visited by a pair of FBI agents soon after the incident. If Black had screwed up and left behind anything of value, the Feds had it now.

This was a new development. The FBI was interested in Mr Black. The League would want to hear about this.



Back in his own hotel room, Johnny used a burner-cellphone to contact his employers and tell them that the FBI was sniffing around Mr Black's trail.

"Your use of the word 'trail' implies that your target has once again eluded you," came the terse remark.

"He's a slick one," Johnny grumbled, avoiding any explicit acknowledgement of failure.

“For now, back off,” he was instructed. “We will look into the FBI’s interest in the target.”

The line went dead.

Johnny could guess what they were going to decide. For all the League’s audacity, they tended to be overly phobic about attracting the attention of any Authorities. Nothing could be allowed to endanger their genocide program, cleansing the population of undesirable deviations was a sacred task to them. If the FBI were hunting Mr Black, Johnny was going to be warned to steer clear of the matter.

But...the notion of abandoning tracking Black was unthinkable to Johnny. The bastard was Johnny’s nemesis. No warrior worth his salt would turn away from defeating their nemesis. If only Johnny could find the elusive bastard; he knew he would emerge victorious once they came face-to-face. It was insanity to ask Johnny to step down.

Besides—the FBI’s investigation itself was a potential boon. Johnny could let the Feds do the grunt work. Let them ply their federal data bases and scour their surveillance networks—and when they found Mr Black, Johnny could step in and kill him first.

After such a long hunt, Johnny would welcome finally achieving victory over the bastard.

The decision to go rogue came easy to Johnny Wolfbreath. Granted, it was risky to go against the League’s wishes, but Johnny’s obsession to personally destroy Mr Black was just too strong. He refused to abandon it.

Once he had restored his reputation by vanquishing Black, the League would applaud his action. Who knew what the Feds wanted with Black... What if they chose to overlook his genetic impurity and—oh horror—protect him as a national asset? The League would have a mass stroke. But—if Johnny managed to reach the target before the FBI, Black’s destruction would be guaranteed. By that point, the League would be glad to retroactively sanction his brazen action.

He trashed his burner phone, then checked out of the cheap hotel. Traveling south, he found lodging in an even sleazier dive just outside Washington DC.

## 5.

For weeks, Dusty and Joan had been inseparable. Moving in together was inevitable.

They were lost in the blissful throes of young love. As with all couples in the early stages of their relationships, their passion burned brightest of all. They only had eyes for each other; the rest of the world existed only peripherally, if at all. Not even an earthquake could have shaken the lovers apart.

They spent every day at the library: she sorting books behind the counter, he hunched over textbooks in the reading area. During the evenings, they frequently dined out, for the depths of Dusty's wallet was limited only by his imagination.

Their relationship served to generally temper Dusty's usually vagrant imagination. So intense was his devotion for Joan that it left little room for his mind to dwell on other subjects.

On weekends, Dusty would've been happy just staying in bed with his beloved, but Joan craved cultural diversions every once in a while. Bedazzled by her, Dusty rarely opposed her whims. They went biking everywhere, which left Dusty with cramps in his legs from all the pedaling. They visited the zoo and a few museums. One Saturday, they spent an entire day—from dawn to midnight—wandering the Farmers Market at Reading Terminal, where he enjoyed his first taste of numerous ethnic dishes. He'd expected that he would be uneasy around so many other people, and that assumption proved faulty—but only because Joan dominated his lovesick attention.

They chose her apartment when they moved in together, since his was too small and located in a disreputable area of the city. His belongings were few; all of his clothes fit into a medium-sized cardboard box. Consequently, his contributions to the quarters' decor were minimal. Joan tried hard to make room for him, but he declined to fill the spaces she offered him. Even though he left most of his clothing in a box, she convinced him to buy a suit and hang in it "their" closet. Dusty wore the suit only once (he found it too constricting and itchy) and it remained in the closet, keeping silent company with her dresses.

Intoxicated by joy, Dusty found himself content for the first time in his life. No worries harried his buoyant moods. Each day was another eternity in his beloved's company. Sometimes just sitting and staring at Joan triggered waves of rapture, he didn't even have to speak or touch her. Exchanging a smile was enough to articulate

the fevered ardor they felt for each other. For hours on end, his curse was completely forgotten.

Joan Brenner was happy too, for never before had any guy shown her more than a passing interest. She'd always been too plain, too timid, too dispassionate. She longed to be adventurous, but simply hadn't been able to muster the courage...until Chuck came along. He lavished his entire heart on her. There was no mistaking that. He fairly glowed with love, and Joan knew she mirrored that radiance. She found herself leaving the bathroom door open while availing herself of the facilities—because she couldn't endure even a wooden door separating them. All she had to do was ask and he would give her whatever she wanted. Her materialistic needs were trifling, though, and she saw no reason to tax his mysteriously bottomless finances by asking for the moon. Meanwhile, he thoroughly fulfilled her emotional needs.

While they shared tender thoughts and engaged in languid conversations about trivial aspects of life, Dusty rarely referenced his time before he'd met her. Attuned to this, she declined from asking him about his youth or his family. She never brought up the subject of previous lovers (his or hers), for she astutely sensed that she had been his first. This made her feel special, endearing her heart to his with even greater affection.

They were inseparable.

Consequently, Dusty did not notice the changes Joan was undergoing.

## 6.

Johnny Wolfbreath took an instant dislike to Washington DC. His loathing had nothing to do with politics or climate. Granted, whether or not they were part of the great bureaucracy, most of the city's inhabitants were probably vile enough; in Johnny's eyes, everyone was. No, the cause of his discomfort were the cherry blossom trees. They were everywhere, lining streets like decorative lampposts. The air burned with their sickly sweet aroma. It stung his eyes and left an repellent tart flavor on his tongue. Never before had pollen or floral scents bothered him, but this city's pink stench blessed him with a permanent headache. The cherry blooms tainted everything with their overwhelming perfume. Even the local food

tasted too sweet. He spit out his first bite of a street vendor's hotdog. Thereafter he restricted his diet to prepackaged foods.

The sooner Johnny could finish his business here, the quicker he could flee the saccharine bias of these oppressive blossoms.

Locating the two Feds was easy. Johnny took up an innocuous position across the street from the offices of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Within two hours he spotted both agents as they arrived together and entered the building. Their faces (and names) ranked among the things Johnny had wrenched from Detective Sampkin's eviscerated guts.

For all his hunger to move things along, Johnny was leery of exposing himself to federal attention. The instant he stepped inside the building, arrays of surveillance cameras would capture his image and he would be in their database. No, he preferred to wait and approach the agents away from their stronghold.

The sun, made crimson by the tainted atmosphere, kissed the western horizon before either agents Synder or Durne reappeared.

Johnny watched them descend the steps and cross the pavement to a nearby parking lot. As they unlocked and got into a dark Impala, Johnny abandoned his post and moved along the opposite sidewalk. His gaze flickered from the agents to the cars parked at the curb adjacent to his stroll. When he finally spotted a vehicle to his liking, he sidled up to it and adroitly jimmed open the door. In he slid. His fingers rooted under the dashboard, plucking wires from the base of the steering column and changing their attachments. The ancient Chevy coughed to life. Johnny wrinkled his nose at the noxious exhaust generated by the engine; it was almost as bad as the cherry blossom overkill. He'd chosen the Chevy because it was innocuous, but its rumbling motor was liable to attract unwanted attention. But he was stuck with it. If he went looking for another car, the Feds would get away. And so, with engine shuddering and belching clouds of exhaust, Johnny followed the Feds' Impala. Hopefully, this wouldn't be a long drive.

Johnny's initial scheme had been to follow the agents home. The first one to get dropped off would be his prey. He would wait and kill the Fed in his bed. Then, an examination of the agent's viscera would provide Johnny with whatever the man knew about Mr Black.

But the two Feds did not go home. They drove only a few blocks, then parked in a small lot behind an Italian restaurant.



Johnny drove past and around the corner before ditching the Chevy. He reached the corner in time to witness the Feds exit the alley. But the pair did not enter the bistro together. For a few moments, they engaged in a discussion. Eventually the tall skinny one went inside, but the beefy one continued on down the street and disappeared into a corner tavern. Raised hands had signaled each other's comradely parting, so it wasn't an argument that prevented them from dining together. Perhaps the big one shared Johnny's dislike for Italian food. Or maybe he had a drinking problem and preferred alcohol to solid food. Realistically, the reason didn't matter to Johnny. In fact, by separating, they were making things easier for him.

For a moment he lingered on the sidewalk in indecision. If he followed either one inside the bistro or the bar, they might notice him—and that could impair his ability to stalk them later on. Best to stay out here and wait.

But not out in the open. Even though no fluffy pink trees lined this block, their scent had invaded the neighborhood. The sugary stench drove him back to the Chevy. He would repark it in a position that gave him a clear view of the block. Once sealed inside the car, its fuselage would ward off a percentage of the foul air.

Except the Chevy was gone. In the few minutes it had taken him to dash around the corner and then grudgingly retrace his steps—some street punk had boosted the car!

Others might have looked upon this development as an omen, but despite his upbringing, Johnny was not a superstitious individual. Circumstance was a fickle mistress and often tested warriors with obstacles. He refused to entertain a hint of defeatism.

Resolved to brave any adversity this city could throw at him, Johnny retreated into the alley beside the restaurant. This passage connected the rear parking lot with the street. When the Feds were done eating—or drinking—they would travel along this alleyway to reach their car. Whichever one finished first would win the glory of being Victim #1. Lurking in the path's inky recesses, Johnny could pounce and dispatch him with limber ease.

Either one of the agents was bound to know something efficacious about Mr Black, if only the reason behind the FBI's interest in the slippery bastard. That fact alone could launch Johnny on a fresh new leg of his hunt. If Victim #1 knew nothing of value, Johnny would lie in wait for Victim #2 and see what he knew.

He settled down behind an overstuffed dumpster. Mounds of torn garbage bags propped open the dumpster's lid. The fetor that

spilled forth masked the sickening cherry blossom stench. At least that was something of a relief.

Rising to blend with the darkness of the evening sky, the walls of the surrounding buildings reminded Johnny of a prairie canyon. His grandfather had shown him a sacred canyon when Johnny was young Henry White Owl. The grotto's majestic grandeur had deeply impressed the boy. This concrete chasm had the makings of an urban facsimile. If he glossed over a host of elements (like the noise of traffic coursing along nearby avenues or the distasteful undercurrent of cherry blossoms carried by breezes), he could almost see himself waiting in this cement grotto to ambush a pair of Texas Rangers.

Unreal but sometimes discernable just on the edge of his consciousness, the spirit of Johnny's grandfather cheered him on. The old shaman had hated white men, especially the ones who pranced around wearing tin badges which they believed entitled them to enforce their own self-serving legislation over the laws of nature held sacred by most tribes. It's possible that some of pawpaw's teachings had attributed to adult Johnny's antisocial ways. But where the old man had restricted his prejudice to Caucasians, Johnny hated all people equally, regardless of their race, religion or ethical philosophies.

Intellectually, Johnny knew his grandfather's spirit did not stand watch over him. Johnny was his own man, self-reliant and capable of holding his own against any adversary. He needed no help from mystical powers—which he refused to believe in. No such things existed. Every mysterious occurrence could be explained by the firm application of a commanding logic. Even the genetic deviants the League sent him out to slay. Some of them might possess unnatural abilities, but all of those talents fell under the scope of advanced psychology. Mass hypnosis, telekinesis, teleportation—these abilities were born of the mind, not evidence of witchcraft.

Even Mr Black. Whatever trick that bastard was using to elude detection, in the end Johnny would penetrate his defenses and smash him.

A sudden wariness jolted him from his reverie.

He was not alone in the alley. Someone drew near, skulking like a shadow through the muddy gloom.

Johnny turned in time to meet the assault head-on. His attacker pounced with arms swung wide. As he reached Johnny, his arms closed in an unyielding bear-hug. The man's clutches were superhuman. The bite of his fingers drew blood. The madman

snarled and gnashed teeth barely inches from Johnny's face, held off only by his raised arm.

Johnny brought his knee up into his attacker's crotch, but despite the solid blow, his opponent showed no sign of distress.

He drove his free elbow into his attacker's face. He hit him square on the forehead, hard enough to fracture the skull...but again, the aggressor remained undaunted.

Jerking to the right, Johnny managed to smash his attacker against the side of the metal dumpster. This impact served to loosen the madman's talons, freeing Johnny.

The maniac was dressed in denim jeans and a corduroy jacket; at first glance he looked quite normal. A glimpse of his face, though, revealed his bestial hostility. His features were grotesquely distorted by his wrathful grimace. He was clearly too far gone to feel anything—probably some street bum jacked up on PCP.

At first, Johnny believed his attacker wore gloves whose fingers were tipped with blades. But as he dodged back from the man as he collapsed, Johnny saw that his hands were bare—but razor talons gleamed at the tips of his fingers.

*My attacker is some kind of physiological mutation,* surmised Johnny. *What—*

Before he could finish that thought, his attacker was up and coming at him again. His razor-tipped hands dove at Johnny like twin serpents. The talons were aimed for Johnny's throat. He deftly avoided them. As Johnny swung aside, his own hand dove at his attacker. His extended fingers gouged into the man's wild eyes. As the attacker plunged by, now wailing instead of growling, Johnny's fingers were dragged from those now-empty sockets, tearing flesh across the madman's cheek.

A sudden wave of nausea swept through Johnny. His knees weakened and he staggered back to collapse against the dumpster.

Suddenly the smell of cherry blossoms and even the stench of the alley was gone, replaced by a coppery tang. This new odor stirred a hunger in him. This hunger swelled to dominate Johnny's mind, goading his thoughts to embrace a series of revolting atrocities that turned even the assassin's stomach. He ached to tear someone apart and sate his lusts with mouthfuls of warm, just spilt blood. Adding embarrassment to this morass of depraved impulses, he felt his groin stir and his member engorge itself against his will. A symphony of malice filled his head, momentarily occluding his surroundings.

Thoughts of foreign origin swamped his head:

*Finally—prey! And I can tell this one's lifeblood is untainted by heroin or cocaine like so many of the wretches slumped in other alleyways. Finally—I can satisfy my hunger with a clean meal! I'm so hungry, so—*

These loathsome impressions cut off, abruptly replaced by a rage intense enough to cause paint to curl and peel and flake away.

Johnny's brief contact with his attacker's eyes had triggered his necromantic senses—and the fleeting impression he had received belonged to an unholy monstrosity. None of the deviants Johnny had previously slain could compare to this individual's abnormality. It went beyond any anatomical differences or psychological quirks—this man's distinction was so horrible that it transcended sanity. His attacker wasn't a he, it was an *it*—an abomination.

Despite its severe injuries, the attacker regained its composure frighteningly fast. It whirled to face Johnny, detecting him without vision, and bounded for him. Blood and vitreous fluid streamed down a face contorted by rage, not pain. Its awful mouth gaped with ire, displaying the extended fangs of a beast. Its talons stretched unnaturally long as they accurately targeted Johnny's head.

Again, Johnny was able to sidestep the principle onslaught. His attacker brutally smashed gnashing face and clutching hands against the iron container. Teeth, flesh, and shards of talons went flying.

Johnny stepped in and swiftly took advantage of his attacker's momentary torment. By now, Johnny knew that no amount of physical damage was going to disable this opponent. This abomination would keep on coming, relentless and furious.

Hints of data thrust upon Johnny during his brief necromantic contact with the madman's blood were enough to identify its nature. It didn't matter that vampires didn't exist, Johnny was battling one, mythical or not.

Contemplating the existence of a fictitious being would have to wait. First, Johnny needed to kill the thing—or be killed himself. And the latter was not an acceptable option.

Reaching out, Johnny flung the dumpster lid into the air. While it soared up to bang against the wall, he batted aside the container's overflow of garbage bags. By the time the lid ricocheted off the wall, the way was clear for it to slam shut.

Next, Johnny grabbed the collar of the thing's jacket and yanked the figure to its feet. Continuing the lift, he hoisted his maimed assailant up until its sputtering head hung over the edge of

the dumpster. When the lid came crashing down, Johnny added his own strength to the impacts...for it took several slams to detach the thing's head from its flailing body. Once the neck finally gave way, though, the monstrosity ceased struggling.

The combat had left Johnny feeling like a live wire, but he wasn't breathing hard, nor had he broken a sweat.

Perspiration suddenly beaded on his brow as he looked upon his attacker's corpse.

*That thing can't really be a creature out of mythic folklore,* Johnny tried to convince himself. *It has to be an extreme case of physical mutation.*

Among the deviants Johnny had slaughtered for the League, some of their eccentric physiologies had been more horrific than this vampiric creature (like the thing whose chest had yawned wide to expose an organic pit crowded with twitching shark teeth), but this evening's adversary had taken deviation far past just anatomical idiosyncrasies.

The necromantic taste Johnny had gotten had revealed a level of emotional depravity far more despicable than anything conventionally associated with insanity. Although Johnny didn't particularly believe in Good or Evil, *evil* was the only sentiment he could attribute to the abomination's mindset. Evil and malevolent and powerful.

While it seemed important that he discover what this creature had been, Johnny recoiled from the notion of any further necromantic examination of the cadaver. Information derived in this fashion transferred itself to his own consciousness, so that he assimilated not only the subject's history but their skills too. This time, Johnny wanted no part of this evil influence anywhere near his mind.

The taste he had gotten by accident had been more than enough to assure him of that.

It was a good thing he had already rejected any prospect of examining the vampire's corpse. As he watched, the thing's flesh became a molten surface. Phantom heat set its clothes aflame. Within seconds, the incandescence faded and all that was left of the cadaver was a blackened man-shaped cinder. Then even that decayed further and ash sifted across the muck.

Shock more than nausea sent him stumbling from the alley.

## 7.

Dimitru Bodescu was dining on an overweight teenage girl when he sensed the extinguishing of one of his spawn. Shrugging off this dark omen, he finished his meal. Once every drop of precious blood had been drained from the girl's body, he discarded the corpse and let it tumble to the bottom of the deep quarry. There, the cadaver might never be found; not that he cared. Dimitru had no serious fear of legal reprisal. He lived beyond—aye, far above—the laws of mundane human beings. His hunger was the only rule he heeded. Now, sated and complacent, the creature turned his undead thoughts to the demise he had felt.

Over the years, he had spawned only a few unholy offspring, for each progeny was a potential rival for dominance of the night. His kind had little use for kinship. Only the hunger mattered—and the rich blood that slaked that relentless appetite.

It was extremely difficult to kill one of his kind, and they rarely perished by accident. Something had slain one of Dimitru's progeny, and while he had no sympathy for any lost spawn, he was wary of anything capable of killing a vampire. Knowledge of that nature could not be left to spread from mortal to mortal. Someday that dreadful tactic might end up being used against *him*. Self-preservation ran a close second to his primary thirst.

Just as Dimitru was about to venture forth in search of the guilty slayer—the spawn's spark reappeared in the psychic ether.

The progenitor sank back onto his haunches to reflect on this phenomenon. He gazed off at the Pennsylvanian woodlands without seeing them.

He had distinctly felt the offspring perish; for tangible moments its spark had been absent from the ether—and now it was back, albeit slightly less enthusiastic than it had been prior to its mysterious disappearance.

Events like that were unprecedented. Dimitru had existed for many centuries, but had never witnessed anything like this. He didn't know what to make of it. Eventually, indifference outweighed his curiosity; he had no interest in the doings—and the dyings and undyings—of one of his pups. He put the incident from his mind.

Already he was hungry again.

## 8.

They'd been back in DC for only a few days when Special Agent Frederick Synder went to get coffee and came back with news of more deaths in Baltimore.

"So what?" his partner grunted without looking up from the pile of reports he was wading through. "People are always dying in Baltimore."

"These deaths are apparently connected to that Mr Fox incident last week."

This got Special Agent Dexter Durne's attention. He lifted his eyes to squint at Synder. "Officially connected?"

"Maybe not so far, but I think the links are pretty blatant."

Pushing back from his desk, Durne folded his arms across his narrow chest and cocked his head. "Okay—let's hear it..."

"You remember Mr Strickland?"

"The superintendent of the tenement Fox was staying at, right?"

"Right."

"What about him?"

"Dead. Strangled in his apartment."

Durne pulled himself back to his desk. "Happens all the time in Baltimore."

"Mrs Dirwitz—remember her?"

Durne shook his head.

"Well, we never met her, but Strickland told us how she was the one who reported Fox's apartment being left open."

"Okay. So—what, did she kill him?"

"No," Synder replied. "She found his body when she came to report that somebody'd left the door to Fox's apartment open again."

Durne continued fussing with his paperwork. "So—what's our intrepid Detective Sampkin make of that?"

Synder shrugged. "Hard to say. The man's gone missing."

"Okay." Durne pushed aside the pile of reports and stared up at Synder. "You've got my attention."

"Awfully coincidental coincidence, huh?"

"You think Fox came back to town and the super spotted him?"

Pursing his lips, Synder remarked, "That doesn't fit Fox's profile. He's never killed anybody before."

"Not that we know of..."

"And he's never returned to any of his previous lives."

“So...somebody else killed the super,” Durne deduced.

“And maybe Sampkin.”

“I can understand somebody offing Sampkin, he was a pompous ass who went out of his way to rub people the wrong way. But why kill the super?”

“I think somebody else is tracking our Mr Fox,” announced Synder. “Someone who isn’t squeamish about wetwork.”

“That’s a disturbing thought.”

“Especially if they get to him before we do. Then we’ll never find out what Fox’s been doing all this time.”

“So...” Durne sighed. “I guess we’re headed back to Baltimore.”



Before Synder and Durne could embark on this northward journey, the latter had a prior appointment he could not skirt: a dinner date with his estranged wife.

Lately their marriage had been rocky. Although Marie had known what she getting into marrying an FBI agent, she had grown to resent her husband’s dedication to justice. “There are hundreds of other agents that could do your job,” she had warned him on more than one occasion, “but only one husband that can satisfy *my* needs. Or would you rather I find someone else to take your place?” Torn between his love for her and his professional commitment, Dexter Durne vowed she was his primary concern, but time and again his job lured him away from Marie’s side. She just didn’t understand. Human beings were supposed to be capable of cutting each other some slack, of accepting their mates’ preoccupations. But crimes had no such tolerance. They happened and if you didn’t jump on them, cases never got solved. Evidence went stale, witnesses’ memories grew hazy, culprits left town.

For several months, Dexter had been losing ground rationing his home-time with his hours on duty.

This dinner date was supposed to give the Durnes a chance to reconcile.

“She’ll understand,” he muttered to Synder as they drove out of the FBI parking lot.

“No, Dex,” Synder retorted. “She won’t.”

“But—”

“Baltimore can wait a few hours while you patch things up with Marie.”

Synder appreciated his partner’s dedication, but he also knew how important Dex’s marriage was to him. Dex often got swept



away in their pursuit of criminals and needed Synder to remind him of his real priorities. Skipping this dinner date to go running off to revive a cold investigation would have been the straw to break the camel's back.

For his partner's sake, Synder kept a careful watch over the amount of time Dex apportioned to law enforcement.

They had arrived at Gino's Bistro. Durne drove past, then turned the Impala into a nearby alley.

"What about you?" he inquired as he parked in the lot behind the restaurant. "While I'm at dinner with Marie, you're going to head off for Baltimore, aren't you?"

Dex's accusation was not entirely out of line. Both agents knew how obsessed Synder was with tracking Mr Fox. Now that a new lead had presented itself, Dex seriously worried that his partner planned to abandon him—for the good of his marriage.

"No," swore Synder. "I'd never cut you out. This is *our* investigation...and it can wait until tomorrow morning."

"No need for that," Durne protested. "My dinner shouldn't last more than two hours. We can be on the road by midnight."

"You're so out of touch with romantic scenarios," Synder teased him. "If everything goes right, dinner should be a prelude to an evening of connubial reconciliation." He flashed his partner a bawdy grin.

"Well..." Against all efforts not to, Durne blushed. "Maybe you have a point..."

They stood now on the pavement outside the door to the bistro.

"Go enjoy yourself," Synder advised his partner. "I could use something to eat too. I think I'll grab a cornbeef special at the bar on the corner."

"Okay."

"Give me a call in the morning when you're ready to go."

As they separated, the two men waved casual "see-ya-later"s to each other. Durne pushed open the door and vanished into the restaurant. Synder buried his hands in the pocket of his trenchcoat and strolled off down the sidewalk.

They would never see each other again.



The corner tavern made a mean cornbeef special. Synder chased it with two Belgian dark ales, which left him with a pleasant (but entirely manageable) buzz.

Moving from the counter to a secluded booth, Synder reviewed the case's new factors.

Mr Strickland had been strangled, and soon after Mr Fox's old apartment had been broken into.

Detective Sampkin had not reported in for work in two days.

Had Fox returned to Baltimore, perhaps seeking something of importance he had forgotten in his one-room domicile?

Or...was someone else tracking Fox, someone with no problem murdering incidental witnesses?

Synder put little faith in the possibility of Fox's return. Neither it nor any lethal violence conformed to the profile he had concocted for the elusive man.

But then, the existence of a mystery stalker seemed just as unlikely. Why would anyone want to track Fox down?

Okay, Synder had his reasons, but they were all tangled up with numerous inexplicable incidents, things that stretched the definition of "strange." Somehow, Fox was connected with these anomalies; Synder felt certain of that...he just couldn't prove it. At least, not without the opportunity to question the man. And when he did, would the answers he got make any sense?

Even worse—what if no genuine connection existed between Fox and the weird occurrences? What if Synder had been chasing a pipe-dream all this time?

No...if Fox wasn't a person of interest, why was someone willing to kill their way to him?

That part worried Synder. Why was someone willing to kill their way to him? What part of Fox's hidden life could attract such bloodthirsty attention?

Was Fox a lowly gunsel on the run from the Mob?

Or just a runaway husband trying to escape a shrew wife?

Maybe this ex-wife was the one doing the killing...

For a while, Synder nursed the dregs of his second ale and let his mind hunt for inspiration among these questions.

Was there really anything to gain from returning to Baltimore? Mr Fox was long gone. Whoever had killed the super was probably gone by now too. And Detective Sampkin? Synder had a bad hunch that Sampkin was gone too, but that the detective had done more than merely leave town, he'd shuffled off this mortal coil. Killing a cop was a dangerous move for the super's murderer. The police might lose interest in someone who just strangled a tenement superintendent—but they'd never stop looking for a cop-killer.

So—why had this new player killed Sampkin?

*Our killer went to the tenement looking for Fox, Synder mused. Maybe he didn't intend to kill the super. Maybe he was just questioning him...and the old man's heart gave out. Right—so he strangled Strickland to revive him.*

*Then he went after Sampkin...to question him too? What would Sampkin know? The man showed no interest in solving the case—in fact, from everything I saw, Sampkin didn't seem the type to solve any case. Had the fool stumbled upon an actual clue concerning Mr Fox? Somehow, I doubt that,*

One thing was clear, though: someone else was hunting Fox. Synder hoped the jerk was having just as hard a time as he'd had so far.

The outcome of this development was that now Synder was hunting Fox and his murderous pursuer. That was reason enough to revisit Baltimore—to investigate these new killings.

*For all I know, there are completely unconnected explanations to all this. An irate tenant could've killed the super. And Sampkin might just be off on a bender with a hot tootsie.*

But again, Synder doubted that.

Mental exhaustion finally set in from batting around these suppositions. With a weary sigh, Synder detached himself from the booth and left the bar. His head buzzed, but more so from his frustrated deductions than the ale he had consumed. His stride was smooth and stable as he made his way back up the street.

As he passed the bistro, a glance through the windowpane told him that Dex and Marie were still on their date. Things looked like they were going well for the Durnes.

He smiled and thought, *At least one good thing's come out of tonight.*

## 9.

His experience in the alleyway had nearly traumatized Johnny Wolfbreath.

For years and years he had doled out death with a smug aplomb, never once feeling squeamish or any hint of remorse. He had killed men and women, tycoons and hobos, humans and mutants. And he would continue to do so. No close encounter with some creature of the night was going to sway him from doing whatever he wanted.

He wanted to kill—to slaughter every person until the world was rid of them all. He had realized this at an early age and everything since then had been tailored to hone his ability to achieve that goal.

But more importantly: he wanted to destroy Mr Black and restore his deadly reputation.

To accomplish that, Johnny needed to find the bastard. His only immediate lead were these two federal agents. Whatever knowledge they carried in their heads about his target would soon be his, but only if he stopped daydreaming. He should return to the alley and lay in wait to ambush whichever Fed showed up first—but the idea of going back there was abhorrent. That *thing* was back in the alley.

*You're supposed to be fearless*, Johnny chastised himself. *How can you be afraid of a stupid vampire—much less one you already slayed?*

But still, he was reluctant to venture back there. The creature might have been dead and gone, but...its putrefied ash was scattered all over the alley.

Shell-shocked by the conundrum, Johnny had sunk to his knees on the pavement. None of the fears he wrestled were evident on his face. His vacant expression stared off into space.

Johnny was only vaguely aware of someone approaching him on the sidewalk.

“You okay, fellow?”

The spoken words broke his daze. His clouded eyes snapped back into focus—and Johnny found himself staring up into the wide face of the beefy Fed.

The Fed repeated his question. He extended a hand to touch Johnny's shoulder, as if to steady him.

“Yes,” muttered Johnny. “Thank you.”

As he came erect, Johnny slipped a dagger from his sleeve and drove it deep into Synder's chest.

“I can do what I came to do.”

Perfectly aimed, the slender blade slid between his ribs and ripped an immediately fatal hole in his heart. As the Fed collapsed, Johnny swung him over his back and quickly carried him out of sight—into the alley.

Pangs of dread sought to defeat his resolve, but Johnny ignored them.

If luck was on his side, then he'd be here for only a short period—enough time to reach the Fed's car. Once he found the man's keys, Johnny dumped the carcass in the trunk and climbed

behind the vehicle's steering wheel, Calmly but swiftly, Johnny navigated the Impala through the alleyway and out onto the street.

He drove off, whistling a happy tune.



He drove north, leaving Washington DC behind.

When residential tracts dropped away to be replaced by woodlands, Johnny left the highway and traveled progressively more primitive roads until he was deep in the woods. Here, safely far from civilization, Johnny could perform his necromantic inquisition of the dead Fed without interruption.

During the whole ride north, Johnny had smoldered with insolent satisfaction. Things had ended up playing out to his advantage. Instead of having to find another spot to ambush his prey, one of the Feds had showed up and offered itself as a lamb to the slaughter. It was almost as if killing that vampire had been a turning point for Johnny. By overcoming that bizarre challenge, he had enchanted fate into granting him a deluge of fortune.

Now he was going to reap the reward of that windfall.

Hauling the Fed's corpse from the car's trunk, Johnny dragged it over to a small clearing beside a burbling brook. A full moon hung high in the sky; Johnny took it as a good omen. It provided him with more than enough light to conduct his evisceration.

First he stripped off his sweater and slacks, since he had no change of clothes with him. When he was done, he could wash away the gore in the brook.

He took vindictive pleasure in the mutilation he inflicted on the Fed's cadaver. The one he *really* wanted to mangle was Mr Black, but the Fed would have to suffice for now. Johnny ended up venting a good deal of his frustration on Synder's corpse. He wished the Fed was still alive to suffer some these indignities. When Johnny finally got his shot at Mr Black, he'd make sure the bastard was still conscious so that he felt each wound and tear. He'd rip out Black's entrails and dangle them before the wretch's nose, squeezing each memory and secret from their viscous pulp. Only then would Johnny feel like a complete man again. If only butchering this federal agent could bring him such satisfaction...

So far his evisceration of the Fed had been enthusiastic and intense—but it had uncovered no clues about Mr Black's whereabouts. The damned Fed knew less than Johnny about the target. The foolish Fed was tracking Black because he *suspected* a connection existed between the man and the weird incidents—while

Johnny already knew that to be true. In typical pragmatist fashion, the FBI did not entirely believe in most of those weird incidents, dismissing them as exaggerations from overexcited witnesses. When the Feds found Mr Fox, then they would learn what tricks he had used to perpetrate those outlandish stunts.

*Tricks of the mind*, Johnny reflected.

“Mr Fox” was clearly Mr Black. The Feds were so pathetic. They’d concocted a false name for the man, as if seeking to mythologize him.

Johnny dug deeper.

And found that this man had heard about the super’s murder and suspected that Detective Sampkin had met a similar fate—at the hands of some psycho who was tracking Mr Fox. Johnny was reluctantly impressed. Armed with only a few scraps of data, Synder had deduced Johnny’s existence.

*How embarrassing it must be*, Johnny chuckled to himself, *to find yourself being this “psycho’s” next victim.*

But—nothing that might lead Johnny to Black.

In fact, the only lead Special Agent Synder had thought he’d had was to try and track down the “psycho killer.” The Feds believed Johnny could lead them to Black.

*When I do find that bastard*, *I won’t be sharing him*, he fumed, his hands buried in the Fed’s abdomen.

## 10.

Dominic D’Salle usually spent his summers in Ibiza. His ancient bones appreciated the warmth. He would park his luxury yacht just offshore and settle down under a pastel canopy with a stiff whiskey and a pipe stuffed with hashish to survey the view and study the cavorting ladies in their bikinis. Even after two-hundred-and-fifty-three years, Dom still enjoyed a healthy sexual appetite. Fortunately, he did not look his age.

Standing five-foot-four in his bare feet, Dom’s slender lankiness made him seem taller. A robust crop of jet black hair exploded from his scalp. A dapper pencil-thin mustache decorated his broad upper lip. His smile was a wide one, pushing deep into his gaunt cheeks. His eyes—the windows to a secret soul—were frequently hidden behind mirrored lenses. Most women thought he was irresistibly handsome. His hands featured long tapered fingers

that were often twitching. He was one of those people who sat down and yet one foot was always moving, either pumping the entire leg when planted on the ground, or jiggling it in mid air when his legs were crossed. Dom had a wealth of nervous energy.

His wealth did not stop there. Over his many adult decades he had accumulated a considerable fortune from scrying stocks. His villa in Tuscany stood high on a hill surrounded by profitable olive groves.

But this summer, Dominic D'Salle had forsaken high society for grubby shorts and a sweaty sleeveless Hawkwind T-shirt. Mud covered his arms well past his elbows, and his clothes were spattered with dirty stains.

This year, he had traveled to Rapa Nui in the Southeast Pacific, to join a scientific expedition that planned to unearth some of the surviving Easter Island stone heads.

Actually, most of the original statues (or "moai") were whole-body figures; their disproportionately oversized heads led to their popular mislabeling. They were carved by the island's Polynesian colonizers between 1250 and 1500 as, it was believed, monuments to notable clan chiefs. By the late-1800s, most of those full-figure moai had been toppled, leaving only a selection of moai erect on the slopes of Rano Raraku. Many of those were buried up to their shoulders.

Decades had passed since anyone had been allowed to tamper with the moai. But recently a team of archeologists had sweet-talked the Chilean government into permission to examine the moai. Ultrasound scans had confirmed that the heads extended as stone shafts deep into the ground. The archeologists wanted to excavate them, exposing these bodies that had been "buried for far too long."

Under normal conditions, the stone heads stood four meters tall, looming over all observers. The average diameter of their columns at their base was 1.6 meters. The features are crude yet expressive: spatulate noses and deep-set eyes above stern mouths.

When Dom had encountered an internet article about the digs last week, the entire affair had immediately attracted his interest. His nose for the occult assured him that these statues were worth investigation. And his intuition rarely steered him wrong.

And so...financial donations had earned Dominic D'Salle the right to hang out at the site as long as he didn't get in the way. At first, everyone had tolerated his presence, but they'd soon discovered him to be an able worker, willing to take orders and excruciatingly conscientious with his assigned labors. His aristocratic

features and lean physique always attracted the carnal attention of women, and the few females among the interns were far from immune to his innate charms. One might expect this to have alienated the other male members of the crew, but Dom was a likable fellow, full of amusing anecdotes and able to hold his cups along with the best drinkers. Even the stodgiest of the professors showed a grudging respect for Dom's archeological acumen, which turned out to be far more than one might expect from a weekend scholar. If anything, Dom had to be cautious not to show too much arcane wisdom, for the true scope of his knowledge concerning antediluvian affairs went far deeper than most living authorities.

Anyway: Dom enjoyed getting his hands dirty. And doing grunt work put him down in the mud pits excavated around the moai heads, bringing him into close proximity to the idols' cylindrical bodies.

While most of the original moai had been destroyed over the centuries, remains and old photographs revealed that many of the statue's backs had been adorned with runes and pictograms carved into their rock surfaces.

So far, these newly unearthed statues had surprised everyone. The symbols liberally carved into their basalt backs were profoundly different from any previously documented carvings. These arcane formulae bewildered the dig's archeologists—but not Dom.

During his long life Dominic D'Salle had become conversant in several languages, to facilitate his need to relocate every twenty years when people started to notice how he never aged. In order to engage in metaphysical pursuits, he had also learned a number of dead languages, enabling him to decipher ancient tomes and prehistoric bas-reliefs.

And so, while the Rapa Nui runes confounded the professors and student interns working the digs, they easily revealed their secrets to Dom. He was careful not to let anyone know this. After all, he was supposedly here in the role of a rich patron of the sciences, not a surprise expert.



# 11.

Rising early, Dusty slipped from bed. He was careful to avoid rousing Joan.

Padding barefoot into the niche that served as the apartment's kitchen, he stood there and mustered the concentration to prepare a surprise breakfast for his beloved. The basics—bacon, scrambled eggs, and toast with blackberry jam—was easy to imagine. Coffee, though, he went through the physical act of brewing, adding a dash of cinnamon into the grounds because that was the way she liked her java. He had tried to develop a taste for coffee that way, but had failed; he enjoyed the bitter tang of caffeine. But he made it her way, then mentally deleted the cinnamon flavor from any cups he poured for himself.

While the coffee percolated in the drip machine, Dusty stood idle, staring out the small window set above the rudimentary sink. The building next-door occluded most of the sky, but what he could see the southern skyline was darkened by clouds.

A frown passed across his face.

It was Saturday, and the couple planned to spend the day bicycling to Pennypack Park for an afternoon picnic. Afterward, they would loop around to the Mann Center and enjoy an evening outdoor jazz concert. The gloomy horizon held an ominous promise of storm clouds which would upset the couple's plans.

Dusty's brow wrinkled only briefly as he banished the imminent clouds. Now the day would be sunny and breezy for their outing.

Once the coffee pot had filled with suitably brown liquid, Dusty poured two mugs and set them on the breakfast tray his imagination had fashioned. (He would wait to delete the spice from whatever cup she did not select.) Fetching a carton of orange juice from the refrigerator, he poured the juice into a pair of medium-sized glasses—full almost to the brim for her, half-filled for him. Then he lifted the crowded platter and carried it to the bedroom. En route, he added a single rose next to the single plate that contained the breakfast offering. (The couple often ate from a communal dish.)

She squealed with joy when he woke her. Picking up the rose, she took a sensuous sniff, then hugged him. They began eating, but after a few minute abandoned toying with the meal and retreated under the covers for a morning tryst.

Post-coitus, a spent Dusty lay back on a mound of propped-up pillows and watched Joan as she bounced about the room. Sex

always imbued her with excess energy. Chattering about how wonderful the day was going to be, she chose a pair of denim cutoffs and a halter with a lacey brim. As she flitted to and fro, dressing, she repeatedly swung by the bed to snatch additional bites of what was left on the plate. On each pass, she flashed Dusty a warm smile; he responded every time with a contented grin.

They'd only been together for two weeks, but it seemed like months to him—cherished months of bliss. Time had a way of dilating when one spent every day in a state of elation.

In the beginning, Joan had been quiet and plain, but love had transformed her into an adventurous and energetic girl. She flourished under Dusty's devoted attention. Having someone care for her boosted her confidence, her poise, her ambitions. Where once she had expected to tediously grow into a spinster, suddenly she was infused with enthusiasm and optimism more appropriate to her nubile age.

This change always marveled Dusty, for he could see a similar transformation had occurred in himself. His reclusive self had cracked its walls and emerged as someone who actually enjoyed life. But then, what he was primarily enjoying was Joan.

Like now. Relaxed in his afterglow, he watched Joan bustle about.

Even her physique had improved. Her boyish figure had pleasantly filled out. Her cutoffs now hugged supple hips that flared from a tiny waist. Her breasts were firm globes under her halter, where they had once been small and pointy protuberances. Tawny muscles had emerged along her haunches, producing a pair of sensual thighs that made her legs look longer. Even her neck seemed longer...

*Is that possible...?* he wondered.

The other changes could be attributed to the natural process of her blossoming from a girl-child into a sexy adult. Hips filled out. So did breasts. Her leg muscles probably came from all the bicycling they'd been doing. But...necks didn't get longer...did they?

Dusty was fairly sure they didn't...at least, not naturally.

Squinting, he watched her with nervous suspicion.

Now that he thought about it, even Joan's face had undergone changes since he'd first met her. Her cheeks had lost their gauntness, becoming cheerily plump. The cleft in her chin had vanished. Her eyes seemed larger. (What color had they been? He couldn't remember. They were now a vivid shade of emerald...like his mother's.) Her thin lips had adopted an erotic pout. Hadn't her

ears stuck out more? It was hard to tell now that she'd let her hair grow out.

He found that his mental image of her matched her present appearance. He had trouble remembering her any other way. These transformations must have been gradual, and being constantly in her company, he simply hadn't noticed the slow changes.

Right?

Most of her facial changes could be the result of an improved diet—or just a reflection of her newfound positive attitude. There were plausible explanations for all this...

*Except her neck.*

*Necks don't get longer, not in the space of two weeks.*

There could only be one explanation. He had sworn he wouldn't "change" Joan, but apparently his subconscious hadn't gotten that memo. Or maybe it had, but hadn't cared and had gone ahead and exerted subtle modifications in her. "Subtle?" Ha! If Joan had looked the way she did now, she'd never have given Chuck Green the time of day.

His subconscious had remolded Joan to better conform with the image of an ideal girlfriend. The qualifications for that "ideal" had been programmed into him by society. At the onset of their relationship, he'd been quite satisfied with her lithe figure. All along he'd been happy with the way she looked.

*Of course you were—because every day she was getting sexier.*

What kind of person did that make him?

*I'm sorry...* But Dusty knew that sentiment was pointless.

*I should change her back,* he asserted. It would be a simple matter to do, actually, much easier to accomplish than the slow transformation of the last two weeks.

Except he couldn't recall what she used to look like...



There was no Undo button in Dusty's head.

Each change he made was entirely governed by his overactive imagination. Sometimes he could control things, intentionally directing specific alterations in reality (like when he'd made those storm clouds go away), and sometimes his imagination was prompted by emotional impulses (like that rhinoceros in the playground), but most of the time it just fired off on its own, producing random weirdness (like the shark in that ice cream shop).

But in each instance, in order to get rid of the things conjured by his imagination, he'd had to consciously generate a new change,

returning circumstances to their prior state by deleting things. Usually his imagination was capable of picturing what he wanted. Clouds go away—and they were gone.

This time, he was impaired by his inability to remember what Joan had originally looked like. The things he could recall were sketchy, hazy, full of gaps (like the eye color of her birthright). Exactly how thin had she been? How uncurvy? Uncertainty could result in a grotesquely malnourished Joan. He refused to experiment with her—she was his beloved!

Anyway—what was wrong with her looking sexy and pretty? She was still the same Joan inside that hot bod.

Wasn't she?

Dusty was reluctant to consider the possibility that his unconscious modifications had extended to the girl's personality. True, she *had* undergone mental changes (like her shyness becoming outgoing optimism)...but did Dusty's imagination have to take the blame for them too? Wasn't it possible that her love for him had caused her emotional self to mature, like a butterfly?

Was her love for him natural? Or another product of his own unconscious whims?

These questions were getting too disturbing. He was starting to doubt the foundations of his life. How real was her love? How real was she? How real was the city outside? How real was any of it? Especially if everything was malleable to his imagination...

He needed to get a grip—before he started to ask “How real am I?”

“Earth to Chuck.”

“I'm here,” he assured her, but it took him a moment to orient himself. Where exactly was “here”?

The park. They were bicycling along one of the graveled paths that circumnavigated the wide expanse of greenery.

“But,” she chided him, “we should be back there.” She jerked her head over her shoulder, indicating the path behind them. “You missed the turnoff.”

“Oh. Sorry. I...I was daydreaming.”

“Always daydreaming,” she laughed. It was a congenial titter, nothing snide or remonstrative about it. “Aren't you happy with the world the way it is?”

“Never happier.” As long as he could rid himself of these doubts.

“We can take the next side path. It should go by the picnic area.”

Pedaling along, Dusty strained to empty his head of negative introspection. He was supposed to be enjoying another Saturday with his beloved. If only he could get into bicycling, but these jaunts she dragged him on, all they did was leave him with achy muscles.

But if he *really* disliked bicycling, why didn't he imagine it out of his life? It was Joan's passion, not his.

On the other hand, why didn't he just imagine that he liked bicycling? That would solve the problem just as effectively.

After all the unintentional modifications he'd put Joan through, wasn't it time he took one for the team?

Lost again in reflection, he almost missed the turn. Joan cut to the left and veered off down a side path. He had to hit the brakes to avoid overshooting the turnoff. Then he had to pedal hard to catch up to her.

The picnic area appeared ahead: a clearing about fifty yards in diameter. Verdant shrubbery and drooping elm trees surrounded the quadrant. Stained a deep maroon, a group of wooden picnic tables were arranged next to a dilapidated brick barbecue. Two couples were already enjoying their lunches.

Joan pulled up beside a table near the other couples. Dusty would've felt more comfortable at a table farther away from any strangers, but he acquiesced to his beloved's selection. They leaned their bikes against one end of the chosen table. Dusty unstrapped the basket lashed to the rear of his bicycle, then transferred it to the table. While he sat down to catch his breath, Joan busied herself spreading the basket's contents out into an impressive repast. (He marveled how much energy she had after their long bike ride; it was unnatural.) There was fried chicken, potato salad, macaroni salad, carrot stalks and celery sticks—all resting in plastic containers to protect their freshness. A thermos held lemonade. She set aside one tub of angelfood cake for later.

"And here's a special surprise," she announced, drawing from the basket a flat square wrapped in paper.

"Mmm?" He cocked his head, expressing his undivided curiosity.

Unwrapping the object, she presented him with a sandwich. He took it with a smile. It was unnecessary for him to peek at its contents. He knew exactly what he held. Ever since they had shared that ham-and-cheese sandwich on their first meeting, the food had taken on special meaning for them, a symbol of the genesis of their relationship.

"Happy anniversary," proclaimed Joan.

"Anniversary?" he mumbled, momentarily lost.

“Actually, Wednesday was our real anniversary, but I had that twenty-four hour bug. So I decided we’d celebrate it today.”

He smiled, but couldn’t call forth what event this “anniversary” commemorated.

“We’ve been together a whole month,” she declared as she began spooning heaps of macaroni and potato salad to a pair of dishes. “Well, technically, a month and four days.”

*A month?* he thought. *That can’t be right. It’s only been two weeks...*

Or had it?

If he put his mind to the task, he found he remembered going bicycling with her on at least three other occasions. Those trips had occurred on weekends. So...Dusty *had* been with Joan longer than two weeks. How could he have lost track of the time? Was bliss *that* intoxicating?

Joan’s appearance, the time he’d spent with her—how many other revisions were going unnoticed? Was Dusty changing too? He shuddered, suddenly fearful that a host of things were going on around him that he failed to recognize.

His happiness was to blame. So engrossed in his own rapture was Dusty that he had become blind to aspects of his own environment. But—what was the solution to this problem? If he broke it off with Joan, his joy would no longer be a distraction—but that joy was vitally important to him. After all these years, he had finally found his soulmate. Or had his subconscious taken an innocent girl and remodeled her into Dusty’s ideal woman? Either way, losing her was unthinkable.

There had to be another solution.

But no brilliant answer came to mind.

He would have to spend some time thinking about this.

For now, he only wanted to enjoy Joan’s company. (Ah, but wasn’t that the fundamental problem? Every time he came upon a wrinkle he didn’t like, Dusty just shrugged it off and took refuge in the comfort of their relationship.) Together, they would eat the food they’d brought along. And later, they would attend that outdoor free jazz concert, although he winced at *that* prospect. Joan was into jazz; Dusty preferred rock’n’roll. But he tolerated undanceable music because doing so made her happy.

He forced himself to concentrate on his sandwich. It was a sign of Joan’s devotion for him. Why was he wasting time fretting over matters that were beyond his control? He owed it to himself to appreciate every moment he spent with her. He loved her—whatever form she took or whatever mood she adopted.

Right now she was happy—he was responsible for that. Why couldn't he just enjoy their life together?

As he munched the ham-and-cheese sandwich, Dusty's gaze wandered to take in the other couples who shared this picnic area.

One pair was elderly, gray of hair and dressed in dowdy clothing. But smiles stretched their wrinkled faces and their squinty eyes glittered with joy. Clearly these two had been together a long time; they were a testament to the fortitude of true love.

The other couple was younger (maybe mid-thirties). Their attire and poise broadcast a forced sense of self-importance. Even their picnic basket (a sleek aluminum receptacle of diminutive size—it didn't look big enough to have fit the bottle of wine that sat next to it) advertised financial success and adherence to style-according-to-mail-order-catalogues. The woman was bony. Her nose hung from her face like a shark fin. Her hands fluttered with her crystal flue, otherwise she was immobile. The man was gruff and hairy. Even the backs of his enormous wedge-like hands were dusted with fur. He looked like he should be a stevedore or a lumberjack. His squared-off fingers were engaged in folding and refolding a paper napkin until it was the size of a fat postage stamp. The obvious tension between the two signaled that the romance was long gone from their marriage.

Dusty caught the hairy man sneak a peek in his direction. His gaze twitched away, an instinctive avoidance of intimate contact with a stranger. But a moment later, Dusty had to look back. The hairy man still stared in his direction. No, Dusty realized—the man wasn't staring at him, he was staring at Joan! The man licked his lips. His half-lidded eyes smoldered with lewd notions. Clearly, his scarecrone of a wife no longer lit his fire. So he was undressing Joan with his eyes.

Dusty's brow creased with disapproval. This brute was openly lusting after *his* beloved. Besides being an insult and a challenge to Dusty's manhood—for Joan belonged to him—it dishonored Joan by objectifying her. Dusty had to fight down the urge to leap to his feet and yell at the hairy gawker. Such action would instigate a confrontation with the brute—and he *was* a brute. He'd tear Dusty to pieces and then have his way with Joan...while his soulless wife sat there and looked on with patrician disinterest.

There were other ways to punish the brute.

Dusty held his imagination in check for a moment, suppressing a knee-jerk revision that would subject the hairy gawker to explosive diarrhea. He wanted a penalty that would stay with the

buffoon, inflicting constant discomfort. The shrew-like disposition worn by the hairy man's wife inspired his judgment.

A moment later, his punishment burst to life. The man's wife suddenly abandoned her vacant-eyed enervation and came to her feet. She commenced pelting her husband, screeching like a just-dowsed witch. Her denunciations were vivid and cruel. "You're a louse, a wife-beater, an adulterer—although God only knows how you pull that last one off, since your dick is no bigger than a golf pencil!"

Startled by this outburst, Joan tried to keep her face averted from this brawl, but she couldn't help herself and had to sneak furtive glimpses of the public spat.

The elderly couple recoiled in the face of this marriage coming unraveled. Their wrinkles flushed with mortification. Gathering their belongings, they fled the picnic area.

At first, the hairy man tried to ignore his wife's hysterics, but eventually his patience ran out and he turned to rebuke her—and she punched him right in the nose. The impact made by her bony little fist rendered meager pain to his already-splayed proboscis. He was more shocked that she had struck him in the first place. Apparently, it was okay for him to strike her, but not the other way around. Without rising, he twisted around to face her. His arm started to raise, his fingers tightened into a fist. And the wife hit him again, this time with the silver picnic box.

A crowd had gathered. Attracted by the ruckus, a gaggle of pedestrians looked on. A few chuckled at what they saw.

The hairy man had had enough. His wife danced before him, waving the picnic box above her head and continuing her derisive rant. Swinging his legs from under the picnic table, the hairy man stood up. He took half-a-step in his wife's direction, then decked her with a powerhouse right cross to the side of her face.

*Wait—no—* Dusty gasped. He hadn't intended the wife to come to any harm. The hairy wretch was the one who was supposed to suffer a henpecked nightmare. Dusty hadn't anticipated the brute's hair-trigger hostility. His punishment had gone awry.

The crowd split and a pair of policemen stepped forth. They moved with speed and efficiency, closing in on the hairy brute and warning him away from the fallen woman. Cagey now in the presence of law enforcement officers, the brute adopted a demeanor of sugary innocence.

*No!* fumed Dusty. *You're not going to sweet-talk your way out of this, you asshole.*



It was a simple matter to imagine the hairy man resisting arrest and being beaten down by the officers.

Alas, Dusty's revision might have turned the hairy brute all violent, but a physical reprisal didn't look likely. These cops couldn't subdue their brutal opponent. He weighed more than the two of them together. When they advanced on him, he struck out and knocked them both back on their butts.

*Tase him, you fools,* Dusty wanted to shout.

The hairy man had just commenced kicking the shit out of the smaller of the two cops when his partner tasered the brute. He teetered, his look of befuddlement transforming into a mask of rage.

*Boost the voltage!*

The brute lifted his arms in defiance, but the cop increased the charge before the wildman could pluck away the electrified clamps from his chest. His features clenched into a rictus of pain, and he collapsed into a twitching mound.

Dusty sat transfixed, stunned by, yet engrossed in the savage drama that had just played out.

As soon as the cops had arrived, Joan had leaped to her feet and dashed over to tend to the fallen battered wife. Ignoring the adjacent struggle, she helped the woman over to the picnic table bench. As she spoke softly to the dazed wife, the cops cuffed the brute and hauled him away.



They never made it to the outdoor jazz concert.

Traumatized by the incident in the Pennypack Park, Joan had developed a terrible headache. So shaken was she that she couldn't balance her bicycle; they ended up walking their bikes home.

They went right to bed.

There was no sex. Instead, Joan cuddled close and shivered in Dusty's strong embrace.

As she drifted off, Dusty wallowed in self-recrimination. His beloved was upset—and it was *his* fault. Now that he thought about it, Dusty couldn't be certain the brute had really been ogling Joan. It might've been his imagination.

## 12.

When Johnny Wolfbreath reported in to the Dark Department, he apologized for his lapse in communication. He had lost his phone. By the time he'd acquired a new cell so he could check his secure email account, he'd found the message calling him back. "So, here I am."

By now, Johnny had mastered hiding memories and thoughts from the League's mind-reading machine. His employers would never learn he had temporarily gone rogue. All psychic evidence of Johnny's disobedience or his encounter with the Feds lay beyond the apparatus' reach.

His employers were much more interested in his clash with the vampire.

The techs studied his account of the encounter with the creature of the night. He freely exposed almost everything to them, moving the incident to Baltimore and back in time before he'd been advised to drop his investigation. That way, he'd still been acting on the League's directives when the vampire had attacked him.

They dissected his account with puzzled faces.

"Well?" Johnny was keen to know if this creature fit any profile in the League's records of mutations. He was still deeply disturbed by the impressions he'd gotten from contact with the thing.

One tech shook his head, the other lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

Nathan Dean was sitting in on the session. From the stool where he perched, the man gave a polite cough, then confessed, "No, there's nothing like this creature on record."

Dean was a bland little man, middle-aged and balding. He had a paunch and jowls. He was always perspiring. Despite his harmless appearance, the man could get quite overzealous when it came to the subject of cleansing mankind's deviants. As far as Johnny could guess, if the pudgy man didn't run the Dark Department, he certainly ranked high in its hierarchy.

This vampire issue had attracted attention from the high and mighty.

"In fact," continued Dean, "if not for the fact that this description was derived direct from your memories, we would be inclined to disbelieve the entire affair."

"Yeah, well, it happened," Johnny bridled.

"If you weren't stalking this creature, then why did it attack you?"

"I guess I just got lucky."

"You didn't think to find out?"

"I was too busy fighting it off."

"I meant find out later. There's no trace in the readings to indicate you conducted any necromantic examination of the creature..."

"Damn straight," Johnny spat back. "I received a brief impression of the thing when I ripped off its face—and what I glimpsed was abhorrent. There was no way I was going to absorb the thing's deepest secrets."

"That is unfortunate."

"Look—regardless of the absurdity of the creature's self-image, it considered itself a real blood-sucking vampire, not some mutation modeled on Dracula. It was vile—and evil." Johnny gestured to the techs where they sat at the console of the mind-reading machine. "Go ahead, that part has to be clear in your readings."

"The reading shows your interpretation of the creature as 'evil,' but that's a subjective impression," replied one of the techs. "Not an actual fact."

"Of course this creature is evil!" Dean declared. "Its deviations mark it as nonhuman, an abomination!"

Johnny was privately amused the Dean had selected that word—"abomination"—the same as he had used when faced with the thing's horrific nature. But then, he suspected their definitions of the word differed fundamentally. In Dean's eyes, all mutants were abominations. While Johnny reserved the term for things that truly profaned any sense of decency.

"But—" Johnny pressed, "the League has never encountered a creature like this?"

The tech who had shrugged did it again and remarked, "Not outside of fantastic fiction."

"This is reality," Dean proclaimed, "not some cheap horror film! We deal with fantastic abominations every day. The species is suffering from genetic stress, and these mistakes must be removed from the equation."

When Johnny tried to voice his concerns about the danger this creature posed for humanity, Dean cut him off: "Every deviation from mankind's genetic purity threatens us all. This one is hardly more menacing than any of the other mutations we have detected and eradicated. Besides—you killed it, so it's no longer an active threat."

Johnny wisely kept his disagreement to himself.

Dean curtly announced that the debriefing was done.



Hours later, back on his ranch outside Cheyenne, Johnny mulled over the matter.

He was disappointed. Clearly no concrete data concerning the creature would be forthcoming from the League's Dark Department. Their techs were outright stymied, and Dean remained steadfastly blind to the obvious fact that this abomination was entirely different from all the other abominations. The League was liable to trust Dean's opinion on the matter and do nothing about this threat.

Johnny felt fairly certain that the one he'd slain was not unique; there would be others. If the monster hadn't made the mistake of attacking someone capable of fighting back and destroying it, the very existence of these vampires would have remained a secret.

But they weren't *entirely* unknown. At some point in humanity's past, someone had discovered their existence, and over time the truth had become folklore, a scary bedtime story that the modern world had popularized through an endless stream of schlocky monster movies.

Always the pragmatist, Johnny was shocked to learn that vampires were *real*.

Something like that threatened to erase the boundaries between the supernatural and the real world. That rankled Johnny most of all. A variety of monsters already filled the world, and he wasn't thinking of the deviants the League sent him out to hunt. When it came to heinous behavior, normal people (especially the white dogs) were quite capable of giving those mutants a run for their money. There was no need to add monstrosities like vampires to the mix.

Johnny sat on his porch, his legs elevated with his ankles resting on the wooden railing. Sipping his bourbon, he stared out at the sun as it set over the golden range that comprised most of his spread. Once upon a time, this property had raised horses, but Johnny had released them all into the wild when he'd purchased the real estate. He had no commercial aspirations regarding the ranch; it was supposed to be his private retreat, a sanctuary apart from the white man's world of commerce and greed.

Originally, the homestead had been a simple single story farmhouse. Upon taking ownership, Johnny had drastically renovated the farm, leveling the quaint relic and erecting a stately

modern structure. The end result would've looked more appropriate in Beverly Hills. Two and a half floors nestled beneath a sloping kidney-shaped roof. The walls on the western side of the building were all glass, housing a spacious living room, and an indoor gym. The rest of the house's edifice was a stylish blend of rococo stonework and chrome pillars. The eastern quadrant was relatively windowless: the girls' quarters located above his groundfloor personal boudoir. In striking contrast to overall modern style of the house, he stuck on a rustic log porch so he could lounge and watch sunsets. He'd left the barn standing, settling for just giving it a fresh coat of paint and a new roof; later, on his own, he made some private modifications. At the request of his live-in concubines, he'd installed a lavish garden on the northern flank of the ranch with a small shrubbery maze. He'd expected the girls to cultivate roses or orchards there, but they'd surprised him by planting vegetables. The property was far enough from any main roads that it could easily be called isolated. That was exactly the way Johnny liked it.

Right now, however, his gaze was vacant, taking in nothing of the glorious sunset. His thoughts, dark and foreboding, could not shake themselves free of the prospect of vampires hidden out there among the normal populace. Other vampires, stalking hapless victims and killing people...people that should've been left alive so that Johnny could someday kill them.

Beyond his intrinsic revulsion of these bloodsuckers, Johnny considered them rivals. He did not appreciate—or want—their help in wiping out mankind. Every victim they claimed meant one less person left for him to kill. Genocide was Johnny's self-appointed vocation.

No fanged kin would be coming after him, bent on revenge for their fallen brother. Revolting as it had been, his accidental glimpse into the life of a vampire had shown how they were all loners, shunning their own kind as fervently as they avoided direct sunlight.

He would have to exert additional caution in his affairs. These other vampires were out there, and they may hold no grudge against him for his actions, but that didn't mean they wouldn't victimize him if they crossed his path. They were a vicious lot, eager to spill blood even when not hungry.

Long before the League had appropriated the term "human" and bound themselves to it, Johnny's ancestors had used it to describe the members of the tribes. White men were not human beings, they were interlopers, liars and thieves. Johnny, though, was a human being—one of the few left. He should—

Suddenly, he tensed.

A shadow fell across the porch, reaching from inside the house. Recognizing its curvaceous contours, Johnny relaxed again. It belonged to one of the women he kept around to entertain him.

She called softly to him, inviting Johnny to forget his worries in her flesh.

*Why not?* There was no point in fretting over these abominations until he ran into another one of them. And when he did, Johnny would deal with it accordingly.

He drained his glass and lowered his feet to the porch's polished wood surface. As he approached the doorway, the screen-door swung open to accept him. He entered and the concubine escorted him deeper into the residence. No words were needed between them.

For the moment, Johnny felt safe.



A week passed, during which time Johnny cast off this new found stress.

Word came from the League. Another assignment, this time in Columbia.

He packed and booked himself on a commercial flight to Bogota. From there, he traveled by his wits, stealing a car to take him to the edge of the jungle. He continued on-foot, hacking a path through the dense foliage until he reached the river. His target lay downstream, although its exact location was unspecified. According to the briefing he'd been emailed, the target moved about quite a lot, but haunted the jungleland surrounding the southern stretch of the river. His briefing had assured him that if he visited this designated region, the target would find him.

Instead, he encountered a group of guerilla soldiers. They'd heard Johnny coming, and ambushed him. Dodging their crossfire with his lightning reflexes, he macheted two of them before the blade jammed in his second victim's skull. Moving like a jaguar, Johnny pounced on another soldier and ripped his swarthy head from his torso. Meanwhile, the guerillas' initial crossfire had taken out three of their own men. That left two of them still alive. They bolted, heading off in diametrically opposed directions. Johnny could only chase one of them down.

Eviscerating this last corpse, Johnny learned they were a squad on patrol. The rest of the troops guarded an old nearby rubber factory that now served as a heroin production facility. Johnny's assignment had led him into drug cartel territory. The one-that-got-

away was guaranteed to alert the rest of the troops to the presence of an intruder. As if that wasn't bad enough, Johnny drew knowledge from the soldier's entrails that the monster he sought was working with the cartel's troops.

*Well, he told himself, at least that makes it easy for me to find the thing.*

The troops, though, complicated the situation. Johnny was confident he could deal with them in small groups, but if he met a swarm, they'd chop him to pieces.

His best strategy was to find a secure spot and settle in there. He'd wait for the monster to hunt him out, then dispatch the creature before it realized it had stumbled into Johnny's trap. Any soldiers who stumbled on him wouldn't live to tell about it.

He had no personal grudge with the cartel. But if their soldiers got in his way, they were going down.

He selected a stout tree whose trunk split into three boughs about six yards up. The foliage appeared dense from the ground, but once he climbed into its midst, he found he could easily see through the leafy blind. Two paths converged on the clearing nestled beneath this tree.

Johnny got comfortable with a loaded bow cradled in his lap and cleared his head. No stray thoughts were allowed now; he needed to hone his full concentration to absorbing the nuances of this jungle. Every scent and sound, each breeze and shaft of sunlight were like puzzle pieces defining his immediate environment. Once he had identified them all, he had an excellent idea of the jungle's status quo. If anything entered that area, he would know instantly.

He remained alert.

It took the mutant two hours to track him down.

The rustling of leaves varied its collective pitch at ten o'clock from his position.

Air movement changed in that direction too, as if something was blocking the flow of prior breezes.

Several birds squawked on Johnny's left and took flight.

Seconds later, the monster stormed into the clearing. Its hooves tore up the turf as it skidded to a halt and lifted its horned head to sniff the air.

His briefing had not prepared Johnny for the extremity of this mutant's physical deformity. But he was an expert. He disregarded his shock and concentrated on business.

He put two arrows in the beast's barrel chest and one directly between its beady eyes. The creature collapsed to the ground.

Johnny waited a moment before climbing down to examine his kill. He was wary of any soldiers who might've been trailing their attack creature, but no one showed up.

Standing over the dead creature, Johnny mused, *You're in the wrong country, sap. You belong in the Middle East, not here in the Colombian jungle.*

The minotaur offered no rebuttal; it was dead. Its beady animal eyes were glazed over already. Its bestial mouth hung agape, its meaty tongue lolling past rows of canine teeth. Its hairy chest was still. Only its backwards-jointed legs twitched.

Johnny set to his customary necromantic procedure. The creature's stomach muscles resisted parting for his bare fingers; he finally used his reclaimed machete to open the minotaur from pelvis to sternum. He pulled forth organs and massaged them, squeezing blood and digested food from them. They told Johnny all of the minotaur's secrets.

The beast had been born in a local village to a family that had swiftly abandoned the newborn monster in the jungle. But instead of perishing, the infant had flourished, living off the land like the animal it half-resembled. The creature had the potential for intelligence, but instinct and cunning had been all it had needed for survival in the wild.

Until the soldiers had found the beast. Surprise, the superstitious lot hadn't slaughtered the creature on sight. Instead, they had adopted it as a mascot. They trained it to hunt and kill to protect the region around the heroin factory. Like a puppy dog with a ferocious side, the minotaur had eagerly served the soldiers.

When the survivor had stumbled into camp with word that an intruder was in the district, the soldiers had promptly unleashed their guard beast to hunt down this intruder. "Tener cuidado," the survivor had warned his comrades, "este hombre es peligroso! Mató todo mi equipo como si fuera un guerrero en una película de acción!" The others had assured him it would take more than an action movie warrior to best the minotaur.

Being recent memories, this exchange was fresh in the creature's bestial mind. And Johnny understood Spanish.

*But your masters were wrong,* Johnny chided the dead mutant. *Este guerrero película de acción es muy peligroso.*

Once he had finished his necromantic gathering of background data to document this slain mutant, Johnny burned the remains. He left the jungle without further incident and returned home.





Back Stateside, Johnny endured a routine debriefing, then retreated to his Cheyenne ranch.

This time, it wasn't his waking worrying that made him lose sleep. Bad dreams plagued Johnny, drastically limiting his somnambulant hours. Each time, he would wake in a cold sweat, certain that undead things stalked him, growing nearer with each subsequent slumber. After two weeks of this torture, he sought mitigation in herbs that promised peaceful sleep. They did not help, so he turned to medicinal chemicals, but what sleep they generated was all too brief, and the pills failed to ward off his nightmares.

Johnny's women tried to help, soothing him with their caresses...but in the end he lay awake in their arms, relaxed but not enough to sleep.

The nightmarish presences in his dreams were not always vampires. Sometimes, the ghosts of people he had killed and eviscerated harried him.

He knew none of this was real. Dreams were just mental fabrications; they had no more substance than they possessed a tangible link to the real world. It was his own mind that kept dredging up these illusionary spirits. It certainly had nothing to do with *guilt*, for Johnny was utterly immune to that emotion.

To a degree, each of the victims he had defiled with necromantic intent lived on inside Johnny. Necromancy was not just the reading of information from a person's entrails, the process involved a percentage of assimilation. Each time Johnny stole secrets from a corpse, he also appropriated a hazy copy of the person's identity and talents. In this manner, Johnny constantly upgraded his skill set with new abilities.

So it came as no surprise to him that some of his dreamtime antagonists were people who had suffered his necromantic hunger. Knowing they were hollow phantasms only helped to calm Johnny when he was awake. While asleep, his nightmares seemed so vivid, and he often forgot he was dreaming.

A frequent theme in these nightmares was chasing Mr Black.

*This time, Johnny is the mutant creature that chased Mr Black from the tenement building in Baltimore. But each time mutant Johnny gets close enough to grab Black, someone interferes, enabling his prey to escape. The mouthy super tries to block mutant Johnny on the stairs. He flings the old man aside. On the street, Detective Sampkin waits with an armed cordon. Mutant Johnny tears through them with almost mindless fury—but the ghastly wounds he*

*inflicts fail to stop the cops from fighting him off. Frustrated and furious, mutant Johnny mauls an endless flow of law officers, but cannot advance an inch. Nearby, Special Agent Frederick Synder mocks mutant Johnny's impotency. Mired in mutilated cops, mutant Johnny watches Mr Black flee across the street and disappear into the park.*

*The dream gets extreme when the throng of policemen parts to reveal a human version of Johnny. Mutant Johnny feels instant fear, for he knows that human Johnny is capable of slaying any mutant adversary—like himself.*

He usually woke up as the human Johnny closed in on him.

*But occasionally, the nightmare refuses to let him go, and he gets killed and eviscerated by human Johnny. Even though mutant Johnny is already dead, his nerve tissue incapable of transmitting pain signals to his brain, the necromantic process is enormously agonizing.*

At some point during this excruciating suffering, Johnny would wake screaming.

*In another version of the nightmare, the vampire is chasing Johnny from the tenement building in Baltimore. Johnny's a mutant, so everyone is out to harm him. The mouthy super, Detective Sampkin, the Fed—all of them do their best to slow him down so the vampire can catch him.*

*And sometimes the vampire does catch him—and the bonus horror is that the vampire is another necromancer. After it kills mutant Johnny, it painfully extracts every one of Johnny's secrets. This goes on and on because Johnny has a lot of secrets.*

Was it any wonder Johnny dreaded going to sleep?

He took to wandering through the rooms of his ranch, down hallways and through den and dining room and gym. He avoided the chambers allotted his women, just as they, sensitive to his foul mood, steered clear of him.

Despite his alienation from the Amerindian tribes, Johnny had decorated his domicile with hand-woven rugs and carved totems and feathered spears and painted shields and grotesque ritual masks. In his den, a pair of stuffed bald eagles hung just below the high ceiling, their wingspans spread in frozen flight. Johnny had captured and killed both birds; only one of them had he subjected to his necromantic examination, seeking knowledge of the skies and highest mountain peaks.

Now, though, none of these ancestral accoutrements served to placate his troubled soul.

Awake, his mind wrestled with knowledge that no human being should have to bear. Vampires and monsters disturbed his peace of mind, and even those fears were undermined by his unrequited need to find and slaughter Mr Black.

Asleep—no respite lay there, either. Despite his grand fatigue, Johnny refused to put head to pillow and risk another appalling torment. Periodically, he would succumb to overwhelming exhaustion and drift off—sometimes doing so while still standing. On those occasions, he invariably woke drenched in sweat and trembling with terror. Embarrassed that he had fallen prey to base organic needs, Johnny would vow to never allow sleep to conquer him again...but it would. He was weak and his body demanded rest. But his mind couldn't endure the anguish that came in slumber.

Venturing out to a nearby Apache reservation, Johnny Wolfbreath ingratiated himself with a gang of youths who sold him meth. Initially, the drug abolished his body's inclination for sleep. But gradually he began to sicken from snorting the considerable amounts of amphetamine required to keep him awake. His nose bled constantly. His eyes lost some of their clarity. His nerves, already raw, suffered most. He twitched at every shadow, and breezes made him gnash his teeth.

There seemed no relief from his sleep deprivation—other than giving himself over to short-lived intervals of nightmarish sleep.



One afternoon, Johnny came out of a fog to find himself staring at the ceiling of his bedroom. Hints of daylight filtered through the curtains that guarded his windows.

*I slept, he realized, and had no bad dreams.* This was a welcome milestone for Johnny. Was he finally liberated from whatever malaise had darkened his life?

He was sprawled on his bed and the sheets were damp. When he indulged in a luxurious stretch, his arm encountered someone else sharing the bed with him.

*Ah, Johnny mused.* One of his ladies had succeeded in draining him of his ugly spirits, as if they'd been a seminal fluid. Whoever she was, the girl deserved a righteous reward.

Rolling on his side, he reached out to caress the concubine—but the flesh his fingers found was cold. His eyes, half-closed with contentment, snapped wide and he sat bolt upright on the wet mattress. A gasp escaped his taut lips.

There was no doubt the woman was dead. Her throat had been torn out. Blood should have been splattered everywhere...but

the span of the stain was strangely small. Where had all the blood gone?

Johnny's first reaction was alarm: some enemy had penetrated his ranch's extravagant defenses and murdered the woman. But Johnny immediately dismissed that suspicion; if an assassin had succeeded in penetrating his sanctuary's defenses, they would have targeted the master of the house, not one of the concubines.

How could he have slept through this slaughter?

His recent memories were spotty, a clear-cut symptom of the bad mojo combination of stress, lack of sleep, and all the meth he'd been doing.

The missing blood made Johnny uncomfortable, for the evidence hinted at something he was loath to accept. Could a vampire have slipped past the ranch's perimeter scanners? But...if a vampire had done this, why had the monster stopped with the girl? Why hadn't it attacked and drained Johnny as he enjoyed his first peaceful sleep in over a week? Was the girl's death some kind of warning?—a challenge to become future adversaries?

Disregarding any affection he might have once felt for the blonde, Johnny promptly opened her stomach and dragged the truth from her viscera. What he learned only aggravated his anxiety.

There had been no intruder—vampiric or otherwise. Examining memories dredged from the girl's guts, Johnny watched himself copulating with the blonde through her eyes. As they'd reached climax, Johnny had pulled her close and ripped open her supple neck with his bare teeth. Her ruined throat had reduced her screams to gurgly wheezes. Her struggles had waned with every mouthful of blood he'd sucked from her ruptured jugular. He'd continued feeding long after the blonde had expired.

The guilty party had been Johnny Wolfbreath!

Johnny recoiled from this revelation. Denial squeezed his eyes shut. Nausea overwhelmed him. Doubling over, he vomited all over the blonde's mutilated corpse. When he finally managed to open his eyes, he found that the stained portion of the bedsheet was bigger. He'd thrown up the blood he had consumed earlier.

This horrific confirmation made Johnny sick again. Only clotted spittle dribbled from his aghast mouth this time; his stomach had already emptied itself.

Fumbling his way from the bloodied bed, Johnny crawled into a corner, where he curled up in a fetal ball. He wished his mind would shut down, but no such easy escape was available. Shocked and revolted, Johnny reeled with the awful truth.

He had slain the blonde—that part was bad enough, for he'd actually liked her—but then he'd drained her blood! As if he'd become a vampire—which was ludicrous!

His tongue examined his teeth. None had extended into fangs.

Sunlight was streaming through the curtains and it didn't burn him.

The entire notion of drinking blood disgusted Johnny.

So—what had prompted his vampiric behavior?

Somewhere in his synaptic storage lay the snippet he'd glimpsed of the vampire's memories. Could that be to blame?

The information he assimilated through his necromancy was just that: information, utterly lacking in personality or identity. These shadows lacked any consciousness. There was no way one of them could muster the psychic definition to influence Johnny Wolfbreath's behavior.

Anyway: Johnny's exposure to the vampire's history had been too fleeting. He had only gotten a small dose of the creature's essence from contact with its blood, little more than a psychic snapshot. There was no way such a flimsy scrap could manifest an independent identity.

It was impossible for any of his victims to usurp control of Johnny's mind and body.

*But—if I wasn't possessed...*

If Johnny hadn't been possessed, then he'd committed this heinous atrocity of his own volition. He had willingly adopted the role of the vampire. But—why?

The blonde had perished by Johnny's hand...but if he'd had a reason for this violent action, he couldn't remember it. A frightening gap loomed in his mind, and his tryst with the blonde was completely lost within that void.

If that psychic snapshot of the vampire's essence was to blame, it was an unprecedented development. Never before had any of the victims he'd assimilated showed any sign of autonomy. But then...this vampire had been the first creature of the night Johnny had encountered. In his heart, he'd known the monster was different, special—no, "special" was the wrong word...*unholy*, that better fit the abomination. Was that it? Had the vampire somehow infected Johnny Wolfbreath with its unholy essence?

He had no idea how vampirism worked. The things were supposed to be characters of dark fiction, not walking around real. Johnny vowed to research the subject.

But first there was work to do. A certain corpse had to disappear.

Luckily, none of Johnny's other concubines were around to see anything. Realizing he'd been a grump lately, Johnny had sent them all to Vegas for a week's vacation. Only Cindy had remained to tend to his wishes. That much, he remembered.

Bundling the blonde's remains in the stained bedsheets, Johnny hoisted her over his shoulder and slipped outside. He carried her to the barn.

Body disposal was hardly a new experience for Johnny; it was, in fact, a regular part of his job. Considering the deviant anatomies possessed by many of his mutant victims, the most prudent move was to leave no bodies for anyone to discover. This helped maintain the secrecy of the League's Dark Department's operations.

On only two previous occasions had Johnny needed to dispose of bodies here on his home turf, but this time the corpse belonged to one of his household staff and not home invaders bent on thievery. Not that it mattered. They all ended up in the same place.

A trapdoor in the floor of the barn opened upon a pit filled with lye. Johnny dropped Cindy's mutilated cadaver into it.

He made it back to his bedroom unseen by anyone. Locking himself in, he proceeded to scrub the chamber down with bleach. He gathered the soiled rags and the bloodied bedsheets and took them to an old iron furnace located behind the barn. The mattress was similarly stained, so he dragged it out back and tossed it into the furnace too. For good measure, he fed the clothes he wore to the fire.

All during these chores, Johnny forced himself to put aside his vampire worries. He focused on the busywork, meticulously eradicating all trace of Cindy's horrible demise.

Back in his den, Johnny donned plastic gloves and typed up a letter of resignation to which he forged the blonde's signature. He pointedly used certain words he remembered her using in conversation. He folded the piece of paper, then placed it in a white envelope. He sealed the envelope with a sponge. Then, without the gloves, he opened the envelope, withdrew the sheet of paper and unfolded it. He didn't bother to read it. The letter existed only in case the other girls or Cindy's family inquired about her sudden departure for greener pastures. He set it on his desk, then went outdoors to watch the sunset.

*Still no sensitivity to sunlight*, he noted.

*And no hankering for anybody's blood.*  
At least, not so far.



The blonde's death marked a turnaround for Johnny.

As sunset progressed into dusk, he fell asleep sitting on the porch. No nightmares plagued his repose. If he had any dreams, he didn't remember them. He woke rested.

He ate a hearty breakfast and didn't cap it off with a line of meth. As the day unrolled, he had no urge for the drug.

His vampire worries evaporated with the morning dew. He walked in the sun and felt no discomfort. As each passing hour put more distance between Johnny and the girl's murder, his tension abated. It never went completely away, but it held itself in check and didn't dominate his every thought.

He was almost relaxed when his cell rang.

He answered it dutifully, for only his employers had this number.

"Who do I get to kill this time?" His good mood made Johnny flippant.

The voice on the other end of the line sputtered, "Excuse me?" But the emotion burbling in those syllables was confusion, not outrage.

Johnny recognized the speaker—it was one of the Dark Department techs. His name was Smith or something. What was he doing calling Johnny?

"It's Smith, right?"

"Uh...actually, I'm Jones," mumbled the tech.

"Are you calling about a new assignment, Jones?" The Dark Department usually emailed him about such things. That way any incriminating information was confined to the League's server.

"No, sir. Actually, I'm calling about an old assignment..."

"What's the matter? You guys send me to ice the wrong person?"

"I'm afraid you have me confused with someone over in Deployment, Mr Wolfbreath. I work in Data Processing."

Now Johnny remembered the man. They'd met months ago, just after Johnny had returned from yet another failed attempt to locate Mr Black. Jones had been the one who'd pointed out the strange occurrences that always happened in tandem with Black's appearances.

"You think he's causing them?" Johnny had asked.

“Possibly,” had been Jones’ reply. “Or maybe he’s attracted to them.”

“You mean he can predict the weirdness?”

“Yes!” Jones had bobbed his bespectacled head. “The way cockroaches can sense an impending earthquake.”

“They can do that?”

“Yes.”

“Humph.”

From that day on, the two had shared a mutual interest in the strange occurrences that accompanied Black’s sightings. Jones kept him abreast of each new oddity. Lately, it had become the Dark Department’s most reliable means of tracking Mr Black.

So—odds were good that Jones was calling with news of fresh weirdness. “Have you got a new anomaly for me, Jonsey? What is it this time—a town statue changing from brass to peanut brittle?”

“Nothing as absurd, Mr Wolfbreath.”

As if a shark in an ice cream shop wasn’t absurd enough.

“Two days ago, a storm system was headed out of the southwest for Philadelphia. Weather services tracked its progress up the coast. But the storm never arrived.”

“So—it petered out. Storms do that.”

“That’s what Director Dean feels too, but in this instance the storm did not dissipate. According to the meteorological apparatus that was tracking the system, it just vanished. There one second, utterly gone the next.”

“Hmmm...”

“Since Director Dean has dismissed the incident, the Department is officially not classifying it as an anomaly. But...I wanted to bring it to your attention, sir...hoping you might see things differently.”

“Yes...thank you.”

For a long moment, Jones made no comment. So Johnny cut the connection.

At this point, Johnny welcomed any distraction. A lead on Mr Black’s whereabouts perfectly fit that bill.

He promptly called to reserve a seat on an eastbound flight out of Cheyenne.



# 13.

Synder had urged Durne to set aside FBI business and pay attention to repairing his personal life. And it'd been excellent advice.

Durne's dinner date with his estranged wife had gone well. So well that Dexter found himself back in Marie's embrace, back in his own bedroom.

The following morning, Durne called the Bureau and arranged to take the next week off. Considering his backlog of unused vacation days, the Bureau had no problem with this request. In fact, they told him to take two weeks off. As long as he had no pending investigation that required attention.

Dutifully, Durne phoned his partner to fill him in on this development. When Synder didn't pick up, the call went to voicemail, and Durne left the following message: "Marie and I are going on vacation to work out our problems. I okayed this with the office. So...if you want to follow up on that lead on your own, enjoy Baltimore."

After a moment, Durne redialed Synder's number and left a second message: "By the way, thanks for forcing me to connect with Marie last night. Everything's looking up. I owe you big, partner."

Next, Durne checked online and found a five-star Bed and Breakfast place in the Poconos. He called them and booked a reservation for a week starting tonight.

Then he went back upstairs and told his wife to start packing. "We're going to spend a week at a romantic hideaway."

"For real?" Marie responded. She was still luxuriating in bed and sat erect at his announcement.

"For real," he assured her.

She flung away the sheets and rushed to throw her arms around his neck and smother him with kisses.

Their embrace lingered and soon put them back in bed together.

Afterward, Marie bustled about filling a pair of suitcases with her clothes and necessities. Durne traveled lighter, so a single valise served his needs.

By noon they were on the road. With Durne at the wheel of his wife's hatchback and Marie seated next to him, a laptop in her lap, on which she was inspecting the B&B's website and sharing each feature with her husband.

"Each room has its own jacuzzi!"

He nodded. That had been one of the deciding factors in his choice of Hendleson's B&B over other hotels. He remembered how much fun they'd had in a jacuzzi on their trip to Niagara Falls three years ago.

He and Marie had married young. He'd still been a DC cop, while she was still dabbling with painting as a career. Two years later, Durne's exemplary record had taken him to Quantico, while Marie had grown weary of the unprofitable art world and had exchanged her brushes for a vacuum cleaner. Until then, Marie's art had occupied most of her attention, but without this obsession, her life seemed empty. Being a housewife was a hollow existence when the husband was so rarely around. Their troubles had started just after their third anniversary.

"It's called the three-year itch," a fellow federal agent had once told him. The man was a psychologist, so Durne figured he knew what he was talking about. "For the first few years, romance is king. But then the passion starts to wane, and things that were just minor problems get blown all out of proportion. Most couples throw in the towel at this point. People are lazy these days. Nobody wants to face their problems and resolve them; they'd rather use divorce as an easy cure-all."

Dexter Durne had never thought of himself as a quitter. As a law enforcement official, he was thorough and relentless. So far, he had managed to solve every case he'd been assigned. It had never occurred to him that this dedication to justice would interfere with his home-life.

Without her art, Marie had become more dependent on their marriage—and consequently jealous of his work for always keeping him away from her. Unaware of her emotional needs, Dexter had regularly chosen work over her, favoring public safety over personal complacency. Naturally, Marie had disapproved of his decision.

Arguments had led to a brief separation. Only the threat of divorce had forced Durne to reevaluate his priorities. He'd worked hard to repair the marriage; once Marie saw how serious he was, her efforts joined his, and a reconciliation was achieved.

He really did love her. Marie had been a part of his life so long, Dexter couldn't imagine not having her around. He still found her attractive—and she was. Time had added a little baggage to her hips and her boobs hung a little lower, but so what. She was still the petite redhead he had fallen for. Her smile still melted his heart. Her touch still aroused him. He earnestly wanted the marriage to work.

True to the psychologist's prediction, things were good for another three years, but eventually both Dexter and Marie began to

backslide. Dragging her art supplies out of the attic, Marie had sought fulfillment in reviving her career as a landscape painter. Around this time, Durne had partnered with Synder.

Like last time, annoyances grew into disputes, arguments threatened to destroy the marriage. The difference this time: having been fooled once, Marie was less willing to accept her husband's promises that things would change; she demanded to see these changes instead of just hearing about them. Meanwhile, although Durne tried to keep his heart focused on home-life, his job was making similar demands on his time. He hoped his excuses would placate Marie, for he knew the Bureau had little patience with slackers. His past performance record set a standard that he was expected to match, if not surpass.

Last night had been Dexter's last chance to prove his devotion to his estranged spouse. If Synder hadn't convinced him to blow off their investigation and meet Marie at the restaurant, Durne's marriage would have been doomed. He owed Synder an enormous debt.

Once the Durnes had repaired their relationship, Dexter would be more judicious about the amount of overtime he put in pursuant to his job as a federal agent. He was resolute to avoid making the same mistake again.

Durne knew Synder would understand his abrupt vacation. He expected his partner could handle the follow-up inquiry in Baltimore. With no woman in his life, Synder had no problem throwing himself wholeheartedly into his work.

"As of this moment," Durne proclaimed, "the rest of the world doesn't exist. Nobody knows where we'll be. And I left my cell at home."

Woody by his declaration, Marie scooted over to press against Dexter. After a moment, he pulled off the highway and parked, for her affectionate ministrations prevented him from concentrating on driving.

They arrived an hour late at Hendleson's B&B, and promptly checked into their room to finish expending their ardor.

## 14.

For some reason, Dusty couldn't forget how that hairy loudmouth had been ogling his Joan in the park.

He knew it was wrong to be overly possessive about her. She was a human being, not a shiny car—but the entire incident really rankled him. The loudmouth's lewd attention demeaned her, for in the asshole's eyes, Joan had clearly been no more than a nice-looking slab of meat.

She was nice-looking. He couldn't argue with that, especially since (apparently) Dusty was responsible for her looking so nice.

*Was that it?* he wondered. *Because I made her into a hot babe, I'm the only one who gets to enjoy her hotness?* That sounded awfully sexist...but the entire affair was rooted in sexism. Loudmouthed asses were always going to gawk at hot babes. Nothing anybody could do would stop them from that kind of chauvinist behavior.

Well, nothing *most* people could do...

Dusty was different. Dusty *could* do something to change the behavior of loudmouthed assholes. All it would take was a single all-encompassing whim to cure every misogynist out there.

Did Dusty really want to start screwing around with reality like that?

Defending his girl's honor was one thing—but striking out at thousands of strangers just because they were asses...a move like that seemed too judgmental, too brazen, too foolish. Even if doing so would make the world a better place.

Dusty should have been content with the punishment he'd already doled out for hairy asshole, but it still bothered him that the man's wife had gotten hurt in the process. He hadn't meant for anything like that to happen. He'd wanted the hairy asshole to suffer, not anyone else.

*Sometimes, you just don't think things through enough,* he remonstrated himself. *Ha—especially when my subconscious acts up on its own.*

He sat in the library, one arm propping up his lazy head, supposedly devouring a textbook, but his mind had wandered. He glanced across the chamber. Joan was manning the front counter. Dusty watched her check out a stack of DVDs for a teenager.

She was hot, there was no denying that. Joan still dressed conservatively for work, but her curves were too ample to be concealed by dowdy garb. Her baggy blouse was stretched taut across her bigger-than-ever breasts. And her face—devoid of any makeup, she was still gorgeous.

Even now, Dusty could tell the teenager was staring at Joan's bosom. An unconscious reprisal made the kid wet his pants as he stood there. Dusty had to smile as the teen freaked out. A

startled Joan watched the kid rush from the library, ineffectively trying to hide the huge wet spot on his jeans.

Dusty wanted to feel guilty, but the sentiment wouldn't come. Again, he'd only been defending the honor of his beloved.

Reluctantly, he had to confess that he couldn't punish everyone who ogled Joan. The way she looked, everyone was going to stare. He'd be on perpetual watchdog duty.

It was difficult to suppress his jealousy.

*It's my own fault, Dusty reminded himself. Everything would be okay if I'd just left Joan the way she was when I met her. I liked the way she looked back then. Why did I have to go and improve her?*

Technically, Dusty's unconscious urges were to blame for changing Joan...but in the end, he had to admit they were still *his* urges. Just like his jealousy. They were parts of himself that he didn't like to acknowledge, but that didn't make them go away...or stop influencing things.



They took public transportation to get home.

This evening, they stood waiting for the bus. Twilight was just starting to darken the sky, but the streetlights were already on. Roughly six other people waited for the bus to arrive so they could change from pedestrians into commuters. Several of them milled around a nearby newsstand, perusing headlines while they waited. Joan was among them.

Dusty caught the *look* the newsstand vendor gave her. The man, an Asian in his forties, was gawking with open delight.

*You could be more subtle about it, Dusty silently chastised the man. How would you like it if everybody gawked at you like that?*

And suddenly the others loitering around the newsstand were staring at the vendor. The man flinched under this barrage of intense gazes. Some of them, Joan included, took a step toward the vendor, seeking a closer view.

*Oops—*

He called Joan over and distracted her with questions about what they were going to have for dinner.



The entire bus ride home, Dusty found himself deflecting the lustful attention of other commuters. Everyone, guys and girls, noticed Joan and couldn't keep their eyes off of her. By the time they

reached the building that housed their apartment, a sense of exhaustion gnawed at Dusty's concentration. Yet, as they rode the elevator to the fourth floor, Dusty felt sexually excited, for he was not immune to Joan's beauty.

Once inside their apartment, Joan started to prepare their dinner. They had agreed on pasta. Dusty watched her fill a pot with water and set it on the gas stove to boil. He couldn't take his eyes off her ass. Apparently everyone else's carnal desires had stirred Dusty's own feelings. Before she could add the pasta shells to the water, he made his move.

Coming up behind her, Dusty reached around and cupped her hefty breasts in his hands. After an initial squeeze, his fingers unbuttoned, then discarded her blouse. As her brassiere fell to the floor, Joan wriggled her butt against his crotch. She pivoted within his embrace and began working to divest Dusty of his pants. He pulled his shirt up over his head and sent it flying. Once they were both naked, the couple sank to the kitchen floor and unleashed their passion.

At some point, Joan complained that the hard linoleum floor was hurting her butt. With a mutual grunt, they disentangled themselves and rose to seek the softer platform of a mattress. As they exited the kitchen, Joan turned off the stove; half the pot of water had already boiled away.

In the bedroom, their ardor picked up again. Their consummation was fever-driven and drained them both. Dusty hadn't been the only one seething with elevated desires.

Afterward, the lovers were starved, but they lacked the energy to deal with preparing a real meal. They settled for nuking frozen dinners, which neither of them finished.

Their lassitude drove them to bed. They were too weary to do more than cuddle. Sleep easily conquered them.



Something yanked Dusty from a vengeful dream. He propped himself up in bed, blearily peering about the darkened bedroom. The bedside clock read: 8:06.

*What woke me...?*

The doorbell went off again.

Beside him, Joan stirred.

"It's okay," he mumbled. "I'll get it."

With a grunt, she pulled the covers over her head.

Fighting to cast off his weariness, Dusty trudged from the bedroom into the living room. As he approached the door to the apartment, someone started banging on it.

“Open up!”

Befuddled by sleep, Dusty’s common sense contributed nothing to his decision to open the door.

A man stood in the hallway. Maybe late fifties; corpulent but not obese; just shy of eye-level with Dusty, which made him around five feet tall. He was unshaven, but instead of making the man seem shabby, his stubble seemed to give him a rugged demeanor, not unlike a character in a modern noir film. He wore an ill-fitting brown suit, and a crumpled hat was jammed down on his head, forcing his sparse hair to jut out like spikes. His eyes were small, mean-looking. The lit stump of a cigar waggled from the corner of his mouth.

“Who the hell are you?” demanded the man.

“I don’t know you,” Dusty retorted. “You must’ve knocked on the wrong door, pal.”

“Ha! *You’re* the one who doesn’t belong here!”

Annoyance stirred in Dusty. He was still half-asleep and this fool’s blather didn’t make any sense. And the smoke from the man’s cigar stank.

“Put some damned clothes on,” the man ordered. As he pushed past Dusty and into the apartment, he intentionally puffed a cloud of noxious cigar fumes right into Dusty’s bewildered face.

Dusty lowered his head to cough and discovered he was naked. He’d come direct from bed without bothering to put anything on. He dimly recalled that his pants and underwear had been left on the kitchen floor. On one hand, he wanted to cover himself in the presence of this stranger, but he was reluctant to leave the intruder alone.

“Brenner!” bellowed the stranger. “Where are you? Get out here?”

*He knows Joan... Who is this guy?*

The man yelled again, summoning her.

Moments later, Joan peered from the darkened bedroom. “Eep!” she squeaked, then stepped forth. “Mr Marks...” Unlike Dusty, she had taken the time to don a baggy sweatshirt before venturing from the boudoir. “What brings you here so late? What time is it, anyway?”

“I’ve got several businesses to run, Brenner,” he replied with pompous bluster. “I can’t afford to leave the office and travel all the way over here in the afternoon.”

“Well, no,” she hesitantly agreed with him. “And I wouldn’t be here, Mr Marks. I’m at work until seven.”

Dusty didn’t like the way this guy was addressing Joan. And it was definitely unnerving to see his beloved grovel for this stranger. Who the hell was he?

“You’re always ‘working,’ but you can’t remember to pay your rent on time!”

“Ah...” grunted Dusty. “You’re the landlord.”

Mr Marks turned to angrily squint at Dusty. He sneered, “Who is this exhibitionist?”

“Chuck is...” Her gaze swayed in Dusty’s direction—only then did she notice his undressed state. “...my boyfriend.”

“Uh...hi...” Dusty offered his hand.

Mr Marks gave him a look of disgust. As if to declare: I’m not touching that. I have no idea where it’s been.

“Chuck,” muttered Joan. “Maybe you should go put some clothes on.”

“Okay. Sure.” Feigning a lack of embarrassment at his nudity, Dusty strolled off into the bedroom. There, he turned on the light, then closed the door. The clothes he’d been wearing were on the kitchen floor; he needed to find fresh stuff. He started to dig through his cardboard carton, hunting a new pair of boxers, but found none.

It took him a moment to remember that Joan had given him a drawer in the dresser to store some of his clothing. He’d resisted, but she’d been persistent—and sneaky about it: after doing the laundry, she had stashed his socks and underwear in the drawer instead of putting them in his cardboard box.

He found his underwear in the drawer. He snatched a pair of slacks from his clothing carton and pulled them on. He added a Led Zeppelin T-shirt on his way back to the living room.

He arrived in time to hear Joan whine, “—but surely we can work this out...”

Mr Marks remained unsympathetic to whatever Joan wanted. “There’s nothing to work out, Brenner. My mind’s made up.”

“What’s the problem?” ventured Dusty.

Even though Dusty was decent now, Mr Marks stared at him the way one would look at a big bug.

“Chuck, no—” Joan tried to hold Dusty back, but he shook her off to confront the unshaven landlord.

“Every problem has a solution,” Dusty remarked in the most friendly voice he could manage.



Mr Marks barked a laugh that stank of cigar. “You’re the problem, Nature-Boy! At least one of them.”

Joan tugged Dusty back. “It’s the rent check, Chuck. I...forgot to transfer funds from my Savings account into my Checking account...so it...bounced...” She threw a pleading smile in Mr Marks’ direction. “But I have the money. I can write you a new check—”

“Do you think I’m a chump, Brenner? I wouldn’t trust another check from you.”

“What about cash?” inquired Dusty. He started to put his hand into an empty pocket, but the landlord released another stinky guffaw.

“I don’t want your money, Nature-Boy. I want you—both of you—out of my building!”

“You can’t just—” Dusty started to object.

“Little Miss Brenner is in violation of the lease, Nature-Boy, so I’m entirely within my rights!”

Dusty threw Joan a questioning look. She guiltily ducked her head.

“The lease on this apartment expressly states: ‘occupancy for one person.’ Little Miss Brenner isn’t even allowed to have a pet—much less a live-in lover!”

“Hey, c’mon,” Dusty congenially chided the man. “So let’s write a new lease—one for occupancy by two people. The rent will probably be more, right? Call it double—and I can give you cash right now. Hold on—”

Turning to Joan, he flippantly asked her, “You wanna get a pet, honey?”

He resumed facing Mr Marks and continued, “Let’s call it an extra fifty so we can have a pet. I’ve got cash right here—whadya say?” He withdrew a wad of cash from his pocket.

“I am a man of principles, Nature-Boy!” The landlord puffed up with righteous indignation. “I cannot be bribed to change my mind once it’s made up! I disapprove of public nudity—and I definitely do not sanction premarital cohabitation! If the two of you wish to continue to live in sin, you’ll have to do it elsewhere!”

*Huh—?*

“You’re joking...right...?” was all Dusty could utter.

“He’s not joking,” Joan whispered fretfully at his elbow.

“If you two sinners aren’t out of here in two days, I’ll send the sheriff to evict you!” With that, Mr Marks spun on his heel and goose-stepped for the exit.

*I tried to resolve this within the confines of the situation, remonstrated Dusty. When all along I should've just tweaked things so no problem existed.*

Spawned within his imagination, the changes were not immediately evident.

Mr Marks paused with his hand on the door handle. He shook his head, as if puzzled by something. When he turned back to face the couple he wore a broad amiable smile on his unshaven face.

"Actually," chattered the landlord, "maybe cash *would* be better."

Grimly returning the man's grin, Dusty handed him a wad of bills.

"It's always better to settle differences privately. Involving the police can get messy," Mr Marks chattered away. "Let me draw up a new lease and mail it over for your signature." He lifted the money close to his face to meticulously count it.

"Remember to add a pet clause," Dusty called after him as the man slipped through the doorway and was gone.

He swung his smile on Joan. "Problem solved."

She swept into his arms, hugging him tight.

"Oh, Chuck—my *hero!* You fixed everything. I'm sorry about the check, I really did forget to transfer the funds. I guess I was too wrapped up being with you." She buried her face against his chest. "And I was afraid to let Mr Marks know you had moved in. I knew he wouldn't approve. He's so old school."

"It's okay," he reassured his beloved.

*Bring on the problems. I can fix them all.*



Something yanked Dusty from a vengeful dream. He propped himself up in bed, blearily peering about the darkened bedroom. The bedside clock read: 8:06.

*What woke me...?*

The doorbell went off again.

Beside him, Joan stirred.

"It's okay," he mumbled. "I'll get it."

With a grunt, she pulled the covers over her head.

Fighting to cast off his weariness, Dusty climbed from bed. At the last second before he hurried out of the bedroom, he thought to put on some clothes. He fumbled about in the darkness, settling for wrinkled pants and a Metallica T-shirt from the hamper. Suitably

attired, Dusty went into the living room. As he approached the door to the apartment, someone started banging on it.

“Open up, bitch!”

Even though he was still befuddled by sleep, Dusty’s common sense kicked in, preventing him from unlocking the door.

“Who’s there?” he shouted through the door.

A protracted pause ensued, then the voice demanded, “Who the hell is *that*?” A sudden thump made Dusty jump. And the angry visitor snarled, “You got a man in there, bitch?”

“Go away!” Dusty shouted.

This time, the voice didn’t yell, but muttered to itself, “Damned bitch thinks she can replace me that easy—I’ll show her—”

Dusty’s gut wrenched as he heard the sound of a key clumsily slipping into the far side of the doorknob. Before Dusty could reach out and throw the deadbolt, the door came crashing open. It knocked him back.

The living room was dark; he’d neglected to turn on any lights en route to answering the door. Now, illumination spilled through the open threshold, revealing the intruder in stark silhouette. He was tall and bulky with musculature. His neck seemed to be thicker than the shaven head it supported. Standing there as if aware of his dramatic pose, the invader called out, “Where the hell are you, bitch? Show your ass—so you can see me beat your new boyfriend into a bloody pulp!”

The impact of the door had left Dusty unsteady but still on his feet. But before he could adopt a defensive stance, the intruder moved forward and drove a dark fist into his stomach. Dusty doubled over—just in time for a steel pipe that was actually a knee to rush up and smash him in the face. A tidal wave of pain enveloped his head. As he went down, an elephant kicked him in the ribs. Cracked ribs added their ache to his chorus of agony.

Immersed as he was in a cocoon of pain, sound took on peculiar properties for Dusty. First, everything sounded dull, as if heard through a wall. And each syllable seemed to repeat itself, expanding words into a series of overlapping echoes. Added to all that: something inside his head rang like a gigantic bell.

He was fairly certain he was on the floor.

Somebody was kicking him in the side. These sharp blows seemed to go on and on—and then they abruptly stopped.

“Rarr-ar-ar hoo urr-ur-ur, hoo eech-heech-heech!” someone yelled. It might have been a masculine voice.

A sweeter voice answered, its tone rich with concern and fear. “Rar-rar-rar-y, hot-tot-tot urr-ur-ur hoo doon-oon hree-ee-ee?”

Despite the distortion and the tintinnabulation, Dusty recognized Joan's voice.

"Roo helonk-lonk-lonk wid-id hmee!"

"No—hoo hoodnit-nit-nit been-eeen-eeen hree-ee-ee!"

Their exchange went on, each snatch of gargled sound battering Dusty where he cringed on the floor. Eventually, the ringing in his head diminished and the echoing effect stopped stretching words into peppery nonsense.

"—what you're told before I get really mad, bitch!"

"I don't belong to you!"

"Who told you that? Some big city egghead? Or is this some crazy idea you picked up from one of your stupid books?"

"There's nothing stupid about books!"

"Words put on paper cuz they ain't worth remembering."

"You act like we were married—"

"I told you all the time you were mine, bitch!"

"And then you'd hit me, Gary! You shouldn't have done that!"

"Only hit you when you deserved to be hit."

Dusty had heard enough. The heated debate had offered an assortment of clues—even an idiot could've figured out what was going on.

Once upon a time, Joan had been Gary's girlfriend. He used to hit her, so she left him—and now he wanted her back.

Joan had never mentioned any of this to Dusty...but then, neither of them had shared much information about their pasts. He had his secrets—and apparently so did she.

Answering the door of Joan's apartment at night had clearly marked Dusty as her new boyfriend. So Gary had to punish Dusty for stealing his woman.

The argument had circled around to Joan's new boytoy. If Gary couldn't have her, he refused to let anyone else be with her.

The physical assault resumed. Gary kicked Dusty again and again. With each blow, Dusty groaned, followed by Joan pleading for a cessation of this gratuitous violence.

"I'll show you 'gratuitous violence,' bitch!"

The kicks stopped coming. Through bruised and puffy eyelids, Dusty tracked the hazy shape of Gary as he moved in Joan's direction. The brute hit her—hard. She staggered back and collapsed in a heap.

A white light went off in Dusty's head. It grew to wash the gloomy living room with its ethereal glare. Dusty's imagination needed no conscious prompting, it acted with vicious instinct.

Instead of pursuing Joan to inflict more blows, Gary stepped back into the open doorway. There, he positioned his head against the door jamb, then grabbed the door and slammed it—repeatedly—again and again until his skull was a shattered shell oozing bloody pulp. As Gary's corpse sank to the floor, Dusty gave a serves-ya-right grunt.

Struggling between satisfaction and revulsion, Dusty let his subconscious clean up this mess. The lingering whiteout consumed the entire scenario.



The last fifteen minutes were eradicated. Not undone, because they'd never happened in this revised reality. Time looped back on itself, and Dusty was back in bed, lost in the grips of an unpleasant dream.

*Back on the streets, Dusty walked with Joan. He wore a clown outfit. She wore nothing.*

*Pedestrians gawked at the naked girl. She was hot. Everybody licked their lips and called out profane suggestions. A crowd formed, blocking any prospect of escape. This leering rabble pressed close. Several lechers reached out to manhandle Joan's luscious flesh. They ignored her protests.*

*Outraged, Dusty struck out. He smacked and punched and shoved and slapped these rude maulers away from his beloved...but there were too many of them. As soon as he would succeed in battering aside one reprobate, two more would take its place.*

*A flush of frustration colored his face. That heat radiated from him, an incandescent wave that melted everything in its path. The mob of debauchers dissolved away, leaving Dusty knee-deep in mounds of their molten meat.*

*Where was Joan?*

*Spurred by panic, Dusty pawed through the ragtag remains surrounding him.*

*No—he cried. I only meant to melt them—*

*But his outlashing had been too fierce, too impartial. The heat of his rage had melted everyone—including his beloved!*

*His wail of torment sounded a lot like a doorbell.*

Something yanked Dusty from a vengeful dream. He propped himself up in bed, blearily peering about the darkened bedroom. The bedside clock read: 8:06.

*What woke me...?*

The doorbell went off again.

"It's okay," he mumbled. "I'll get it."

But as Dusty sat up in bed, he realized that he was alone. Joan's curvaceous form did not rest beside him. His brow furrowed. An explanation rose in his barely awake mind: Joan must have risen before him, she was going to answer the door. Lying back down, he pulled the covers over his naked body—as the doorbell rang again.

This time, his frown deepened as he threw off the blanket. From his vantage, he could see the living room through the bedroom's open door: all was dark.

"Joan?" he called.

When no one responded, Dusty rose and ventured to the bedroom door. Despite the gloom, he could see that the living room was empty. A glance to his right revealed that no one was in the kitchen either.

*Where's she gotten to?* he wondered.

As he stood befuddled in the darkened apartment, a knock sounded at the door—but it was a civil rapping, not angry banging.

*Why would I think it might be angry banging?*

Confusion muddled his weary mind. Suddenly Dusty was unsure of anything.

Moving like an automaton, he crossed the room, unlocked the door, and opened it.

A policeman stood in the hallway. His uniform and the thin mustache on his upper lip tried to make him look older, but his nervous posture and limpid eyes marked him a rookie.

"Yes?" Dusty mumbled. "Can I help you, officer?"

"This is the apartment of Miss Joan Brenner?"

Dusty nodded without verbal reply.

"And you are...?"

"My name's Chuck. I'm Joan's boyfriend."

"Hmmm." The policeman consulted a small notepad he drew from his pocket.

"What's wrong?" gasped Dusty. "Has something happened?"

"May I come in, sir?"

Dusty's confusion ballooned, banishing his bleary-eyed drowsiness. He stepped aside to allow the officer to enter. As Dusty closed the door, he automatically reached out and flicked on the wall switch. Light filled the living room.

"Umm, perhaps you'd like to put on some clothes, sir?"

Dusty was only vaguely aware of standing naked before the officer. After a mute moment, he nodded and shuffled away to disappear into the darkened bedroom. There, he didn't bother to turn

on any lights. Pulling pants and a button-down shirt from the hamper, he dressed in the dark. He left the shirt unbuttoned.

The policeman waited patiently back in the living room. He hadn't strayed far from the closed door.

"What's all this about, officer?"

"I'm afraid I have some bad news..."

Dusty took a deep breath and held it as he sank onto the sofa. His gut wrenched and it felt as if his heart did flip-flops in his chest. All the while, his gaze remained fixed on the policeman. He wanted to gasp "What?" but his mouth wouldn't cooperate. All that came out was a breathy croak.

"Miss Brenner had an accident," the cop finally mustered the courage to voice his announcement. "I'm sorry."

"Accident?" Dusty gaped at the man. "She... Is she okay?"

Before the officer replied, he chewed his lip and shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then back again. "No," he whispered.

The foundation of Dusty's paradise shuddered.

"Wh-what happened?"

"There was a...mugging. The perp hurt her..."

"A mugging..." rasped Dusty. Considering her sexy appearance, Dusty could guess that was a euphemism for "sexual assault." A wave of anguish swept through him.

Some asshole had hurt Joan...

The cop continued: "She managed to crawl out of the alley where it—uhh—happened. Some passersby discovered her on the sidewalk. They called 911...but the ambulance—uhh—it didn't arrive in time..."

"What does that mean?" gasped Dusty. But he knew what it meant.

"I'm sorry for your loss, sir," the policeman feebly offered.

*My loss...*

Joan was dead.

His heart ceased pounding. His entire chest went cold.

He had lost his beloved.

*What the hell was she doing outside at this hour?*

After their lovemaking, they'd fallen asleep in each other's arms. How could Joan have gotten out of bed without him knowing? And why had she left the apartment in the first place?

"Did Miss Brenner have any relatives?" asked the cop. "Someone who should be notified...?"

Dusty weakly shook his head. He couldn't look the man in the face. Anguish clouded his vision.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll need to come down to the morgue, sir,” instructed the officer. “To identify the—uhh—body.”

Dusty continued to shake his head slowly. He could tell the man was talking, but the words didn’t penetrate his woe.

“You—uhh—don’t have to do it tonight, sir. Tomorrow’ll be okay.”

Mute with grief, Dusty hung his head and wept.

At some point, the officer let himself out.



Why the hell had she gone out at this late hour?

They’d made love. He dimly remembered that they’d nuked some frozen dinners, but they’d been too tired to finish them. Exhaustion had driven them to bed.

He had a nebulous feeling that something bad had happened while they’d slept.

He’d had a bad dream—several of them, in fact.

In one: an angry landlord had shown up and threatened to evict Joan and Dusty from their love nest. But—money had placated the man’s righteous intolerance.

In another: an abusive ex-boyfriend had broken into the apartment and tried to beat Dusty to a bloody pulp. Joan’s objections had failed to stop the brute. He’d hit her...and Dusty’s rage occluded the dream’s outcome.

There’d been another dream: in it, scandalous strangers had assaulted Joan on the street, and when Dusty had fought to rescue her from their cruel groping, they’d shoved him aside and persisted in their lascivious conduct. Again, his rage threatened to cloud the rest of the dream—but not so much that Dusty couldn’t fill in the ghastly sequence. His fury had erupted, manifested by his overactive imagination, and the blast had scorched them all—wiping out the attackers *and* his beloved. He had killed her in his dream.

And now some bastard had murdered her in real life.

Unless—maybe Dusty was trapped in another nightmare...

But he knew that was just wishful thinking.

His grief was incapacitating.

But not enough to stifle his vengeful imagination.

Some bastard had murdered his Joan...and Dusty was alone now. His hate for this scoundrel burned like a cinder in his stomach. He ached for revenge...but the killer’s identity was unknown.

Did that really matter? So many of the people out there lusted after his beloved. Any number of them would’ve jumped at the chance to violate her. In their reprehensible hearts, they were all



guilty. Everyone deserved to be punished—the actual killer and all the wannabes.

Dusty's wrath reached out and made it so.

## 15.

It took Dominic D'Salle a few days to decipher the runes found on the newly unearthed bodies of the Rapa Nui statues. Not that they were exceptionally obtuse, but Dom had to wait until everyone else went to sleep so no one would know what he was working on. Once he was done, Dom memorized his results, then burned the few notes he had committed to paper and scattered the ashes in the afternoon wind.

The gray shards drifted out over the Pacific to eventually settle on the waves. Watching this, Dom contemplated what he had learned.

It was commonly accepted that most of the moai had been constructed to honor the mana (or mystic power) of certain clan chiefs. Their carvings supported this hypothesis. Before rogues had toppled these statues, they'd all faced inland, guarding the island's villages. A few exceptions had been found along the shoreline, their angular profiles facing away from the island; it was believed that these had been intended as mystic guardians who would watch over wayward seafaring members of the tribes.

The newly uncovered carvings dealt with something else entirely; what that "something else" was, however, mystified the dig's archeologists, but not Dom.

The new moai runes documented an ancient spell designed to ward off seismic activity. The magic stretched back centuries, in origin and apparent effect. While everything that lay in the Pacific Basin (from Tokyo through the Hawaiian Islands all the way south to New Zealand) was imperiled by periodic volcanic outbursts, Rapa Nui had remained unshaken for a long time. The spell was still quite potent.

Dom had to wonder, though, if disturbing the statues might somehow interfere with their cumulative magic. This group of half-buried moai would form an intricate (albeit invisible to modern man) network maintaining the spell. Expecting some of the stone heads to topple over time or be displaced by hurricanes, how much

redundancy had the builders incorporated to compensate for missing portions of the physical incantation?

By digging up the statues, were the archeologists unwittingly voiding the spell? Was Rapa Nui about to lose its seismic safeguard?

If so—what could be done to rectify the situation?

As his idle gaze strayed to track an albatross lazily floating on offshore air currents, Dom reflected on this possibility.

Halting the excavation would be rather difficult at this stage; four of the stone heads' bodies had already been exposed. The professors were far too excited by what they'd found so far; convincing them to abandon their investigations would be problematic. There were plans to completely dig out one of the basalt columns and extract it from its hole. If anything else, *that* would definitely fracture the seismic protection spell.

Even if Dom withdrew his funds from the project, things would continue on for a while—in fact, suddenly deprived of funding, the team might actually speed up their work to liberate one of the stone columns before the money ran out. Basically, if the damage was real, it had already been done.

Maybe Dom could bewitch a local politico to raise some kind of stink that might shut down the digs. Nations were often touchy about foreigners screwing around with their “national treasures.” If the stink could be whipped into an outrage, the disturbed statues might even get returned to their holes and be reburied.

He really hated screwing the team over, but the safety of the region might be at stake. Derailing the careers of a few scholars was acceptable collateral damage if the outcome saved thousands of lives.

The albatross' torpid hovering guided Dom's reflections away from seismic worries.

For half of his extended life, Dominic had endeavored to be a white sorcerer. Only during his younger years had he dabbled with black magic. It had taken a while, but eventually he'd realized that the Greater Good was more worthwhile than personal avarice—especially if the townsfolk set after you armed with torches and pitchforks. Life was more comfortable without having to deal with incidents like that. Maintaining a low profile wasn't stressful, and in no way did it impair his ability to amass fortunes and properties and controlling interests in multinational corporations. These accomplishments allowed him to live in luxurious leisure.

Once upon a time, there had been others like him, individuals skilled in arcane practices, some had been even older and more

powerful than Dom. Over the decades, though, their ranks had slowly dwindled as accidents pruned the world's ranks of talented sorcerers—and sorceresses, for he mustn't forget the Lady Gwendolyn. He'd enjoyed thirty-six years of bliss with Gwen before cancer had taken her out of the game. Time and misfortune had eventually whittled away at the roster of Dom's occult peers. A few remained, but they rarely contacted each other anymore, preferring the safety of their hidden demesnes.

Ah, but in the old days...

It excited Dom to recall the resistance group he had joined back in the '40s. Together, he and eight like-minded adepts had waged a secret war against the Nazis. On several occasions the group had foiled Nazi schemes to enlist demonic help to their cause. Covens of blackguards sworn to aid Hitler's armies in conquest of this world and the next; enclaves of vampires and misshapen monsters vying to join SS ranks—all these and more Dom's group had tracked down and eradicated. On such a mission, he had met and rescued a sorceress who would become his one true love.

Thinking of Gwen always brought to mind their participation in the Summer of Love in Berkeley in the late '60s. At one point, concerned with a bad run of LSD overdoses, Gwen had studied chemistry in order to accurately analyze the drug going around town. Discovering that the underground manufacturers had accidentally made the acid dangerously strong, she had cast a spell to decrease the drug's hazardous potency, allowing hippies to safely trip out. In Dom's opinion, Gwen was an unsung hero—the entire psychedelic movement would never have happened if not for her arcane influence. Without her reduction of the psychological risks of acid, the drug would've quickly killed off its users instead of enabling them to transcend to alternative consciousnesses. The world would've been a sadder place without Jefferson Airplane or the Grateful Dead.

Sometimes Dom found it surprising that, forty-five years later, he hadn't strayed far from his hippy self. He still listened to psychedelic rock (although the scene had expanded from California, seeping into creative niches all over the world; in fact, he owned a few small labels that released psychedelic music by European bands—only now, the genre was called “space rock”). His choice of clothing was often too colorful for current trends; he still owned several tie-dyed shirts, although he only wore them in private. Even the decor of his Tuscany villa exhibited a fondness for mod furnishings. (One of his prized possessions was a piece of art he had created in '72 using a variation of the carnival spin-art booth.

Traditionally, one squirted paint onto a horizontal canvas mounted on a wheel; by spinning the wheel, centrifugal force would send the wet paint radiating into artistic patterns. Dom's variation dispensed with the wheel and even the physical canvas. Instead he squirted paint into a sphere of air roughly a meter in diameter in which he had negated gravity; then he would mystically spin the sphere, causing the globs of paint to explode into spiny three-dimensional formations. By carefully positioning the initial globs of paint and varying the direction and speed of the sphere's rotation, each starburst could interact in astounding ways. Dom had created numerous spin sculptures, but of them one was his favorite. He kept it in a glass case suspended from the vaulted ceiling of his Tuscany boudoir. The few outsiders who ever glimpsed it believed it was a conventional sculpture made of plastic. Only Dom knew better.) Although he had lived through many cultural changes and quirky trends (like those terribly uncomfortable high collars back in Merry Ol' England), none had affected Dom as deeply as the Psychedelic Years—perhaps because Gwen's enchanted company had been such an integral part of those days.

He missed Gwen. Her influence had touched him deeply. She had helped make him a better person. After her death, he had vowed to honor her spirit by keeping true to her ethical outlook. Long before he'd met her, Dom had sworn off the black arts and restricted his spells to white magic; but upon her demise he had appended a rule to that: he would not tolerate any harm happening to anyone as a consequence of his (or anyone's) occult affairs.

If any of the team suffered from the abrupt shutdown of the Rapa Nui dig, Dom would see to it (in a purely covert manner) that they found gainful employment at one of the companies he owned.

Just as, should his efforts fail to rectify disturbing the anti-seismic spell, he would see to it that ample funds were made available to rescue and reconstruction efforts if the region suffered any devastating volcanic activity.

The albatross Dom had been watching had drifted beyond his view.

*Enough daydreaming, he decided. Time to get started on halting the dig.*

He would need to borrow one of the crew's cars to drive into town, where he could see about chartering a flight to Chile. Easter Island belonged to that country, so Dom would need to go there to find a politician who possessed the clout necessary to shut down this archeological site.

He was turning away from the sea when a psychic pang hit him. Its intensity was so great that it made him stagger. To avoid stumbling and losing his footing, which might send him tumbling from the crest of the hill, Dom fell back on his ass. He sat there as dizziness threatened to swallow his consciousness. He lowered his head and massaged his temples, hoping to alleviate his sudden misery.

Something had happened. Some event had drastically disrupted the psychic plane. Although he could discern no details, he could tell it had occurred far beyond the Pacific horizon. For him to have so vividly felt the dark ripple from this remote vantage, the event had to have been an arcane catastrophe.

All thoughts of orchestrating the reburial of the Rapa Nui statues fled from his mind. Whatever this new disaster had been, it warranted his immediate investigation. More immediate than him catching the first flight off the island. Faster transportation was required.

After a few minutes, Dom felt steady enough to rise and hobble back to camp.

## 16.

During his life, Frederick Synder had accumulated a host of memories, some treasured, some he'd rather not remember, and others which constituted the mundane stuff that filled the spaces between noteworthy occasions.

His first kiss: Arlene Fedderschaal, one Saturday afternoon in the back-row of the Stohlville Movie Plaza. She had been the prettiest girl in class, and her early blossoming had made her quite popular. Freddie's high school buddies had dared him to ask her out, and she'd surprised them all by accepting his invitation. While Freddie had been marshaling the guts to make his move, it'd been Arlene who had pounced on him and forced her lips against his, her tongue into his mouth, and eventually his hand under her blouse. A few weeks later, Arlene had taken his virginity in the hayloft of her father's barn—but that was another cherished memory.

His first day at Quantico: where the serious attitude he'd adopted had gotten him teased as "teacher's pet"—but this recollection was only a pleasant one if he skipped ahead—for in the

end it had been his nose-to-the-grindstone demeanor that had earned him higher marks than the rest of the recruits.

His first bust: a purse-snatcher, his second day as a beat cop in Tucson, Arizona. The thug had been a runner, but Synder had been lucky enough to chase him into a dead-end alley. His luck had persisted too, for when he'd dragged the punk back to the station house for booking, it had been discovered that the idiot had several warrants out on him for crimes spanning from wife-beating to bank heists. Two days on the force, and already Synder was scoring points with the brass.

Of course, not all of the memories floating near the surface of Synder's mind were favorable ones.

Like the time a neighbor's dog had bitten him.

Like the third time he'd gotten laid. He'd been unable to get it up—but he blamed that mishap on the untimely arrival home of the girl's parents.

Like the bully who had tormented Freddie all the way through eighth grade. He'd never learned the bully's actual name, everyone used to call him Fists, a nickname the kid had exploited by inciting fights wherever he went. Fists harbored no special grudge against Freddie Synder, the brat had picked on everybody. Fists had been a burly lad, too, outweighing all other classmates. Consequently, Fists always won the fights he started. On more than a few occasions, Freddie had come home with black-eyes and torn clothes. He'd told his parents he had fallen down in a ditch, for Freddie Synder was no snitch.

One day, Freddie vowed he was going to stand up to the bully. He found a videotape on self-defense and studied each move carefully. But when the time came, these lessons failed poor Freddie.

The incident was scorched into Synder's consciousness; no amount of denial or suppression could banish the memory far from synaptic access.

It was a Tuesday afternoon. School had just let out and the front steps and lawn were thick with kids. To the right, an asphalt loop reached from the street to the school's entrance, enabling parents to pick up their children as they left the building.. To the left lay a playground for the younger grades and the lot where the teachers parked their cars. A row of pine trees ran perpendicular from the left corner of the school all the way to the street, obscuring any clear view of the parking area from the building's front windows. It was usually in that parking lot that Fist staged his beat-downs.

That Tuesday, he picked Freddie Synder as his victim. Freddie had been waiting for this. For weeks he'd been studying that self-defense videotape, training for his next encounter with the bully. Even so, Freddie lacked the confidence to initiate any clash, so he'd had to wait for Fists to start something. And today was the day!

One might think this memory would be sketchy at best—Freddie was, after all, only eleven years old—but the recollection was remarkably vivid and brimming with details—many of them irrelevant to the fight. Such was the curse of an eidetic memory.

Like: he remembered the day had been surprisingly chilly for late April. Having neglected to wear a jacket or a sweater, he'd been mildly uncomfortable.

Like: just before the fight had begun, an airplane had flown overhead, as if functioning as a starting bell. Then later, another jet had zoomed across the sky, marking the battle's humiliating conclusion.

Like: at some point during the clash, a car had pulled up to school's front entrance with its windows open and the radio blaring. A snippet from the middle of Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall" had briefly accompanied the beat-down before eventually fading away as the car drove off.

The elements germane to the fight were similarly picturesque.

Freddie was with his friends, Terry, Andy, and Charlie (who had a game leg). All three were wearing denim jeans—but then so were most of the other kids. Freddie wore a T-shirt bearing a Queen logo—curlicue letters with a crown superimposed on the word. By sheer coincidence, Charlie was wearing the same Queen shirt, although his had been black where Freddie's was white. The other boys' mothers had forced them to take jackets, so whatever bands they'd honored were hidden beneath zippered-up coats.

Of the crowd that eventually gathered, Synder remembered most of the gawking faces, cheering or condemning the combat. Their attire was burned into his cortex, a rainbow of colored shirts and dresses. Arlene had been among that throng of onlookers.

Fists always dressed the part of a bully: white tanktop and tattered jeans with lengths of chains dangling from his belt loops. His feet were shod in mud-splattered hiking boots. He had a tattoo on his bicep of a heart being stabbed by a knife; a rumor circulated that it was just drawn on with magic markers, but no one ever had the guts to challenge him about it. His hair was habitually trimmed close to his bullet-like scalp. Some old skirmish had left his nose flattened between a pair of naturally piggy eyes. His mouth was wide, cruel.

His overall physique was deceptively lanky—but tawny muscles lined his limbs. And his fists were constantly clenched into his namesake.

Rather than tax his sub-par intellect for a justifiable reason to tango, Fists called Freddie a “homo” for wearing a Queen T-shirt. At first, Freddie thought the bully was talking to Charlie (for he was wearing a similar T-shirt); only when Fists punched Freddie in the back (“fer ignorin’ me!”) had he realized he was today’s victim.

He turned to face the bully, his face adopting a serious glare that he hoped might unsettle Fists. But the bully was completely focused on belittling Freddie’s manhood. He spouted a stream of vulgar slurs. At some point in his rant, Fists realized that Charlie wore a similar shirt, so he included him in the insults, out-and-out accusing the two boys of bugging each other in the showers after gym. “I seen ya—pair’a disgustin’ perverts!” Charlie moved to flee, but a crowd had already gathered and they blocked the boy’s easy escape.

With a bellow of “sissy-boy!”, Fists attacked Charlie. He pummeled him about the head and shoulders, swiftly beating the half-crippled boy to the ground.

Mustering his courage and calling upon all the moves he’d studied, Freddie grabbed Fists from behind and whirled him around. The maneuver was supposed to throw the opponent off-balance, setting him up for a toss over Freddie’s hip. But he’d miscalculated the bully’s mass and instead of destroying his equilibrium the tug had only served to rotate Fists until he faced Freddie. His leg was extended in preparation to tumble the bully. Fists took advantage of this and brought his booted foot up to crunch into the boy’s crotch.

This was the first time Freddie’d been kicked in the balls. None of his training had prepared him for this calamity. Sharp pain spread through his stomach to flood his entire body with the awful sensation. Freddie had never imagined such agony could exist. The pain occluded everything from his mind.

With a pathetic whimper, down Freddie went.

In time, the aching throb abated and Freddie found himself hunched over, his chin digging into the asphalt. His teeth clenched in anticipation of further blows—Fists was a kick-em-while-they’re-down kind of brat. Yet no additional injuries swept in to batter Freddie.

His attempts to defend himself (and poor Charlie) had been utterly futile. All that training for nothing. Fists had beaten him with his usual ease.



As he crouched there in defeat, a hand reached down to help him rise to his feet. He took it—and was unexpectedly yanked erect. There was no chance to gasp in surprise before a fist crashed into Freddie’s face, breaking his nose. Blood gushed everywhere.

As Freddie wobbled on his unsteady legs, Fists went ballistic. Enraged that his victim had splattered blood on his “good pants”, the bully launched into the dazed boy with fierce hysteria.

Only the timely intervention of a teacher (who’d been attracted by the crowd while en route to his car) saved Freddie from hospitalization.

Adding to his chagrin, Arlene refused to speak to him after that day, much less let him get to third base.



Getting stabbed in the heart was like getting kicked in the balls.

Both attacks had occurred without warning.

Thinking the man was drunk or sick, Synder had been bending down to offer a helping hand—when suddenly a monstrous pain had roared in his chest. His suffering had been brief, though. Once pierced, his heart had shuddered and ceased its pulsating function. While the pain had ebbed, however, Synder’s consciousness hadn’t.

His wound guaranteed an unavoidable death. His ruined ventricles could no longer pump blood through his body. Deprived of the life-giving oxygen carried in the bloodstream, his vital organs summarily ceased to function. His brain was one of the last to succumb to the onrushing necrosis, firing off synapses right up to the end...and a bit beyond. Life could be obstinate, refusing to go softly into the dark night. Cut off from his senses and incapable of firing the neurons necessary to induce action, Synder’s consciousness became entirely internalized. His dying thoughts ran through the customary itinerary of emotions:

Denial: *This can’t have happened—I’m a trained federal agent. How could I be ambushed by some common street thug?*

Anger: *Dammit—I don’t deserve this! If I die now I’ll never get the chance to track down Mr Fox! That’s not fair! After all the time and effort I put into studying him.*

Bargaining: *Please—make my wound superficial. Let me survive and recover...I’ll do something for the Greater Good...*

Depression: *Aw, who am I kidding? I had my chance. I was just one man, nothing I did—or could ever do—was going to change the world. And here I am: dying before my time...*

Acceptance: *Oh, c'mon—everyone thinks they die “before their time.” There’s always something left unfinished. I shouldn’t be so judgmental. I did a lot of good...as a cop in Tucson and then as a Fed. I brought a decent amount of criminals to justice. I helped to capture murderers before they could add more victims to their unholy accomplishments. Okay, I’m not going to get the opportunity to track down Mr Fox...but then I never considered him dangerous—just mysterious. And Dex’ll take care of that, I can trust him to finish my investigation.*

Death came to Frederick Synder in a Washington DC alleyway. But contrary to conventional expirations, his essence was doomed to live on.

He’d never been all that religious, so it came as quite a shock to “wake up” in darkness after being stabbed. At first, he assumed he was dead and this was some form of afterlife. But then he noticed the *activity* around him: flashes of energy that spoke. No, “spoke” was inaccurate; it was more like each flash conveyed information...and somehow he could decipher this information. The problem was: the data given off by each individual flash were too fragmentary to make sense. It took him a while to learn to superimpose neighboring flashes on each other in order to achieve context and thereby meaning.

In this manner, Synder learned where he was and how he’d gotten here...as incredible as it was.

After his murder, Synder’s body had been hauled off to a secluded location and subjected to profane regimens. Callous physical mutilation, followed by the merciless rape of his consciousness. Technically dead by that point, while the evisceration had been quite brutal, Synder had experienced no physical pain. Later, he learned that not all agony required a nervous system to induce torment or fear.

His murderer was a necromancer—someone who could read a person’s life by dissecting their physical remains. This “reading” was far more than a clinical forensic examination; it involved the violent evisceration of the subject, then the piecemeal extraction and analysis of that viscera. Sometimes consumption played a part in that analysis. The process may have seemed supernatural, but it was entirely rooted in the murderer’s psionic ability. That mind was capable of unlocking psychic energy stored in the body’s individual cells. Compiled together, these biotic traces represented a true documentation of the dead person’s life: their deeds, their hopes, their fears, even their skills. All these electromagnetic data were assimilated by the necromancer. No secrets were hidden from him.

So now Frederick Synder found himself trapped in the necromancer's mind, living a second life as a set of electrical impulses which completely duplicated his mortal existence. From his subjective perspective, his life had hit a snag when the necromancer had stabbed him, then after a blackout he'd "awakened" here in someone else's cortex. Whether he was the original Synder or just a copied set of impulses—this didn't much matter to him. He didn't feel like a copy...but he knew he was. But then the point was moot, for he was *everything* the original Synder had been—except now he was pure intellect and lacked a body.

"Trapped" was another human term that didn't really apply to Synder's new existence. As a set of electrical impulses, he was stored along certain neural chains in the necromancer's physical brain. Since it was the necromancer's brain, everything was organized, stored and controlled by that consciousness. From the necromancer's point-of-view, Synder was just a compilation of stolen memories, raw data to be reviewed and accessed when necessary. His brain was cluttered with such data clusters. Consciousness was not supposed to be a trait exhibited by these stolen memory groups.

In all honesty, Synder wasn't even sure he *was* a consciousness.

Once he understood the parameters of his new existence, Synder had to face the cold implication that his "consciousness" now consisted entirely of past experiences, basic personality traits, and the skills he had mastered during his mortal life. Unable to *do* anything, he had to wonder if this new self possessed any actual cognition...or were his thoughts simply the result of stored intellectual reflexes?

From this internal vantage, Synder could sense the necromancer's thoughts. Synapses fired off all around his storage chain; it was fairly easy to eavesdrop on the villain's doings. For it became immediately apparent that the necromancer was a villain of a caliber far beyond anything encountered by Synder during his years working for law enforcement. "Mass murderer" was a gross understatement when it came to classifying Johnny Wolfbreath.

By reviewing the necromancer's recent memories, Synder was able to "re-live" his death and subsequent mutilation. What he "saw" shocked him. Not only did Synder feel psychic "pain" with each successive injury, but he reeled with repulsion at the necromancer's delight.

Via deeper memories, Synder learned that Johnny was the one who had strangled Strickland the old superintendent. He was

also responsible for Detective Sampkin's disappearance—the jerk was dead and eviscerated—like most of Johnny's victims.

Besides the scores of innocent people Johnny had slaughtered, his psyche was pure evil. The villain exuberantly enjoyed killing. He fantasized about genocide. What had started out as a visceral hate for “the white devils” had swiftly transformed into a uniform loathing for all of humanity.

It deeply disturbed Synder that this madman had carried on his homicidal mayhem for so long without ever attracting the attention of the Authorities. But then, this Environmental Purity League clearly had friends in high places. If Johnny ever made a mistake, they could easily have it covered up.

Except...Johnny never made mistakes. The villain's self-confidence was apparent in every thought bouncing around in his head. He had honed his skills as an assassin until he excelled beyond perfection. He always succeeded—in everything he did. Even more disturbing: his expertise vindicated his monstrous arrogance.

Ah—but wait—the villain's scorecard was *not* perfect. A certain target had eluded him—*repeatedly!* Evidence of Johnny's failure lurked everything in his psyche. Finding and killing this man had become a driving obsession for Johnny Wolfbreath.

Mr Black. The villain's nemesis was called Mr Black...although he had adopted different names over the years...as he moved around the country...causing or chasing strange occurrences...

With a start, Synder realized that Johnny's nemesis, Mr Black, was none other than his Mr Fox, the man Synder had tracked for so long!

In fact—Mr Fox was the reason the villain had murdered Synder! Believing the federal agent possessed crucial information about Mr Black, Johnny had murdered Synder so he could use his necromancy to steal those secrets. Except Synder had known no more than he about their mutual target...actually less. Fox's use of the Black pseudonym predated the FBI's files on the elusive man. So, in the end, much to Johnny's frustration, Synder's death had gained him nothing...nothing except the base ecstasy that killing brought the villain.

Peering deeper, Synder discovered that the League had originally ordered Mr Black's extermination as part of their clandestine efforts to rid humanity of impure genetic stock. The League suspected Black was not entirely human, hence (in their

opinion) his removal was no crime. Killing Black was no different in their regard than stepping on a spider.

Synder did not need to consult Johnny's ruminations to know that his goals differed from those of his employers. Where the League assigned death warrants to genetic deviations (and political enemies), Johnny Wolfbreath wanted to kill *everybody*. If the need arose, he was completely willing to act on his own, unconcerned whether or not his actions contradicted the League's guidelines.

In the matter of Mr Black's extinction, however, Johnny fundamentally agreed with the League's judgment.

Privately, though, Black's destruction was far more vital on a personal level. Besides restoring Johnny's one-hundred-percent success rate, Black's death would intensely satisfy the villain. He ached to destroy his nemesis—and then he would use his necromancy to discover and steal whatever abilities Black had.

All of this horrified Synder. He was an unwilling passenger in the mind of a homicidal maniac! As a federal agent, he felt compelled to bring the villain to justice—but his incorporeal state prevented him from doing anything to further that goal. All he could do was sit back and watch Johnny continue with his evil intentions.

## 17.

Johnny Wolfbreath's flight arrived at Philadelphia International Airport at 10:30PM.

As he drove his rental Toyota along the river headed for the city, Johnny contemplated how to conduct his search. Mr Black was somewhere in this city, one person among 1,560,279 others. Finding the man was not going to be easy.

The prey habitually changed his appearance, so Johnny couldn't rely on past descriptions. The only thing linked to Black in a dependable manner were the strange occurrences that seemed to follow him around the country. Or that he followed, if there was any validity to Jones' theory. Even then, couldn't bizarre events be expected to attract the attention of other people? How was Johnny supposed to pick his target out of a crowd of gawkers?

It was certainly a quandary—but one Johnny felt confident that he would solve.

Johnny was an accomplished hunter who had assimilated the skills of many unique individuals over the years. Here was an

opportunity for him to exploit Special Agent Synder's deductive expertise. There was a certain irony in this, for in life the Fed evidently had shared Johnny's obsession with locating the mystery man. Now, in death, he would help Johnny succeed where he had failed.

As the city's skyline loomed into view, the traffic thinned until Johnny shared the highway with only a handful of other vehicles. He took no undue notice of this, lost as he was in his thoughts. It wasn't until he took an exit labeled "Market Street" that Johnny realized he was the only car on the road—at least the only *moving* car.

In fact, as he drove up Market, passing numbered street after street, he couldn't help but notice that the thoroughfare was also devoid of any pedestrians. Did this city have some curfew unknown to visitors? None of the other automobiles he saw were in motion; some sat crooked across sidewalks or crashed into building fronts, others seemed to have been abandoned and left to block the lanes.

Something had happened here, but Johnny couldn't imagine what.

It was as if the city had been evacuated. But besides being implausible, the evidence didn't exactly match an evacuation. If Philadelphia's populace had fled the city, why had they left so many automobiles behind? Wouldn't each person have used their vehicles to join a mass departure?

Could some catastrophe have occurred while Johnny rode an airplane east? If so, then where were all the bodies? Testing this latest assumption, Johnny turned on the car radio and spun the dial. He encountered mostly static, and the few stations he found were weak, perhaps broadcasting from out of town. When he caught a news summary, there was no mention of any Philadelphia disaster or evacuation or anything out of the ordinary.

*But, surveying the empty streets, what I see is definitely not ordinary.*

If anything, it was *extraordinary*.

Could the absence of any people be another "strange occurrence"? Was Mr Black behind this?

*What about vampires?* Could a swarm of those monsters have descended on the city and devoured all of its inhabitants?

While Johnny knew very little about the bloodsucking fiends, he had clearly sensed from his fleeting glimpse into the vampire's soul (or anti-soul) that the creatures were fanatical loners—they did not associate with others of their kind, so the odds were slim that they hunted in packs.

Besides, if vampires were to blame for the absence of the city's populace, they'd have drained their victims and left the bodies behind. The streets would be littered with bloodless corpses. No, they were not responsible for this phenomenon.

For the first time in a long while (barring his concerns regarding vampiric infestation), Johnny felt uneasy. It would take an enormous amount of resources to eradicate over a million people—and considerable time. Even Johnny Wolfbreath, acting on sanctioned orders from the League, would have been hard-pressed to effect such a genocide—and it would've taken him weeks. But here: something had done away with the city's entire population.

Well, *that* was a presumption. Johnny wasn't actually certain that the entire city had been abandoned. Perhaps only this district was empty.

A large obstacle blocked the roadway; he recognized it from pictures: City Hall. Spotlights were aimed at the statue atop the building's high dome. He tried to follow the lanes that wound around the soot-stained structure, but here the abandoned cars were crowded too tight to allow his Toyota to pass.

Against his better judgment (for he still did not trust the empty city), Johnny left his rental jammed between two dead cars and continued on-foot around the city's seat of government.

Past the building, the streets were similarly devoid of activity. Lights flashed, neon signs flickered, bits of trash skittered along the gutters, but no people stirred.

For a moment, Johnny paused and turned his face to the sky. A cool breeze basked his puzzled brow. He closed his eyes and felt the night.

Empty...no people...an entire city that had lost its inhabitants... To anyone else, this notion would have been horrific, but it sent a delicious shiver up Johnny's spine. He imagined that he was responsible for the solitude. He pictured everybody succumbing to death strokes delivered by him, each person dying horribly while he celebrated their pain. And once they lay dead, he would indulge in an orgy of necromancy, eviscerating them all, one after another, sucking up their memories and personalities and talents...until he was a million strong.

He strolled along the barren avenues, soaking up the morbid ambiance. His acute ears thrilled to the dominant silence. He voiced a death song under his breath. His chant praised whoever was responsible for this glorious depopulation.

Someday, Johnny hoped to achieve a genocide of his own design.

A noise broke the spell, jarring Johnny back to the empty street. It had come from ahead. Slipping his dagger into hand, he jogged up the road. The noise came again, and Johnny whirled in time to witness a mangy dog skulk from the shadows of an alley. Both he and the animal froze when they spotted each other. For a long moment they stared at each other, evaluating the other's existence. Deciding that Johnny had no food, the dog moved off along the pavement and disappeared around a mound of crumpled metal left behind by an auto accident.

So... mused Johnny. *Whatever did this only targeted people. It didn't harm the animals.* It would appear that *this* genocide had been selective. It wasn't much, but every nuance told him something.

Unfortunately, this piece of information did little to unlock the bigger mystery of what had happened in the first place.



At some point, Johnny wondered whether the city was really empty...or were the inhabitants hidden away indoors? If they were hiding—then what were they hiding *from*? Johnny wasn't worried. If he ran into something prowling the streets, Johnny knew he could it.

Well, if the people were in hiding, Johnny would simply have to ferret them out.

His choice of a building was hardly random. First, he ruled out any office buildings or shops, restaurants too. People didn't hide in a diner, they barricaded themselves into their homes. He looked for a suitable residential structure. Roughly a third of the windows were lit, but he detected no movements behind any of them. That didn't faze him; hiding people stayed away from the windows. But then, hiding people didn't advertise their presence by turning on the lights. By this logic, he was looking for a mostly darkened tenement.

He selected a brownstone structure nestled between a pet hospital and a hardware store whose front was shuttered. The brownstone was four stories tall. It featured six windows per floor and only one of them was lit (on the third floor). Pointed heavenward, an assortment of satellite dishes hung from a number of the windows. Besides their unlit condition, shades had been drawn to mask several rooms.

If people were hiding indoors, Johnny would find some of them here.

The outer door was locked. Visitors were supposed to buzz one of the tenants to give them access. He took an elbow to one of



the door's panes, then reached through to flip the latch and admit himself.

A second secured door lay at the back of the small foyer. It fell prey to the same tactics. He stepped through into the empty lobby. A large glass globe hung from the ceiling, providing garish illumination of every aspect of this drab antechamber. Half of one wall was occupied by a series of mail-slots. A rickety sidetable stood beneath this array; three loose magazines sat there, waiting to be picked up by tenants who no longer existed. Across the room was a closed elevator, beside this a single doorway led to the rest of the groundfloor. Through that doorway, he found a gloomy hallway lined by numbered doors; the first one opened on a stairwell that went up and down.

Johnny decided he would start at the bottom and work his way up.

His examination of the basement was uneventful. An ancient water heater dominated the subterranean chamber, while the remaining area consisted of storage lots separated by chain-link fences. Aided by his pocket flash, he swiftly ascertained that no one hid among the stashed cartons and bundles of ancient magazines and broken furniture.

He continued his methodical search, peering behind every door on the first floor. The first apartment was especially shabby and small; he assumed it belonged to the building's super. The other apartments featured inexpensive (but still better) furnishings.

The rest of the floors told the same story.

No occupants.

More telling, however: Johnny saw no signs of any struggles or the clutter left behind by hasty departures. It was as if all the tenants had calmly walked away—or evaporated where they stood.

In two apartments he found unfinished meals laid out on tables. The food was as yet unspoiled—so these hungry citizens had disappeared within—say—the last six hours.

In another apartment, a shower was still running. The building's reserve of hot water had run out long ago, though, and the now the spigot pumped out a spray of cold liquid.

On four separate occasions, he discovered abandoned pets upon breaking into the various apartments. Twice, cats made a mad dash the instant he got the door open. ("Run free, little cougars.") Once a dog cowered in a corner, wetting the rug with its anxiety, as Johnny searched another apartment. ("Canines were once a noble breed, but the white man turned them into poodles.") And in one, a parrot squawked at him as he inspected the premises. Before he

left, Johnny released the bird from its cage and shooed it out an open window. ("Fly free, feathered spirit.")

If everything so far was any indication, Philadelphia had indeed become a ghost town.



Johnny felt more relaxed back on the street. Indoors, the people were gone, but their belongings occupied so much space. Outside, the emptiness seemed natural. If he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine he was out on the prairie without a soul around for miles.

Philadelphia had become ground zero for a major phenomenon.

The League would expect him to promptly report on this development. They were very keen on studying strange occurrences. How long would it be before the rest of the world discovered that the city's entire population had vanished?

Survivalists would blame it on aliens. Old school radicals would point the finger at those Commies. Republicans would blame it on the gays. Democrats would blame it on the rich. Realists would denounce the media for spreading blatant lies.

And Johnny hadn't the faintest idea if any of them would be right or wrong.

*It's not my job to figure out what causes these inexplicable occurrences, Johnny reminded himself. I'm here to find Mr Black and kill him.*

If he told the League about the doom that had befallen Philadelphia, they'd immediately send in crews of scientists who would muscle Johnny aside in order to conduct their investigation. He'd be in their way. He'd never get the chance to locate Mr Black or exterminate him.

*No, he decided. This is my town until my hands run wet with Black's blood.*

*So—I better get started...*

Except Johnny couldn't imagine where to start. He certainly couldn't go door-to-door—it would take him months to search the whole city. He only had so much time before word got out about Philly's emptiness.

For that matter, Johnny couldn't even be sure that Mr Black was still in town. The bastard could've skipped out; that was what he'd done every other time there'd been an outbreak of weirdness.

It was even possible that Mr Black numbered among the ranks of the missing. Johnny was loath to consider that possibility—it left him with no chance for success.

He was desperate to succeed this time. After so many previous failures, Johnny wasn't sure if he could cope with another defeat. He'd be the laughing stock of the Dark Department. His hatred for Mr Black might become so intense that it would quite literally make his head explode.

He *really* needed to kill Mr Black.

So far, he had been walking down the street at a moderate pace. Suddenly, he began to run, picking up speed with each long-limbed stride. His braided hair trailed behind him like some dark comet tail.

"Where are you, you bastard?" he bellowed.

Hitting an intersection, Johnny impulsively turned left. He ran down the center of the lane, his boots slapping the median painted onto the asphalt.

"Stop hiding from me!" he demanded.

He was forced to race around abandoned cars and other obstacles. He almost tripped over a travel suitcase (one of those type with wheels and a handle that popped up from the base) that someone had discarded in a crosswalk.

"I hate you!" he ranted.

Gone girls and gone boys. Gone old people and babies and telemarketers and skateboard athletes and everybody gone.

Breathless from his extended sprint, all that Johnny could manage now was a raspy "Arrr! Arrr!"

Logic did not govern his tempestuous velocity. He ran out of desperate frustration coupled with his deranged craving for Mr Black's blood. Having exhausted any methodical strategy for a search, Johnny had fallen into haphazard hysteria. Somehow, he hoped that if he ran long enough he would stumble upon his prey purely by chance. He ran and ran, his potent fury blinding him to his environment. Even if he did run into Mr Black, Johnny was too far gone to even notice.

He ran until he dropped.



With the return of consciousness came a wave of humiliation. Johnny immediately recalled his recent behavior and it mortified him to realize that he had lost it.

He found himself sprawled on asphalt. When he propped himself up on his elbows, Johnny could glean that he lay in a parking

lot. His internal clock told him it was the middle of the night, maybe right after midnight. All around him, the city's abandoned lights turned the immediate skyline into a stark silhouette against the hazy twilight.

He climbed to his feet.

Johnny had no time for recriminations. His temporary madness had already lost him hours. He needed to get his shit together and get back on-course.

"Dammit," he cursed aloud.

Something murmured as if in agreement. The sound came from the edge of the parking lot, where the store (a Dollar General) met the street. Something moved there. It was too tall to be a dog.

*A person!* Johnny dashed over to confront the figure. *Someone who can tell me what happened here—*

Revulsion curbed his hasty approach. (Keep in mind: it took something pretty severe to shock this bloodthirsty necromancer.) As he drew near, Johnny could see the woman in more detail—and some of those details were horrific. She looked like a wax doll that had been held too close to a flame; her head and left shoulder slumped in molten deformity. Her lips had partially melted together, reducing her utterances to tragic moans. Her displaced eyes bulged with anguish.

This was no genetic mutant. If she had been born this way, she'd have perished during childhood. Something horrible had happened to this woman.

But—what could melt a person's physiology so radically without killing them?

Then he saw the second woman. She shambled up behind the first and embraced the deformed wretch, as if to comfort her. This new person was another abnormality, although her disfigurement was less extreme (i.e.: less disgusting) than the first woman's semi-dissolved condition.

Still, Johnny had to grunt: "Gak!"

"Help us," the second woman pleaded. Hugging the molten figure, she took up the other's *woebegone* moan.

The second woman's head was dented...or maybe *bent* was a better description. Her head was bean-shaped, an arc like a backward letter C. The rest of her was ordinary, even healthy in a sexy way. Her bosom was extravagant, her butt prominently shapely. If not for her distended head, she'd have aroused Johnny.

Others were coming up behind the two—more women, each one of them deformed in some fashion. Limbs that didn't match, spines arched with spiny protuberances, upside down faces, multiple

breasts running from chest down to belly, one even had a fish-head. A marathon of mutants shuffled toward Johnny.

As they converged on him, Johnny realized they were all the same woman, Despite each one's unique deformity, their facial features were identical—and quite beautiful when undistorted.

They all begged him to help them.

What insanity was this?

## 18.

Dusty didn't need to go outside to discover what had happened.

Grief and rage consumed him.

Joan was gone.

And now everyone else was gone too. They'd all paid the price for lusting after Dusty's beloved. His lost beloved.

Dusty didn't like being alone.

Anyone he let in ended up getting hurt. His mother, that stranger in Austin who'd bought him lunch when he'd been down on his luck, and now Joan...all deleted from the world...because they'd meant something to him. His overactive imagination was a curse, one he couldn't get rid of. He'd tried. Even "imagining" it away had failed. He was stuck with it, and everyone else was stuck with its fallout.

"No!" Dusty asserted. This time things were going to be different. He refused to accept losing Joan. Okay. he couldn't undo her extinction, but he *could* try to recreate her from scratch.

His first few attempts were woefully misshapen. Although his fervor was fueled by grief and rage, those emotions distorted his concentration, resulting in grotesque failures.

He discarded these monstrosities. Fighting to focus, Dusty tried again...and failed. Determination drove him on and on, imagining imperfect copy after copy of his lost beloved. As his frustration mounted, the Joans became progressively uglier.

And assertive. These Joans attacked Dusty. With lust blazing on their often warped faces, they tore at his clothes. He was forced to delete them outright.

After a few hours, exhaustion stopped Dusty. He closed his eyes and sank back on the sofa that had once belonged to Joan

Brenner...but sleep wouldn't come. His mind still whirled with the need to restore her to his life.

Although his conscious mind had ceased to generate new Joans, Dusty's unconscious took no breaks. New girls continued to phase into existence, one after another, elbowing aside their predecessors in an effort to catch Dusty's attention before the next Joan came along. With his eyes closed, Dusty had no opportunity to evaluate any of these creations. Their numbers increased, ultimately displacing groups of the rejects into the hallway outside the apartment. Eventually, the spillover made its way down to the groundfloor of the tenement building and out onto the street.

Lost and dejected, the Joans wandered off.

Eventually, Dusty's exhaustion outweighed his agitation, and oblivion put a temporary end to his distress.



Upon waking, Dusty's first thought was: *Where's Joan?*

He sat up and looked around. She was nowhere to be seen.

She was gone. But—he had imagined himself scores of new Joans...alas, all imperfect... Some of them should still be lingering here in the apartment. They wouldn't all desert him.

But they had. Dusty was alone.

Crossing to the window, he peered outside. The city was still in the grips of the night. He had barely slept for an hour. Along the shadowy avenues, Dusty could detect no movement. The streets were deserted.

Where was everyone?

He fled the apartment. When he reached the street, he headed off without a thought to direction. He just ran.

He hunted for Joan. So profound was his loneliness, any of the misbegotten ones would have sufficed at this point.

He earnestly regretted his misguided efforts to recreate Joan. He should have stopped once he realized that her perfection was beyond the scope of his imagination. His fancies were strong, but his memories lacked the clarity necessary to mold an accurate rendition of his beloved.

Making matters worse, Dusty had callously rejected these imperfect Joans. He had cast them out in his heedless fever to generate more.

Most of them were physically faulty, but more often than not he was reasonably successful in duplicating her personality. Consequently, each defective Joan loved Dusty with an overwhelming passion. When he rebuked them, he broke their

hearts. Some died inside, others modified their devotion into derision. How dare he spurn his soulmate!

Sane now, Dusty agonized that he had hurt his beloved—and not just once, but time and again. How could he atone for such disrespect?



The first Joan he found was a gnarled monstrosity. Three of her limbs were fused to her torso; innumerable bruises and scrapes covered the woman's ambulatory leg from serving as her sole means of mobility. Johnny was amazed by how far she'd managed to get.

He crouched down and bent over her trembling form. Her eyes, moist with anguish, rolled to gaze into his sad face.

"I'm sorry," he told her.

When Dusty moved off, nothing remained to prove she had ever existed.

The next few he encountered, he spent a moment mourning the misery he had inflicted before deleting them from reality. Soon, though, their numbers grew too many to allow him to indulge in such personalized farewells. He took to uncreating them in waves, clearing entire blocks with a glance.

As a rule, they were all moving (walking or crawling, depending on the limitations of their anatomy) away from the tenement building that housed the apartment Dusty had shared with the original Joan. He wasn't sure whether they fled him or their own fractured lives.

Considering the vast ranks he had imagined into being, Dusty knew he'd never catch up to them all. Some would miss out on the somber peace he administered. By deleting them, he put an end to their suffering and at the same time helped scrub a stain from his soul. If not for his guilty madness, none of them would exist. It was his responsibility to return them to nothingness and abort their torment.

His heart constricted every time he met eyes with any of these flawed Joans. He loved them all dearly, but the best gift he could give them was a release from their loathsome lives.

Canceling out his mistakes, Dusty moved steadily south on Arch Street.

# 19.

The only “help” Johnny could give these malformed wretches was a quick death.

Most of them were docile creatures who didn’t complain as he throttled them or twisted their necks until their spines snapped. Some of them lacked necks, forcing Johnny to unsheathe his dagger and gut these freaks. From that point on, he found it easier to just wield his blade and cut them down.

Early on, out of curiosity, Johnny had taken the time to eviscerate one of the women. His necromantic examination of her viscera should have told Johnny who she was and how she’d come to be so drastically deformed—but to his disbelief, there was a scarcity of data contained in the corpse. The woman’s cellular structure possessed no history to document her history. She knew her name was Joan, but that was the extent of her self-awareness. It was as if she had only existed for a few hours. The only element that played any active part in the woman’s personality was a deep, almost obsessive devotion for someone named Chuck.

When he eviscerated a second deformed woman, he found that she too was called Joan and harbored her own blazing love for this Chuck fellow.

The intensity of their passion disturbed Johnny.

But not as much as the question of the women’s identity. This vigorously perplexed Johnny. Hundreds of copies of the same woman, each one deformed in different ways, all traveling along a street in an otherwise empty city—the mystery was so outrageous as to be tantalizing.

He never expected her to be his gateway to finally coming face-to-face with the elusive Mr Black.

Ahead, Johnny spotted a figure moving among the milling throng of deviant women. A male, a normal man, meaning undeformed. As this stranger moved along, it seemed to Johnny that the women appeared to dissolve into mist.

Pausing, Johnny studied the man from afar. He wore drab slacks and a black Metallica T-shirt. Sweat had turned his frizzy hair into oily curls. The man’s pale face was made up of sharp features that somehow managed in their gestalt to become innocuous and unmemorable. Johnny vaguely recognized the face, secondhand from the woman’s sparse history (*That’s the guy these women think of as their soulmate!*), but something told him the person hiding behind that mask of flesh was important in another way.



A flash of insight told Johnny that *this* was Mr Black. He had finally found his prey!

There was nowhere to hide—and no point, really. Johnny was the dominant figure here; every ounce of him screamed danger and lethal consequences.

Remaining where he stood, the arrogant hunter enjoying the moment before his triumphant kill, Johnny let the prey come to him.

Roughly twenty yards out, Mr Black halted. He had finally noticed Johnny. Peering around one of the malformed women, he scrutinized Johnny. With an inward smirk, Johnny wondered what Black made of his hunter's bedraggled appearance. Johnny's clothes were rumpled, his ponytail was frayed with numerous loose strands. A fair amount of blood splattered the sleeves of his expensive suitcoat, blood from the wounds he had doled out to the deviant women. Johnny was hard-pressed to stifle a wicked grin.

He curtailed the urge to dash over and pounce on his prey. After all this wait, he wanted to savor imminent victory.

Internally, Johnny Wolfbreath seethed with gleeful anticipation. *After years of unsuccessfully hunting this bastard, I've finally caught up with him. There'll be no escape for him now.* But Johnny had to remind himself: Mr Black was *not* just a man, he was a genetic deviant. His physiology may appear normal, but that only meant that his deviation probably involved some mental trickery. Johnny sharpened his readiness as a precaution.

"Who are you?" Mr Black called out to Johnny.

"You don't know me...but *I* know you."

"What are you doing here?" Only then did Mr Black seem to notice Johnny's bloodied hands and the trail of slaughtered women. His annoyance transformed into sorrow. "You—you've been killing my Joans!"

"They belong to you? Tell me about them."

"They...were my girlfriend..." sobbed Mr Black.

"Yes, the ones I sampled were quite devoted to you. In fact, that constituted the extent of their consciousnesses. They had no past. Can you explain that?"

"I don't have to explain anything to you!" Mr Black spat back.

With a single nod, Johnny conceded, "That's true. I'll get all the answers I want once you're dead."

Mr Black took a backwards step. "What? Why—why would you want to kill me?"

"Because you're a damned nuisance," snarled Johnny. "You were supposed to die years ago, but you keep eluding me. Now, I've finally caught up with you."

Mr Black waved a raised hand, as if warding off Johnny. “Wait a minute—you want to kill me because you’ve never been able to find me? Is that supposed to make any sense?”

“You’re just a genetic deviant. It really doesn’t matter if anything makes sense to you.”

“This isn’t right—“

With a shrug, Johnny started his advance. “Just doing my job.” He lifted the stained knife in a menacing fashion.

And suddenly Johnny held no knife. Where had it gone? Johnny was sure he’d just had a knife. Yes...his hands and sleeves were still drenched in blood. There *had* been a knife—but it was gone now.

*No problem, mused Johnny. I’ll just tear him to pieces with my bare—*

A thunderous tumult went off suddenly within Johnny’s head: “NO!” Its force was potent enough to halt the assassin. Kaleidoscopic discharges bleared his vision. His head felt as if it were about to detonate. Wooziness drove Johnny to his knees. As he toppled, only his blindly outstretched hands kept him from landing on his face.

## 20.

Watching the world through borrowed eyes was an exasperating experience for Frederick Synder. He was used to being in control, but as a set of electrical impulses he could no longer flash his badge—or a gun—and immediately command situations. His posthumous existence had reduced him to a silent, helpless onlooker.

It was bad enough to be trapped in here with Johnny Wolfbreath’s depraved thoughts pressing in close all around him—but Synder was forced to witness every one of the villain’s atrocities.

He’d had a ringside seat for Johnny’s jaunt to the Colombian jungle, and while a number of the individuals (mainly the thugs guarding the heroin factory) killed on that outing had probably deserved their fate, there’d been others whom Johnny had senselessly slaughtered—just for the hell of it. The man’s casual brutality had revolted Synder. On these occasions, his eidetic memory was a curse, forever documenting each ghastly moment of Johnny’s gore-fest exploits.

But far worse lay ahead.

While Johnny did not remember murdering his blonde concubine, Synder had witnessed the entire ghastly outburst.

The depravity exhibited during this violence had been disturbing enough, but the real horror had come when possessed-Johnny had started to drink the girl's blood.

For the villain *had been* possessed. Hiding away in his neural cluster, Synder had beheld the entire impossible process. A dark fog had erupted from one of the other neural clusters, the type that stored stolen personalities like himself. This emission had contaminated synaptic pathways, usurping control of Johnny's physical body. An auxiliary inky tendril had suppressed Johnny's cognitive nucleus, keeping him asleep for the duration. Once this usurper had established dominance, it had used Johnny's body like a puppet: attacking the blonde, mauling her, then draining her blood. The invader had gorged itself, not just on her crimson lifeblood, but it had drunk her fear like psychic nectar.

The entire incident had scared the bejesus out of Synder.

On his own, Johnny Wolfbreath was a terrible individual: a homicidal lunatic whose special talents only increased the horror of his atrocities.

But this usurper's essence was darker by far. At least Johnny pretended to be a human being, this new villain had never thought of itself as human. To it, "human" was an insult, or a word associated with food. The usurper believed it had been a *vampire* before the necromancer had slain and assimilated it.

All this Synder was able to read in the thoughts of the newly dominant consciousness. He never got the usurper's name; the neurons that should have contained its personality was just a churning vortex bestial fury.

It had been raw animal rage that had commandeered Johnny Wolfbreath's body that day. And when the vampire had sated itself, its inky tendrils had withdrawn back into its neural cluster...where it could pretend to be just a stored set of memories, not an active consciousness.

But Synder knew better.

What the vampire had done was frightening...but it showed Synder that it was possible to interfere with Johnny's dominion over his body.

*If Dracula could do it—so can I!*

*I just have to figure out how...*



Careful to keep his activities secret (not just from Johnny, but Synder had to be cautious about betraying his autonomy to the brooding neural cluster that was Mr Dracula), Synder probed the necromancer's memories for information concerning his assimilation of the mock-vampire.

But once he'd rifled through Johnny's memories of that night in the alley, Synder was forced to revise his opinion of the supernatural. The creature had displayed many of the traditional vampiric attributes: strength, speed, bloodlust, and physical transformations. Severe wounds hadn't even slowed it down as it had assaulted Johnny. Only decapitation had stopped the rampager. And then the body had crumbled to dust before Johnny could examine its guts and learn its secrets—that part was difficult to explain away.

All that Johnny had gotten was a brief necromantic flash when his bare fingers had torn the vampire's face. That fleeting contact with its blood had transferred to Johnny a snapshot impression of pure evil. Just as when Synder had spied on the usurper's dark essence, the thing sincerely believed it was a real vampire.

*Maybe it is—or it was, mused Synder. But in here, we're all just electrical impulses. Believing you're stronger doesn't make you stronger...*

Or did it?

The consciousnesses formed by these impulse clusters existed without physical attributes. An individual's strength would be judged by the intensity of those impulses. "Belief" was a powerful force...but powerful enough to bolster one's psychic capacities?

That much might be possible, but Synder firmly doubted that any amount of belief could change a human being into a creature of the night. Faith was a powerful motivator, but it could hardly alter a person's anatomy, nor make one invulnerable. (He had to qualify that: the vampire may have been undaunted by the extreme injuries inflicted on it by Johnny, but in the end it had perished when it had been decapitated—so "invulnerable" wasn't entirely accurate...more like quasi-invulnerable.)

But what about these "mutants" the League regularly sent Johnny out to slaughter? The necromancer refused to believe in the supernatural, for he had experience with individuals whose mental and physical abilities transcended those of normal people—and there'd been nothing mystical about them. No matter what their oddity, it could always be scientifically explained. Wasn't it logical to assume this vampire's horrific differences were genetic in nature?

But Johnny's judgment disagreed with this hypothesis. The necromancer had studied this question much longer than Synder, and it was Johnny's conclusion that the vampire had been *more* than a genetic deviation, yet something *less* than human. For the moment, Synder had to accept Johnny's evaluation. Uneasily, Synder found himself inclined to share the villain's conviction, for what he had sensed of the usurper had certainly been distinctly unhuman. (But...that "unhuman" quality could have been generated by the creature's fervent belief that it was not human.) It was all too metaphysical for Synder, whose entire life had been governed by the known laws of physics.

Synder's entire worldview was constantly being challenged by the things he'd learned after his death. Necromancers and secret societies and genetic mutants and minotaurs—and now *vampires!* Why, even his posthumous existence taxed conventional doctrines.

By this point, Frederick Synder was fairly certain he was a real consciousness. *I think, therefore I am*—and all that.

Every passing moment offered him a new building block to reconstruct his worldview.

Like now: following a meteorological clue, Johnny Wolfbreath had traveled to Philadelphia in hopes of finding Mr Black. But instead he had found an empty city. How could the populace of a major city vanish without a trace?

Eavesdropping on Johnny's thoughts, Synder had to concur with several of the villain's deductions. None of the evidence pointed to any conventional enemy attack. A nuclear assault would have destroyed the buildings. A gas attack would have left all the people unconscious or dead—but there was no trace of any bodies. A widespread alien abduction was too ridiculous.

Even Johnny's brief fear that vampires had caused this mass disappearance was quickly dismissed. If a swarm of creatures of the night had victimized Philly's citizenry, there would have been bodies left behind by the bloodsuckers.

No plausible explanation fit the facts, what few there were.

As a child, Freddie Synder had avidly devoured Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. Indeed, those tales had instilled in him a desire to solve mysteries when he grew up. And when he became an adult, Synder had pursued a career in law enforcement. There was a classic Holmes line from *The Sign of the Four*: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

Therefore: only an improbable explanation could account for the city's empty condition.

But Synder couldn't imagine what it could be. His mind was trained to collect data and derive likely solutions from those clues. Considering unlikely solutions ran against the grain of his cognitive process.

*By now, he mused, you'd think I'd be used to impossibilities...necromancy and vampires and such... But even these fantastic things couldn't alter a lifetime's deductive reasoning. Maybe with time...*

The stress of the mystery of the missing people weighed heavy on Johnny's mind. He searched the streets, even broke into a tenement building, going from apartment to apartment hunting for anyone hiding...but he found no one. Frustration burned like an ulcer spreading from his gut to the rest of his body. The villain needed to kill someone—preferably Mr Black.

Synder's attention was only partially focused on Johnny's mounting rage. He sensed activity along a nearby synaptic chain. Wisps of oily darkness crawled into psychic view. The vampire was creeping from its neural cage.

Fearful of being discovered, Synder huddled deeper into his own neural cluster.

He watched as the vampire's murky essence spread through Johnny's cortex. But the invader didn't immediately assert itself; instead it paused just outside Johnny's control center, poised to attack. To one side, a thread of darkness teased the node that governed the host's restraint.

So far, Johnny had been walking down the street at a moderate pace. Suddenly, he began to run, picking up speed with each long-limbed stride. His respiration quickened.

"Where are you, you bastard?" he bellowed at the night.

Hitting an intersection, Johnny impulsively turned left. He ran down the center of the lane, unaware that some of his urges were not his own.

"Stop hiding from me!" he demanded.

He raced around abandoned cars and other obstacles. He almost tripped over a travel suitcase that someone had discarded in a crosswalk.

"I hate you!" he ranted.

Now that Johnny's consciousness was engrossed in this infuriated run, the vampire sidled close and whispered to him: *He's out there somewhere. He knows you're coming, so he's hiding. But you can catch him—if you hurry!*

Breathless from his extended sprint, all that Johnny could manage was a raspy “Arrr! Arrr!” His potent fury reduced the world to running.

Pouncing upon the host’s control center, the vampiric essence readily usurped dominance over Johnny’s agitated state of mind. As before, he exiled Johnny into a somnambulant void. Again, the creature had bullied its way into the driver’s seat.

This time, though, the vampire had no intention of relinquishing dominance. It planned to stay in control and use Johnny Wolfbreath’s body to spread a reign of terror

The thing’s evil glee was so blatant, Synder could easily read its scheme.

The necromancer was already a monstrous threat to mankind. With the vampire at the wheel, the threat escalated to outlandish proportions. This could not be allowed to happen.

Someone had to stop the vampire.

*Yeah...and like it or not, it has to be me.*



Johnny ran until he dropped.

When Johnny’s consciousness sank into sleep, the vampire’s essence seized control. But before the new master could impel the body to rise to its feet and go in search of victims, its supremacy was challenged.

A peripheral neural cluster assailed the vampire’s dark stain. The initial assault was crude but its unexpected nature made it seem powerful. In its egocentric arrogance, the vampire had never suspected that any other stolen personalities could achieve self-awareness inside Johnny Wolfbreath’s head.

Synder’s initial assault was crude because he was a novice in psychic warfare. He attributed too many physical imperatives to his onslaught, lashing out his electrical impulses as if they were meaty fists. Recovering swiftly, the vampire swatted him aside like cigarette smoke. It had mastered this ethereal environment and knew how to properly rally the psychic forces to strike back. Synder reeled from the thing’s aggression. Each oppressive wave of nastiness seethed with profane gravity.

*I thought it would be more vulnerable while it was distracted controlling the body—but the damned thing’s reflexes are too fast, too savage.*

He tried to emulate the vampire’s intensity...but fell short of the necessary fervor.

The vampire targeted Synder's neural cluster, its inky tendrils snaking over to strangle the cerebral strands. Distracted by this internal battle, the usurper left Johnny's body sprawled on the ground.

Synder fought for his second life. His adversary was incredibly powerful and mercilessly skillful at psychic conflict. Synder couldn't decide which was more dangerous: its innate evil or its fevered hostility. With each blow, the creature was diminishing him. At this rate, how long before he shriveled to the point where he lost the ability to focus his thoughts? Without focus, he would lose his awareness and be reduced to a mindless set of stolen memories.

Synder fought as hard as he could...but to little avail. The vampire's talent for psychic destruction outclassed his capacity to defend himself. Fueled by its bestial ferocity, the creature stripped away his psionic armor like the layers of a nebular onion. Soon, his core would be exposed to the monster's corrosive wrath.

A warmth crept into Synder's dwindling consciousness. It infused his floundering will with supportive resources. Suddenly, he could resist the vampire's constricting clutches. Theoretical sparks flew as he repelled the parasitic cloud.

*Drive it back into its neural cluster, a voice urged Synder.*

Shrugging off his shock at being addressed by a new someone inside the necromancer's head, Synder thrashed with all his psychic might at the vampire's ethereal manifestation. The hostile tendrils recoiled at contact with Synder's assault and withdrew. Raging and spitting wordless invectives, the dark usurper abandoned the brain's control center. It oozed along the neural pathways that took it back to its allocated storage place. Several times during this averse retreat, the inky blot sought to sneak tentacles of itself past Synder's potent onslaught. But Synder's revitalized verve nimbly corralled these workarounds and forced them to remerge with the roiling quagmire of the vampire's essence. Just before collapsing into its neural pen, the vampire rallied all of its puissance for one last offensive. It lashed out with fearsome electrical appendages, but Synder's bolstered psionic bulwark was strong enough to ward off their desperate brutality. Even Synder was impressed by the power he suddenly wielded.

Evacuated from the driver's seat, the vampire retracted its murky cloud until there was no trace of it, only the neural cluster that housed its wicked impulses.

Synder's energized consciousness paused then, to ponder how best to cage the beast. If Synder withdrew, what was to prevent



the vampire from exploding from its vantage and shredding him from behind?

*I've no intention of settling for just imprisoning this monster,* the voice declared with more than a trace of vehemence.

*Who are you?* Synder wanted to know, but his unknown savior ignored his curiosity and swept in to conquer his own essence. *Hey—*

*Don't resist,* the voice advised. *You don't know how to ultimately destroy this creature—but I do. To do so, I need your assistance. Just as I gave you the extra voltage to defeat the monster, now I must augment my own vitality with yours in order to finish this conflict.*

Synder didn't like trusting this mysterious benefactor, but he really had no choice. The stranger was inherently too powerful. Jumping him when his guard had been directed elsewhere, they'd easily vanquished him. His own impulses were now enslaved by this stranger.

A helpless spectator, Synder watched as the new master moved to dominate the body's control center before Johnny's consciousness could wake.

*Neither of us can destroy the monster. Like us, it's just a stored set of memories. Only Johnny has dominion over the personalities he has stolen over the years. This is his brain, but right now he is asleep. I have observed the monster usurp control; hopefully I can do the same and take care of business before Johnny rouses.*

Although full of questions, Synder kept them to himself lest they distract the stranger's concentration. He saw the logic in their assessment of things. If they felt they could get rid of the vampire—more power to them. There was no need for him to offer his help, the stranger had already conscripted his resources.

Ridden now by the stranger, Johnny's body opened its eyes—but only for an instant. They closed immediately. This action had been the easiest manner of confirming dominion over the necromancer's physical form. But vision was an unwanted diversion, and closing Johnny's eyes returned everything to a psychic darkness.

Now that the stranger knew they were in control, they turned their attention on the neural cluster that housed the vampire's essence.

All along, a residual charge had lingered to keep the vampire confined to its neural cluster. Now that charge retired to integrate with the gestalt essence of the stranger and Synder. Before the

vampire could burst free, a charge of a different nature flowed from the impulses dominating the body's control center. This spark was more vivid, obviously packing more authority. It closed on the vampire's cluster, encasing and forcing the monster back inside.

As Synder watched, this new discharge glowed blue, then red and soon white as it constricted, seemingly strangling the neural bundle out of existence. The charge eventually withdrew, leaving behind nothing but a stump of inert fibers.

*It is done,* announced the stranger.

*What happened?*

*The monster is gone.*

This much was apparent, but Synder wanted to know how it had been done. Where had the vampire gone?

Before he could request elucidation, though, the stranger released their hold on him...and vanished.

*Hello?* called Synder. *Where did you go...?*

But there was no one there to answer.



While Johnny Wolfbreath had contributed nothing to the internal struggle, the experience had drained his physical body. He remained unconscious for some time after the vampire's eviction.

Leaving Synder with nothing to do but wonder who his savior had been.

Were they one of the other people who the necromancer had assimilated over the years? So Synder and the vampire weren't the only ones to achieve awareness in here! But—who was it? How had they learned the craft of wielding psychic power like that?

Synder had so many questions.

Eventually, the stranger spoke again to him: *I'm sorry.*

*Eh?*

*Destroying the monster exhausted me. I had to rest and recover my strength.*

*Who are you?* He exploded with questions. *Where are you?*

*I thought you understood that part. I'm here, inside Johnny's mind, a set of stored memories, just like you. My name is Sindy—with an S instead of a C...but I suppose there's no need for ostentation now.*

*You're another one of the necromancer's victims.*

*No. The vampire was responsible for my death. Johnny used his necromantic talent to assimilate my essence after I perished. Technically, he rescued me from posthumous oblivion.*

*He's a monster!* Synder proclaimed.

*Yes, well...I can't argue with that. But before I died, he treated me with respect and paid me excellently for my services.*

*"Services"?*

*I was a courtesan.*

*A prostitute.*

*What are you, a cop?* she snapped.

*Actually...I was once, before I became a federal agent.*

*Oh shit—* Her ethereal voice adopted a cautious tone. *I—*  
*uh—*

*Don't get your panties in an uproar, honey. I meant no disrespect—*

*Sindy sputtered.*

*Let's start over, okay?* Synder floundered, embarrassed. *Hello, my name is Frederick Synder. I used to be a federal agent.*

*Okay...I'm Sindy—and I used to be one of the girls Johnny kept at his ranch.*

*So—back then, you had no idea what a monster he is.*

*Oh, most of the girls knew he was involved in shady doings. We had no idea he was a pathological serial killer.*

*Technically, serial killers repeat patterns in their killings. Johnny's a mass murderer.*

*Whatever.*

At this point, a psychic rumble momentarily interrupted their discussion. Johnny Wolfbreath cast off his lethargy and woke.

Johnny's initial sentiment upon waking was annoyance that he'd collapsed from his exuberant run. He was embarrassed that he'd succumbed to hysteria.

As far as they could tell, the necromancer remained completely unaware of the fevered struggle that had ensued inside his head while he'd slept.

They resumed their exchange:

*So...what the hell did you do to that vampire?*

*That monster no longer exists.* Sindy's tone was strict, cold, merciless. *I took control of Johnny's consciousness—something I couldn't do if he'd been awake—and I made him forget the vampire. The electrical impulses that comprised the monster's synaptic posthumous existence have been deleted.*

A distinctly victorious tone was evident in Sindy's psionic voice. Destroying the monster had been a major accomplishment for her—avenging her own death from beyond the grave.

*Ummm...if you don't mind my asking: where did you learn to do that?*

*Ever since I discovered Johnny had also assimilated the monster that murdered me, I've been studying his every move. I picked up how to dominate Johnny's control center from observing the vampire do it. I'm a very quick learner (my courtesan salary was paying for college; I was studying to be a pharmaceutical psychologist), but I couldn't do it alone. I'm not strong enough; but together with your vitality, I could accomplish what the vampire had done. Its psyche was incredibly powerful.*

*Do you believe it was a real vampire?*

*I'd like to think such things don't exist. Whatever the prick was, it believed it was a vampire. Now: it doesn't matter. Johnny slayed its body, and I erased its posthumous extension. It's gone for good.*

*Killing the vampire is the only decent thing Johnny Wolfbreath's ever done.*

*As I mentioned, he was always nice to me while I was alive.*

*How can you defend him? Synder bridled. He's a monster!*

*Now that I'm dead and just a set of stolen memories in here, I've seen him do horrible things.*

*Look, he's found some women—and he's slaughtering them!*

Indeed, while Synder and Sindy had been getting to know each other, Johnny had encountered people in the deserted city. Women wandering the streets. No, wait—these women were all deformed! And—Synder realized a second after Johnny did—they were all the same woman!

*How was that possible?*

*Why is he killing them?* moaned Sindy.

*He likes to kill,* Synder told her.

*The real Johnny is so different from the one I bedded...*

Unwilling to entertain any notion that Johnny Wolfbreath had a human side, Synder returned his attention back to the host's sensory input.

With typical bloodthirsty conduct, Johnny was wading his way through a throng of the deformed women.

*Look!* Sindy called out. *There's someone different from these women. It's a man!*

Pirating the impulses transmitted to Johnny's brain by his eyes, Synder saw a figure moving among the milling throng of deviant women. Another survivor—and this one lacked the physical distortions exhibited by the women. In fact, he strode with a degree of authority.

*What's happening?* gasped Sindy.

Synder couldn't answer her. He saw what she saw, but couldn't believe it. The women seemed to be dissolving into fog as the man walked among them.

He overheard Johnny's evaluation of this newcomer: *His features are so innocuous and unmemorable—yet I vaguely recognize that face...but from where...? Oh!—from that woman's sparse history. That's the guy these Joans think of as their soulmate! But something tells me the person hiding behind that mask of flesh is important in another way...*

A flash of insight convinced Johnny that *this* was Mr Black. He had finally found his prey!

If Synder had still possessed a body, he would have leaned forward with sudden interest. From earlier eavesdropping, Synder had learned that Mr Black, the target Johnny sought, was probably his Mr Fox. If this was true, then the necromancer had beaten Synder to the prize. (But then, since Synder was dead, he no longer had any realistic chance of apprehending Fox.) Synder couldn't hide his jealousy.

Their cerebral environment reverberated with Johnny's glee over finding Mr Black. A host of horrible atrocities danced through the assassin's imagination. Finally he would be able to slaughter his nemesis!

Bridling with smug satisfaction, Johnny stood his ground and let his prey come to him.

Roughly twenty yards out, Black/Fox halted. He had finally noticed Johnny. Peering around one of the malformed women, the man scrutinized Johnny with clear suspicion.

Yes, concurred Synder. *You have every reason to doubt this stranger. Run now, while you still have the chance.* Despite his own fixation on catching Fox, Synder didn't want to see Johnny get his hands on the man. Synder only wanted to question Fox. Johnny was obsessed with slaughtering him.

Fancies of bloodletting filled Johnny's head. After years of hunting Black, Johnny had finally caught him. He curtailed the urge to dash over and pounce on his prey. After all this wait, he wanted to savor his imminent victory.

*Actually, Synder sneered, you didn't find him—you stumbled upon him entirely by accident.*

With a wicked grin, Johnny clenched and unclenched his hands; they were greedy to make harsh contact with the prey. *But I have to be careful with Black. This is no normal man, he's a genetic deviant. His physiology may appear normal, but that only means that*

*his deviation probably involves some mental trickery.* Johnny sharpened his readiness as a precaution.

“Who are you?” the man called out to Johnny.

“You don’t know me...” Johnny gloated. “But *I* know you.”

“What are you doing here?” With a start, Black/Fox noticed Johnny’s bloodied hands and the trail of slaughtered women behind him. His annoyance transformed into sorrow. “You—you’ve been killing my Joans!”

“They belong to you? Tell me about them.”

“They...were my girlfriend...” sobbed Black/Fox.

“Yes, the ones I sampled was quite devoted to you. In fact, that constituted the extent of their consciousness. They had no past. Can you explain that?”

Synder understood very little of this part. While Johnny had accumulated his “sampling” of the women, Synder and Sindy had been busy talking.

“I don’t have to explain anything to you!” Black/Fox spat back.

With a snide nod, Johnny conceded, “That’s true. I’ll get all the answers I want once you’re dead.”

Black/Fox took a backwards step. “What? Why—why would you want to kill me?”

“Because you’re a damned nuisance,” snarled Johnny. “You were supposed to die years ago, but you keep eluding me. Now, I’ve finally caught up with you.”

Black/Fox waved a raised hand, as if warding off Johnny. “Wait a minute—you want to kill me because you’ve never been able to find me? Is that supposed to make any sense?”

“You’re just a genetic deviant. It really doesn’t matter if anything makes sense to you.”

“This isn’t right—“

With a shrug, Johnny started his advance. “Just doing my job.” He lifted the stained dagger in a menacing fashion.

*Uh oh—* fretted Synder. The necromancer had had enough fun teasing Black/Fox; now his fun would enter the inflicting pain stage.

But suddenly Johnny held no knife.

*What the—* gasped Synder.

*I know Johnny had a knife—I felt it in his hand,* whispered Sindy. *But now it’s gone. Where’d it go?*

Johnny too was momentarily startled by his dagger’s disappearing act. But his anticipation of hurting Black/Fox was too intense and refused to be diverted by any trickery.

*No problem*, mused Johnny. *I'll just tear him to pieces with my bare—*

**NO!** bellowed Synder. His essence surged from its neural cluster to pounce on Johnny's control center. Initially, the host rebuffed Synder's assault with a reflexive metaphysical shrug. As Synder fell back, he continued to rage: *No no no!* The entire cortex shuddered with his clamor.

But he was insufficiently cogent enough to challenge Johnny's psyche.

*Wait—* came Sindy's voice. *You'll never stop him alone! Let me help you!*

And the dead courtesan's essence flowed over him, melting into his consciousness, contributing her vitality to his. Like before, their impulses merged, currents intertwining, but this time Sindy's presence was nurturing, not commanding. This time, Synder was in charge. Immediately, he felt mightier.

When he struck again, Johnny's consciousness cringed under the onslaught. The Synder/Sindy team had been able to beat back and restrain the vampire's dark self; dealing with a simple mortal like Johnny should've been easy. But it wasn't.

Johnny Wolfbreath was no simple human being. His necromantic talent had attuned him to matters of the psyche. Plus, his innate evil was a puissant force in its own right. Johnny could resist mental interference, had indeed done so in the past. *In case of psionic attack, heed this rule: Think only of yourself.* As the necromancer fleetingly recalled that guidance, the Synder/Sindy team appropriated the knowledge and turned it against him. This time, the tricks Johnny had taught himself to preserve mastery of himself failed him.

Even so, the battle was touch-and-go for both sides.

The Synder/Sindy team struck with relentless fervor. Synder was determined to spare Black/Fox from the necromancer's vile punishment and post-slaughter violation. Although she had no feelings one way or another about this Black/Fox person, Sindy lent her entire essence to fortify Synder's assault; she simply wanted to prevent Johnny from killing again.

Johnny did not possess the temperament to be a victim, so each time he faltered, his rage increased, refueling his might to fighting status. Although his consciousness fought like a demon, Johnny remained unaware that a mental attack was underway. He believed he was warding off some migraine.

Perhaps therein lay the necromancer's undoing. Thinking he was battling nothing more troublesome than a pesky headache,

Johnny never really pulled out the big guns. He had no idea that sets of stolen personalities had ganged together inside his head for the express purpose of bludgeoning his mind into submission so they could usurp control of his own body. Johnny's fundamental strength came from the fact that his mind had a long history running his body. They were in tune with each other, mind and body, difficult to separate.

The vampire had succeeded by applying its fierce hostility. Synder had to rely on his own verve.

Kaleidoscopic discharges bleared Johnny's vision. His head felt as if it were about to detonate. Wooziness drove Johnny to his knees. As he toppled, only his blindly outstretched hands kept him from landing on his face.

His close-up view of the asphalt was the last thing Johnny saw. Succumbing to his inimical "migraine," his mind lost its hold and was forced out of the driver's seat and dumped into a somnambulant bottomless pit. A tunnel constricted his vision until it was a remote pinprick—then gone—and darkness embraced the consciousness of Johnny Wolfbreath.

His body slumped on the ground while the victors caught their psychic breath.

*We did it...*

*You did it, Officer Synder. This time I merely loaned you my strength.*

*Exactly what did we do? My attention was focused on the clash itself. Where did we put Johnny's consciousness once we unseated it?*

Slowly, Sindy retracted herself from his essence. From Synder's point-of-view, it felt like molasses being poured over his head—but in reverse.

Their separation became more tumultuous than it should've been.

Someone was kicking Johnny's body in the head. Unless one of the malformed women had turned violent, it had to be Mr Black/Fox. After all, the man had reason—Johnny had just pulled a knife on him and threatened to kill him.

*One of us needs to take control and stop that before he harms us, urged Sindy. Now that Johnny's gone, this is our body...*

*Johnny's gone...? For real?*

With an exasperated sigh, Sindy nudged Synder aside and assumed dominance over the body's control center. Her first action was to roll away from the kicking. Her second was to call out aloud: "Stop it! Please!"



She started to explain things to the man, but her account got all tangled in itself and sounded stupid.

An impotent bystander, Synder winced at her inept attempts to defuse Black/Fox's enmity.

The man approached even now, and the scowl on his face was a testament to Sindy's failure.

*Wait—what's that—* Synder gasped. *He has a sword? Where the hell did he get that—?*

## 21.

This time, Dimitru Bodescu was not distracted when his spawn "died" again. Although he wasn't concentrating on his offspring (in fact, his own kind was the furthest thing from his mind as he ambled along the nighttime streets of Manhattan), the sudden extinguishing of one of his progeny was almost akin to losing a portion of itself. Detached by distance and lack of interest, his spawn played no part in his routine ruminations. Mainly, food was his primary concern. While he had just fed an hour ago, the creature was already feeling hunger spread an empty ache throughout his undead body.

The Big Apple offered such a wealth of potential meals-on-the-hoof. Dimitru had to resist slaughtering everyone in sight and feasting on the massacre. *If anything*, he cautioned himself, *you need to be more careful here among these crowds*. Crowds could swarm and, despite his superior strength, overcome a him by sheer volume and weight. Once held down, he became more vulnerable to staking or decapitation. As his own progenitor had taught him many many ages ago: solitary targets were always advisable.

So he was aimlessly strolling along Broadway, enjoying the colorful neon displays, when he felt his spawn's spark go out once more. He paused to frown. Dead again? Would the offspring reappear in a few seconds like it had before? Dimitru moved over to stand before the display window of a shoe store; there the creature waited.

But the spawn never twinkled back into existence. Its dark life signature remained smothered. It was not returning.

This time, concern trumped the vampire's usual arrogant aplomb. If he could trust his undead perceptions, the first extinguishing had occurred farther south. But this fresh extinction

had been nearer and to the immediate west. His nocturnal senses were able to pinpoint the location.

This time, Dimitru was compelled to investigate this enigmatic extermination...because he feared whatever had slain the spawn might come after him...and if so, it was getting closer!

## 22.

Dusty felt no fear, only outrage.

This stranger was drenched in his beloved's blood. Her mutilated (albeit deformed) bodies lay everywhere. His guilt was compounded by his own words: he had literally bragged how he planned to kill Dusty.

*My imagination emptied the city, pondered Dusty. So, where'd he come from?*

This nuisance had to be dealt with.

But first—Dusty was compelled to see to the surviving Joans. Putting them out of their misery was what he'd been doing when this asshole had showed up. He wanted to finish that act of kindness before stooping to the rancor necessary to eradicate this pest.

Dusty was *that* confident in the superiority of his imagination that he thought of Johnny as just a "pest."

Gradually, the remaining Joans were fading out. Dusty even wished away the butchered corpses. He told himself it was the decent thing to do, but he grudgingly knew it was more to obliterate all evidence of his grandiose mistake. He should never have tried to reconstruct Joan.

He should never have killed her.

He should never have met her in the first place.

Now she was gone for good.

And he turned to regard his assailant. This man had killed several Joans before Dusty could liberate them from their suffering. Subjecting the murderer to a righteous punishment would help assuage Dusty's own guilt for creating the Joans in the first place.

He kicked the killer in the head—hard and again.

Just imagining the man out of existence was too easy—too drab. A penalty more befitting the crime was called for. Something bloody. Something painful. And—in homage to Joan—something grandiose.

His subconscious put an apropos weapon in his hand. He smiled, *Ah, this is perfect.* He held up the sword and examined it. The blade was wide and razor-sharp. Etchings of weird symbols and pictograms decorated the sword's shiny veneer. Dusty couldn't decipher the incantations, but he recognized the pictures: they were of Joan—a smiling Joan from happier times. Stoutly wrapped with leather strips, the handle was tailored for his grip only. "Yes," he spoke aloud. "Perfect."

With sword raised and ready, Dusty approached the murderer where he squirmed on the ground.

He was babbling about being a composite being with several personalities occupying his head. The wicked one—he was the one who had attacked Dusty, but now he was gone, and friendly parties were in control.

Dusty didn't buy it; it sounded as if the man was just playing for time in order to recuperate from Dusty's kicking.

But then...the notion of multiple minds crowded together in a single head intrigued Dusty's imagination. Unconsciously, he made it so.

Stopping his menacing advance, Dusty lowered his sword. There was no longer any point in assaulting the man. The guilty party had already been punished. Now this person housed a different, friendlier personality. Dusty knew all this to be true because he had actualized it.

He extended his free hand to help the man clamber to his feet. "I'm Chuck. Chuck Green."

As the man came erect, he introduced himself.

"This body belonged to Johnny Wolfbreath, a hired assassin. But Johnny's consciousness is gone, and there's two of us in the driver's seat now. You can call me Captain Synder. And my copilot is a girl named Sindy."



Captain Synder tried to explain their histories.

More than one dominant personality controlled Johnny Wolfbreath's body—what an interesting twist. But Dusty wasn't really interested in these details. He knew his own imagination could provide this duo with more colorful backstories.

He was, however, curious about Johnny Wolfbreath. Why had the man wanted to kill Dusty? He'd been awfully determined about it, too. "Are you certain there's no chance that he might reclaim control of that body?"

But the tale they told Dusty was just too outrageous. It sounded like a bad slasher film. They had to be joking, or at least exaggerating.

“But—” Captain Synder informed Dusty, “Johnny wasn’t the only one tracking you.”

Suddenly wary, Dusty peered about the nocturnal street.

“I was tracking you too. In life, I was a Special Agent with the FBI. I was very interested in your connection with a series of inexplicable occurrences.”

Nonplussed, Dusty nodded, but remained mute.

Captain Synder continued: “I was about to return to Baltimore to reexamine a certain double killing. You were there. You were the half-naked man who ran from the tenement on Heath Street.”

Dusty shrugged. “I didn’t have time to dress. A monster chased me out of my dream and from the building.”

Captain Synder nodded gravely, but a skeptical spark twinkled in his borrowed eyes.

This subtle display of doubt rankled Dusty. “I was there—you weren’t.”

“And you say this ‘monster’ chased you out of your ‘dream.’ Surely you can see how difficult that is to—uh—believe...”

“Nothing is too difficult for my imagination,” Dusty muttered. He was growing bored with this conversation.

“Are you implying that you’re responsible for all the other weird occurrences? The shark in the ice cream shop? Filling that swimming pool with tequila? That all these phenomena originated in your head?”

Over the years Dusty had gone to great lengths to avoid detection, yet here he was spilling his guts—and to a federal agent! The whole multiple Joan incident had unnerved Dusty. He was getting sloppy. He needed to put an end to this encounter.

“And what about Philadelphia? Did you make all the people go away?”

With a petulant edge in his voice, Dusty whined, “That was...a mistake. One of several I’ve made recently...”

“Can you undo it?” asked Captain Synder. “Can you bring back all the people?”

He could...but they wouldn’t be the same. He wasn’t about to share that with this stranger. Already Dusty had told him too much.

It was time to wrap this up and get out of town.

But—before Dusty could imagine away this nuisance, the growl of an automobile motor cut the evening air.

Together, Dusty and Captain Synder turned to stare wide-eyed at the approach of a black limousine. Its headlights swung to and fro as the car slowly maneuvered its way past the abandoned vehicles cluttering the avenue.

*The city's supposed to be empty, fretted Dusty. Where are all these people coming from?*

Finally: drawing near, the limo came to a stop in the middle of the street. The driver's door opened, and Dusty's father emerged.

## 23.

Everyone was busy with dinner when Dominic D'Salle returned to camp.

He could have cast his spirit to investigate the far-flung psychic disaster, but his intuition warned him that his physical presence was probably going to be needed.

Teleportation required a complex incantation...and certain arcane ingredients—some of which he had in his luggage, suitable substitutions for other chemicals he could find in the spice rack in the camp's mess tent.

Once Dom had assembled the necessary ingredients, he took the time to pen a brief "Called away by business. Sorry." note and left it on his empty cot. No one noticed him duck into the mess and borrow a mixing bowl and few containers of spice. Then he retired to a location away from the camp to insure his departure would not be seen by anyone.

He picked a spot in the lee of one of the as-yet unexcavated moai. In a metal mixing bowl he combined the powders and spices, then added a few drops of his own blood.

The teleportation spell was not just complex, it was dangerous even for adepts.

But Dom felt—no, he *knew*—the circumstances called for drastic measures. Haste was essential. Right now the hole in the psychic ether was centered on America's remote eastern coast, but any minute the anomaly could start spreading. He needed to get there before that happened.

He didn't even know what to expect when he arrived. Something awful had occurred, but the details were still unknown to him—and would remain so until he got there and saw the situation for himself. He hoped his basic protection spells would deflect any of

the phenomenon's lingering effects; he really didn't have the time to upgrade them.

Unfortunately, the preparations for the teleportation spell needed to be conducted in a meticulous fashion, slowly reciting appropriate incantations as he methodically added the ingredients one by one into the bowl. Hurrying through the process could imperil the success of the spell—much less cost him his life. He might fail to go anywhere—or worse: only part of him would end up at his intended destination. Consequently, despite his need for haste, Dom plodded through the laborious ritual.

Sitting cross-legged with his back against the cold basalt of a looming moai, Dom dropped a lighted match into the concoction and murmured the final mantra—and he was gone.



The wizard reached his destination in one piece, but extremely thirsty. He'd expected that. Spatial relocation was a dehydrating process. Climbing to his feet (he'd been sitting when he'd left Rapa Nui, so he'd arrived on his butt), Dom dusted himself off. His mud-stained attire wasn't very suitable for the chilly night. He cast a rudimentary masquerade spell, replacing his dirty shorts and T-shirt with an expensive dark blue suit. The hippy hiding in his subconscious gave him an electric blue tie.

He'd arrived in the parking lot of a Dunkin Donuts. There was no one in sight. He went into the shop and found it was equally empty. Stepping behind the counter, he filled a jumbo cup with coffee and drained it before refilling it for the road. He left a ten dollar bill on the counter on his way out.

He wasn't all that familiar with American cities; it had been decades since he'd last visited the States. He cast a quick location spell and learned he stood in Philadelphia. Specifically the fringes of the city.

From here, he unfurled exotic senses attuned to the psychic ether. But there was no one out there. The entire city was empty—all the people were gone. This was the catastrophic anomaly that had ripped a hole in the psychic atmosphere. Where had the population gone? What had happened to them?

He detected no occult residue in the area, so the disappearance hadn't been a product of malicious magic. The city appeared to be intact, so it hadn't been a bomb. He needn't be anxious about radiation. If the populace had fallen prey to a deadly virus—that was a different matter. His protection spell didn't ward off diseases.

*Too late to worry about that*, Dom told himself. If he got sick, he'd deal with the infection later.

Right now his primary goal was to discover what had happened here. What had happened to the city's people?

Wait—as his extended senses withdrew, the wizard detected a grouping of people...at least they *seemed* to be people. Their life signatures were not normal. They lay deeper inside the city.

He needed transportation. The roadways were littered with abandoned cars; he could take his pick, at least so he thought. But his first two choices were locked, and the next nearest vehicles were twisted together from a collision. All of the cars lining the opposite side of the street were locked. When he finally found an open auto, it turned out to be a limousine parked in front of an all-night diner, the driver must have run in for a cup of java when the anomaly had hit town.

The keys were still in the ignition. Dom climbed in, closed the door, and started the engine. He drove off, headed for the cluster of life signatures.

The avenues deeper into the city were more cluttered with abandoned vehicles. He had to slow down to navigate around these obstacles.

As he drove, Dom sensed several of the life signatures disappear. There one second; the next: just gone without a trace. This was exceptionally abnormal. When a person died, their spirit lingered for a time, the energies inherent in the body (chemical and electrical) took time to dissipate. But these people were blinking out of existence, promptly leaving behind a categorical psychic void.

*It's the anomaly*, he guessed. *It's started up again.*

*I need to reach these survivors before they vanish too!*



By the time Dom's borrowed limo reached the survivors, there were only two left.

He brought the car to a halt and got out to confront the pair. Although he didn't recognize either of them physically, one of the men's life pulse was familiar. Now that Dom was closer, he could discern the pulse's nuances and within seconds he identified it.

*Aaron—my lost golem!*



Against the advice of his peers, Dom had always tried to be an occult innovator. Even his mentor had warned him to adhere to

the ancient texts. Embellishments or shortcuts were sure roads to failure—or worse. But back then, Dom had been full of himself; like every novice he'd thought he knew better than his elders. And many were the times that his innovations had been failures (fortunately only a few were calamitous). His learning curve was shallow in those darker years, but with age came respect for the old ways—the *proven* ways. Yet his wisdom was still tempered by a desire to tinker.

Evidence of the value of experimentation was everywhere. Over the years, mankind's relentless curiosity had harnessed nature's powers and unlocked quantum secrets. As the decades had rolled by and he'd watched humanity master the elements through science, Dom had felt left out. All of his spells had been learned or passed down to him from older adepts. He had never contributed any *new* knowledge to the arcane arts.

The urge to do so drove him to take risks with occult practices. Most of his experiments resulted in bland failures. His few successes were more whimsical than useful. In 1954 he concocted an incantation that would prevent ice cream from melting; alas, the spell maintained the treat's increased molecular cohesion to such a degree that it became inedible.

Fifteen years later, he blundered upon his first viable arcane improvement.

He was living with Gwen at the time in an apartment above a head shop on Haight Street in Berkeley. On the evening in question, they'd dropped acid. After engaging in a carnal tryst unencumbered by gravity, Dom settled back to watch the heavens through the loft's skylight ceiling. Curled up next to him, her hip pressing against his torso, Gwen perused a recent issue of *Science News*. The subscription had belonged to the apartment's previous occupant, but Dom had renewed it in his name. He'd always harbored a keen interest in what conventional technology was up to. Gwen shared his interest. In many ways, they were a perfect couple.

His quiet inspection of the star formations was interrupted by a soft grunt from his lovely companion.

When he made an inquisitive noise, she handed him the thin magazine, folded over so that only a single vertical column showed. He took it and focused his eyes on the type.

He read a summary of an analysis conducted by a laboratory at DOW Chemical. The subject of the study had been dust. Dom had to smile at that; such a trivial thing to devote scientific time and effort. And yet the results were surprising (as far as a layman was concerned). Fundamentally, the article explained, dust consisted of



particles in the atmosphere that came from various sources such as soil, volcanic eruptions and pollution. The study had determined that household dust was somewhat different, though. Dust found in homes, offices, and other human environments contained small amounts of planet pollen, paper and textile fibers, minerals from outdoor soil, and a variety of other materials (whose low percentages rendered them moot in a greater accounting). The main ingredient, however, was human and animal skin cells.

And Dom echoed Gwen's mild grunt.

"How about that, huh?" she cooed.

He handed back the magazine and returned to his stargazing. The LSD had peaked during their lovemaking, but a residual effect was transforming the night sky into a panorama of cosmic pyrotechnics. His consciousness sank back into mesmerized bliss.

To one side, clouds obscured a portion of the heavens. While their movements were too fractional to be discerned by the unaided eye, Dom's trippy vision could pick out the roiling motion of the gaseous shapes. Their dark mass morphed into bestial configurations that fought to encroach on the stellar lightshow. He beheld a herd of buffalo stampede across the sky, followed by a lumbering tractor pulling some scything contraption. The plowed crops fell away, their cast off husks taking on hominid form. Upon landing on nearby cloudbanks, these figures were assimilated into the amorphous mass. At one point, a sole figure resisted immediate assimilation—and for an instant its silhouette reminded him of the golem from an old trilogy of expressionistic silent movies by Paul Wegener. While he had seen all three of these films when they were originally released in the 1910s, only *The Golem: How He Came into the World* survived to modern times.

Dom's mind wandered from there.

Golems were part of Hebrew mysticism, artificial men made of clay and animated by occult measures. They were traditionally employed to right wrongs. Dom had learned the necessary spell ages ago. Nobody used it anymore. If you wanted vengeance, there was more satisfaction these days in siccing a zombie or the taxman on your adversary.

Clay was the designated substance...but that choice had probably been dictated by the limited types of material available to the ancient rabbis who had composed the ritual. Nowadays, there existed a wide variety of alternative substances that would create a mightier avenger—plastics, concrete, metals, plexiglas, even the kind of ceramics they used to protect space capsules during reentry.

A stoned smile crept across Dom's drifting mind.

What about more exotic building materials? Like...dust?

Since dust was mainly dead human skin cells, assembling a golem out of dust might produce a more refined entity. In effect, it would be partially human, comprised of the cells of hundreds of different people whose skin cells had flaked off and drifted around for years. At that point, would the entity be a golem?—or a reanimated composite corpse?

This train of thought intrigued Dom.

He remembered it the next morning after the chemicals had left his bloodstream and his head was naturally lucid.

That afternoon he began preparations for this experiment.

Those preparations took time. Dust was everywhere and collecting it should have posed no difficulty. Quantity was the problematic factor. Gathering enough dust to build a man-sized golem took several weeks, even aided by the crews Dom hired to harvest dust for him. Complicating matters, he didn't want outdoors dust; only *indoor* dust would satisfy his needs. In fact, he took to targeting certain locations where he suspected the quality of the dust might be better. Colleges, research institutions, recording studios. He was particularly excited when one of his crews got the opportunity to clean up a sound studio days after Jimi Hendrix had spent a week performing there. Locked in those skin cells was the DNA of a creative genius—exactly the type of building blocks he wanted for his dust golem.

Initially, he tried to keep the project a secret from Gwen...but that didn't work for very long. They were too close a couple; she quickly sensed the changes in his moods, noticed his sneaky comings and goings. Just over a week into the collection process, she cornered Dom and accused him of cheating on her.

"What?" His startled surprise was wholly sincere.

"You're never home any more, always sneaking around. You're keeping secrets from me—I can tell. Granted, we've never talked about our relationship being exclusive, but we've been together a long time—and if you've taken a mistress, I want to know."

"A mistress? What're you talking about? I'm crazy for you—you know that."

"So—if you're not sneaking off to see another woman—what is it?"

"Umm..."

"Dammit—you're not screwing around with some magical experiment, are you?" Gwen disapproved of his experimentation.

Not because she was a rigid traditionalist, but because she worried he might hurt himself when (not if) things went wrong. “What is it this time?”

Eventually, Dom confessed it all to her. To his surprise, Gwen found the notion intriguing.

“Although I’d have picked a more durable substance than dust, darling. Diamond, perhaps. Or maybe a nice green emerald.”

“And where am I supposed to find a diamond big enough to fashion into a man?” he complained.

“You don’t have to build a full-scale golem, y’know. Making it smaller might even be easier.” He had explained to her the difficulties he was having in collecting adequate dust to fit his needs. “You could use an emerald from a brooch and create a tiny golem. That’d be cute.”

Dom resisted the inclination to scoff at the need for “cute” in his experiment. Instead he reasserted his original premise: “The whole point was to see what a golem made of dead human skin cells would be like.”

She shrugged. “Well...I think an emerald golem would be adorable.”

“Maybe later on...once I’ve perfected the spell.”

An emerald golem would make a delightful Christmas gift for her. He could see Gwen putting it to use in the kitchen, chopping vegetables. Yes, later on...

But right now, it was back to collecting dust. Unfortunately, in order to be able to send out crews to clean various scholastic and research facilities, he needed to start a business and entice locations to use his service. That last part was easy: all it took was an empowered suggestion to get building managers to drop their cleaning contracts with whoever they’d been using and switch to Dust-Free Clean-Up Services. Dom found himself trapped in the office for hours, dealing with paperwork and mundane administrative matters. Gwen offered to help; that freed up some of his time.

In the evenings, he labored over calculations that would determine what subtle changes in the incantations were necessary because he was using dust instead of clay. Factoring in the spiritual potential of the skin cells filled more pages of computations.

Even with the popularity of his cleaning service, it took Dom just over five weeks to accumulate enough dust to build a normal-sized man-figure. He was obsessively scrupulous about what dust he used, favoring materials gathered from sites frequented by individuals of high intelligence and heightened creativity. He wanted his golem to be articulate and talented.

After all the efforts involved in preparation, the actual spell seemed anticlimactic. Once the materials were gathered—the various chemicals and herbs to blend and/or burn over the mound of dust molded into a humanoid form—the process was pretty simple. Say this while sprinkling enchanted powder over the dust mound; say that while mixing chemicals in bowls; say this while lighting the bundles of herbs positioned around the dust man. Gwen wanted to help, but a second person would only have gotten in the way. He allowed her to watch, although only if she stood behind a protective wall of plexiglas. There was always the chance that the spell might backfire. Even Dom took the precaution of wearing a fire-resistant suit while conducting the ceremony.

Everything went smoothly, though. His variations in the invocations didn't start any fires or cause any astral explosions. His tinkered spell did not give birth to a monster—at least not an apparent monster.

In fact, the golem was extremely manlike, with realistic features and even fingernails. Dom was particularly impressed by the creature's hair, whose strands were delicate and golden. Gwen felt the eyelashes were his greatest triumph—"Look at how full and gently curled they are!" All in all, the dust golem seemed to be a complete success.

Later examinations supported this assumption. A medical scrutiny revealed the creature to be wholly organic. According to X-ray scans, there were no traces of inert matter throughout its body. Besides infusing the golem with life, Dom's spell had converted dust into flesh.

Sentient flesh! The subject's intelligence was obvious from its inception.

"We've got to stop thinking of him as 'it'," counseled Gwen.

Dom nodded. "He needs a name."

"How about Aaron?"

Dom smiled. "Fine."

He turned to the golem and told him: "Your name is Aaron."

Lacking language at this point, Aaron gave a slight nod to indicate his acceptance. "Aaron," the golem repeated, testing the sound of the name on his newborn lips.

He picked up words quickly, though, and within half-an-hour was able to communicate his confusion. "You call me Aaron, but—who is Aaron? Who am I? Why can't I remember anything?"

Prior to the ritual, Dom had given no thought to what he could offer the fruit of his experiment in the way of explanations.

Luckily, Gwen had. Being more spiritual than Dom, she had prepared a backstory for the golem in case he turned out to be sentient. Waking to find your mind empty of identity and any history could be traumatic. She wanted to avoid anything like that.

“You were in an accident, dear,” she told him. “You crashed your motorbike. We brought you home to tend your wounds.” As she spoke, Gwen cast a minor illusion spell so that painless contusions appeared across Aaron’s chest and limbs. “Don’t you recognize us, dear? We’re your parents.”

As usual, Gwen saved the day with her clever cover story. Although his amnesia still troubled Aaron, he felt a little better learning he was in the care of his mother and father. They embraced the task of “re-teaching” Aaron about life. Gwen had prepared a list of a few highlights, which she got Dom to memorize; that way both of them could help the lad “remember” these noteworthy moments from his childhood. They devoted all of their time to the lad.

What had started out as an experiment in creating a golem made of dust had turned them into parents reeducating their son to “reenter” society.

Aaron was a fast learner. Between books and walks around the Haight Street neighborhood, his head filled with data that helped flesh out his own psyche. Both Dom and Gwen marveled to watch the lad’s personality emerge and mature.

Producing evidence that documented Aaron D’Salle’s existence was a matter of simple sleight-of-hand for the wizard and his sorceress companion. Since Dom was technically a citizen of Italy, they were able to circumvent a host of American regulations when it came to registering the existence of Aaron D’Salle.

Periodically, Dom conducted psionic scans of the lad while he slept. Dom was looking to see how much—if any—influence the spirits of the skin cell “donors” had contributed to Aaron’s evolving personality. He found none. If any psyches lingered in the basic genetic codes, they were dormant.

Aaron was his own lad.

They called him “a lad,” but he was clearly a young adult. Dom wondered if he would age; Gwen shrugged and replied, “Time will tell.”

Early on, Aaron revealed a creative streak. First with cartoons, then several well-crafted short stories. One even got published (by its own merit; no magic was involved in inducing GQ to accept it).

This development thrilled Dom. During the prep stage, he had done everything he could to primarily collect the discarded skin

cells of people who possessed high intelligence and pronounced creativity. He'd wanted to create an artist—and he had succeeded!

He tried to encourage Aaron in his creative endeavors, but his parental advice fell on rebellious ears and the lad ultimately abandoned writing and drawing. Aaron had reached the “terrible teen” stage of his emotional development. He stayed out late and came home stinking of booze. Although Dom never smacked the kid, sometimes he really wanted to. Aaron the Brat was often abusive to his father, treating him like an outsider because he hadn't married the boy's mother.

Maybe if Gwen had championed Aaron's creativity, the lad might have stuck with it. For he doted on her with an abnormal fervor.

He became a momma's-boy.



Consequently, when Gwen got sick, Aaron's anxiety threatened to overwhelm his mother's dwindling health. It was almost as if the boy's feverish devotion rivaled the cancer to contribute to poor Gwen's suffering.

Aaron further resented his father for being absent through much of Gwen's swift downward spiral. Unbeknownst to the lad, Dom had been fanatically immersed in searching for a spell that could cure her cancer. Failing to find any conventional ritual, he sought new occult means to destroy cancer cells. All of this was conducted in utmost secrecy; his “parents” had never revealed their arcane abilities to their adopted son.

By the time Gwen passed away, Aaron vividly *hated* Dom. He argued (unsuccessfully) to have Dom evicted from her funeral. As soon as Gwen was buried, the lad hit the road. Wracked with grief, Dom failed to notice the boy's disappearance. By the time he did, the trail was cold. His golem son was gone.

Did Dom really want to track him down? The family facade had mutated into a warped momma's-boy-wants-to-kill-dad farce. In all likelihood, if he located Aaron, the lad would rebuke any attempts at reconciliation. For several years now, Gwen had been the bond holding Dom and Aaron together. With her gone, their connection became nonexistent—at best, hostile. In all truth, Dom had nothing to say to the lad.

Soon after, Dominic D'Salle left San Francisco too. Everything reminded him of Gwen; the angst got to be too painful. He had to relocate, to try and start a new life. He left everything behind...including the son who wasn't his son.



Since that desolate time, Dominic hadn't thought of the runaway golem.

And here he was—somehow involved in this catastrophic phenomenon.

Before he actually came face-to-face with Aaron, Dom needed to understand the lad's relationship with the anomaly. He hadn't time to wheedle the facts out of him. Aaron would resist questioning. Depending on the lad's state of mind, interacting with him might trigger a violent outburst. The last time they'd seen each other, the lad had advocated his father's public castration.

(After all these years, the wizard automatically fell into the habit of thinking of Aaron as his "lad.")

So Dom extended his psionic senses to read what he wanted to know. What he learned (from Aaron and his bizarre associate) revealed a psychologically twisted and bloodstained progression that had brought everyone to this point, each unnatural event drawing them in to become tangled in a dire destiny that would have horrified mere men.

Some of what he learned shocked him, for the golem had continued to evolve after running away, and now Aaron wielded an incredibly dangerous power that rivaled Dom's own occult expertise.

It all stemmed back, Dom saw, to Gwen's death. Losing his "mother" had been the catalyst that had plummeted the golem into a psychological trauma of monumental proportions. That vivid angst had unlocked all the psyches of the people whose dead skin cells had comprised the dust that had gone into the lad's physical composition. Suddenly, Aaron's head had been filled with conflicting personalities. Only the lad's incarnate hatred for his "father" had maintained the dominance of his own consciousness in the churning pool of that now-communal mind.

But somewhere in the unexpected miasma, Aaron had gained access to energy levels far beyond normal mortals. In his naivete, he blamed his "overactive imagination," but in truth his subconscious had tuned in to the universe's complexity of wavelengths in such a manner as to be able to affect reality. If the lad "imagined" something, it became real. Conversely, if he wanted something or someone gone, they ceased to exist.

Like Philadelphia's population.

Or—a tiny step backwards—this girl, Joan Brenner, who Aaron had met as Chuck Green. He'd fallen in love with her, and a rogue tangent in one of his dreams had eradicated the girl. Intense

guilt over what he'd done had driven Aaron to the very brink of sanity...perhaps even beyond that border, for there was very little potential for rational consideration to be found in Aaron's present state of mind.

At the same time, Dom viewed the golem's lifespan back to the point when he'd run away from home. A long string of fractured masquerades revealed the lad's psychological decay over the last few years. In the beginning, right after he'd hit the road, things had been relatively normal for the runaway. Gradually, though, the suppressed psyches' accumulative potency had started manifesting the lad's errant thoughts. These incidents threatened to attract attention to him, so Aaron had fled, changing his name and later his appearance in order to start a fresh new life. But the lad's incorrigible imagination would eventually force him to move on again. Dom's psionic scan skimmed over a succession of the lad's sad attempts to fit into society. Again and again, weirdness had ruined his meager aspirations, forcing him to move from town to town, slowly crossing the continental United States.

Dom felt sorry for the lad's difficulties, although they did appear to be self-generated.

Even more disturbing: Aaron had started remembering occasions from the childhood he'd never had! Dom could only assume that aspects of the skin cell donors' unleashed psyches were providing foreign scenarios to fill in the lad's nonexistent adolescent years. And in some of these false recollections, he wielded the same reality altering power long before it had come into being.

The kid was a mess.

His mind was undergoing constant invasion by the skin cell donors as they grafted their own memories into the gaps in his own history. Even though Dom was skimming through these parts, he noticed how Gwen remained steadfast and prominent in the lad's psyche. His "father's" face changed throughout his life, as did other basic elements of home and family and school and juvenile friends—all unbeknownst to him. But no matter what face Dad wore, he remained the most hated person in the lad's life.

More recent memories showed that the things he unconsciously wished into existence were becoming progressively hostile—from the monster that had chased him out of his dream to his unwitting culpability in Joan's uncreation. At first, Dom wasn't sure how real these memories were—some of them seemed too outrageous to be real—but then he found corroboration in Officer



Synder's consciousness. Clearly, the lad's unrest was turning on him.

The only fortunate news was that Aaron really didn't understand the scope of his power. He didn't need to channel his whimsies through any "overactive imagination." If the lad really wanted to, he could directly wish things to happen.

If he ever realized this, it would be bad news for everyone.



While the wizard wasn't really interested in Aaron's mysterious associate, he conducted a cursory scan to find out how the man fit into Aaron's plight. That brief scrutiny startled Dom, for the man was a nexus of abnormalities in his own right—or *their* own right, since he was a composite entity.

Originally, the body had belonged to an assassin, whose own history was gruesome and frightening. One germane fact, however: Johnny Wolfbreath had been a necromancer! Adepts in necromancy were quite rare these days. Dom recoiled from examining any of those memories too closely, they were too ghastly. In fact, they were only present secondhand, not from Johnny's psyche but from Officer Synder's vantage as one of the persons the killer had subjected to necromantic violation. In doing so, Johnny had stolen a copy of Synder's life. After which, Synder's strong will had developed from a set of stored data into a coherent consciousness.

The Fed was not alone in there. A young prostitute by the name of Sindy (Dom gave her pseudonym an appreciative smirk) whom Johnny had murdered had also achieved psychic autonomy inside the necromancer's head.

But here, Sindy's history got strange. For apparently, although it had been Johnny's body that had assaulted and murdered her, the mind in the driver's seat had not been the assassin—but a vampire—or rather the assimilated essence of a vampire that Johnny had slain. The undead creature had mustered more than psychic coherence, it had threatened to commandeer the host's body.

The vampire was gone now, along with Johnny Wolfbreath. Both evil psyches had been forcibly forgotten by Synder and Sindy—the new dominant personalities in charge of the necromancer's body. A deep probe confirmed this information: no psychic impulses belonging to the assassin or the vampire were left anywhere inside the body.

Dom was glad the vampire was no longer involved. They were nasty things, ferocious and hard to kill. Having to cope with one of them was the last thing Dom wanted right now.

Adding even more strangeness to the mix: apparently both Johnny and Synder had been separately tracking Aaron. The events caused by the lad's "overactive imagination" had attracted the attention of the FBI *and* a subversive secret organization. While Special Agent Synder had hunted a person of interest, Johnny's employers had classified Aaron as subhuman and dispatched their hired assassin to kill what they believed to be a mutant. Dom had to laugh. For once, the Environmental Purity League's obsession with genetic purity had proven accurate—Aaron wasn't *human* at all—he was *dust*.

Aaron and Synder/Sindy represented two very twisted outcomes of unfortunate circumstances. If Dom had never created the golem in the first place, none of this chaos would have happened. Johnny would never have been sicced after Mr Black. There would have been no weird incidents to attract federal attention, so Officer Synder would still be alive. Even the prostitute wouldn't be dead, for Johnny had assimilated the vampire while stalking Synder for clues about Mr Black; it was clear in her mind that the vampire was responsible for her murder, not Johnny, who (despite his secret life as an assassin) had always treated her nice. It was all so convoluted.

The thread that bound them together in this current tragedy was: Aaron the runaway golem.

*And like it or not—he's my son*, fretted Dominic. Therein lay an irrefutable irony: throughout his artificial life, Aaron had embraced Gwen as his mother and hated his father, when in truth Dominic D'Salle had been the lad's only real parent, for he was solely responsible for the lad's "birth."

*Which makes me responsible for his actions...*



Well—there was no time for any reunion chitchat. Aaron had to be sedated immediately, before his "imagination" started screwing with reality again. Considering how much the lad loathed his "father," Dom was taking a monstrous risk just showing himself—but it was too late to turn and run. Dom had to face the music.

He muttered an incantation designed to send a person into a deep coma. He was indiscriminate about his aim. Synder/Sindy staggered with dizziness, but did not succumb...perhaps because

their combined consciousness were greater than that belonging to an average person. But Aaron remained standing.

Standing, glaring, bristling with mounting animosity as Dom came closer. In the grips of this manifest frenzy, Aaron's mind was immune to sedation. His volatile hatred blazed like a psychic sun.

Dom wanted to offer, "I can help," but he never got the chance.

## 24.

Urgency had tyrannized Dimitru Bodescu into undergoing an extreme physical transformation. He needed to get to Philadelphia to investigate his suddenly deceased spawn.

So haste was vital. No train or automobile could provide the necessary transportation. The creature would have to provide his own mobilization.

Finding a dark corner in an abandoned alley, Dimitru shed his clothes and began rearranging his physiology. His torso shrank, as did his legs, until all that was left were a pair of puny claws protruding from a pointy diminutive ribcage. Most of his abdominal mass had been converted into tremendous muscles bunching across his back. The shape of his head contracted, sliding back into a more streamlined configuration. His nose became a snout twitching above a suddenly wider mouth filled with gnarly fangs. His eyes flushed with red fluid, then went luminous. His arms underwent the most dramatic metamorphosis: elongating into an impressive wingspan, for that was what they became as spiny ribs dragged forth a leathery membrane from the now-lithe limbs, wings of grandiose proportion.

For a moment, the creature crouched, his huge wings fluttering in the air above him. Then with a mighty dual downward beat, the wings propelled him into the sky. In moments, Dimitru was lost in the night, headed west.



As he neared his destination, the creature became aware of the emptiness of the buildings he flew past. Even the streets were quiet, unoccupied by any people. In fact, when he switched to his vampiric sense that made the energy signatures of life-forms blaze

like torches in darkness—he looked down upon a city uninhabited by human beings. The only life-forms he saw were small: dogs and cats, birds and rodents and insects.

*Where are all the people?* Dimitru pondered.

But he flew on, unconcerned by such mysteries. If anything, this absence of people would only make it easier to locate his target. He was determined to catch the slayer.

Vengeance did not drive Dimitru. Even though the fallen party had been one of his own progeny, the creature's kind had little kinship for their own species. Each one was a potential rival for blood and power. No, instead it was self-preservation that motivated Dimitru. Anything that could kill one vampire was a threat to all creatures of the night. There was wisdom in searching out the slayer now and destroying that person before they could reverse the tables and come hunting him.

A wicked grin distorted his toothy mouth as he contemplated the terror he would inspire as he swooped out of the sky to pounce on the guilty vermin. Basking in that dread would be as zestful as draining the killer's lifeblood.

Dimitru missed the olden days when humans had feared his kind. But then those good ole days had had their drawbacks too. Human beings killed things that scared them. By the time industrialization had supplanted superstition, witch hunters and zealots had slaughtered most of the vampire population. Only the cagiest ones had survived—by radically restricting their feeding habits and going underground (culturally and physically). Ever since then, creatures of the night had been forced to skulk and hide; it was demeaning.

He remembered the last time vampirekind had banded together to reacquire dominance over the human race...it had ended badly. Lured out of hiding by Nazi agents, they'd pretended to work for the Third Reich—all the while maneuvering to usurp control once the Axis had won the war. Those scheming vampires had not expected a coalition of wizards to step in and undermine their plans.

*"Undermine"?* fumed Dimitru. *Hell, exterminate was more like it!*

The ranks of the fanged had severely suffered from the wizard coalition's assault. Arcane spells had destroyed many of the vampiric troops.

*I barely escaped myself,* he recalled.

All of which had depleted the vampire population even more. By the Fifties, they had become an endangered species.

But then, a smaller vampire population meant less competition. For the few (like Dimitru) who had survived the purge, there were thousands—millions!—of humans on which to feed. With less than a hundred vampires left, they no longer needed to savagely defend their own territories, each individual vampire could expand their hunting grounds to a global landscape. The world became an open buffet. Why would a modern vampire want to see the race's olden ranks restored?

But that didn't condone killing one of the few vampires left. Anyone brazen enough to exterminate a vampire needed a dose of their own medicine.

Dimitru was looking forward to a righteous bloodletting.



As he came upon the spot of his spawn's demise, the vampire was pleased to see someone was still there—hopefully one of them was the slayer. Dimitru had made excellent time flying from Manhattan.

A war-cry erupted from Dimitru's crusty lips as he pounced.

In mid-swoop, he became aware of several irregular circumstances. These three people were not normal human beings. Their life signatures were different—drastically so. One man blazed with arcane potency. Another housed more than one life signature. And the last one—why, he wasn't human—or even organic, for that matter...yet he owned a psyche that seethed with unnatural vitality.

And when the three men turned their faces to gawk at the descending creature of the night, Dimitru recognized one of them. His battle yell twisted into horrified disbelief.

"You!"

## 25.

It took a lot to distract Dusty from his boiling hatred for his father—but the sudden descent of a winged creature succeeded.

The thing looked like the loathsome offspring of a mating between man and bat. It was as big as a car. Its wings were enormous as they curled back to propel the creature earthward. Its mouth bristled with an abundance of dagger-like fangs. The gaunt hands twitching at its wingtips bore similarly wicked talons. Its eyes

were a radiant crimson hue. It released a shriek as it descended, that shrill outcry announcing a host of hostile intentions.

At first he doubted what he saw, but his eyes weren't malfunctioning. He was fully awake, so it wasn't part of some nightmare. Then he realized it was just his imagination—his damned imagination. Again it had conjured forth some monster and thrown the creature at him.

*Why, he fumed, is my mind out to destroy me?*

By now, Dusty understood that was a moot question. Everyone harbored self-destructive impulses deep in their id—or so claimed the psychology books he had devoured back in the library.

Ah, the weeks he had spent in the library...they seemed so long ago at this point. So did Joan. With an ache of discomfort, Dusty realized he couldn't remember what her face looked like...her original features or any of the variations he had unconsciously forced upon her during their time together. How could he forget the face of his beloved?

Meanwhile, the creature's ululation sputtered into a single astounded word: "You!" Dusty was certain the beast was identifying him as its prey. Suddenly it contorted in midair, as if struggling to halt its plummet. The thing pointed its wide-eyed stare at Father, but its trajectory brought it crashing down atop Dusty.

As Dusty floundered on the ground, the creature scrambled from him. Moving like a gigantic bat, using the tips of its wings as forward legs, it crawled away to menace Father—who stood defiant in the face of this hellish behemoth.

The monster hadn't come for Dusty. It appeared more interested in his estranged parent. Why? Did this mean it wasn't interested in mauling Dusty? But then the answer came to him: Dusty's imagination had created this beast to punish Father. Dusty had been on the brink of wishing the creature out of existence, but now—understanding it was here to do his bidding—he cheered it on.

"Kill him! Tear him apart! Make him suffer!"

Nearby, the figure harboring the Synder/Sindy consciousnesses were just recovering from a brief bout with sleepiness. Using voices of different pitches (the deeper one presumably the masculine Fed and the squeakier voice belonging to the girl), they sounded as if they were arguing with each other.

"—the hell is that thing?!" growled the deep voice.

"A vampire!" the sweeter voice cried.

"But—vampires aren't real. The guy we dealt with was just a crazy who believed he was a vampire."

"Don't be so naive! Look at it—"

“Whatever it is—it’s a monster! We have to destroy it!”

“It’s come to punish us for destroying the other one!” An edge of panic had seeped into her tone. “We have to get out of here!”

“But—it’s ignoring us—”

Their shared body jerked one way, then the other, as the two vied for control of its limbs. Panic drove Sindy to want to flee, while the more sober Synder was compelled to stay and try to cope with the situation.

“Look—it’s going after the guy who just drove up,” the Synder voice remarked.

But Sindy remained unswayed; she was desperate to evacuate the area. “No—I don’t care—I can’t let it kill me—I won’t die twice—not at the hands of vampires both times—no no no—”

“Who is this guy anyway?” wonder Synder. “The monster acts like it knows him.”

“He’s my father,” Dusty yelled. “And he deserves to die!”

“This is all too weird,” muttered Synder.

## 26.

While the wizard immediately identified the creature as a vampire, it wasn’t until it bellowed “You!” that Dominic realized he had actually met this abomination once upon a time.

Back in the ‘40s, Dom had belonged to a coalition of sorcerers who had pitted their occult expertise against the various arcane forces the Nazis had enlisted in support of the Third Reich. There had been a coven of rogue wizards, youngsters still mired in egocentric perspectives. There’d been a trio of demons, luckily they’d been lesser minions of hell and easily dispatched. But the *vampires* had been the threat that had coaxed the sorcerers to form the coalition in the first place.

For the first time in centuries, a large group of vampires had established a truce among themselves. The intrinsic hostility between undead individuals had been suspended, uniting the monsters into a perilously dangerous cooperative horde. As if this hadn’t been enough of threat to all mankind, the vampire confederacy had allied itself with the Nazis!

The coalition had promptly targeted this alliance. Seemingly unrelated attacks on lone vampires had enabled the coalition to pinpoint the monsters’ hidden citadel at the foot of the Swiss Alps. A

concentrated raid was planned. The wizards were merciless, for these creatures represented the antithesis of decency. Evil like that simply could not be allowed to support the Third Reich.

For the most part, the coalition's raid had been a success.

Hundreds of vampires and their enslaved minions had gathered for a celebration feast. The chamber itself was opulently grand. Rich slabs of pink marble had been installed to provide decorative walls to a vast subterranean cavern. Columns of complimentary gray marble swept up to branch into a complex network of interlocking arches which appeared more organic than Euclidean. Elaborate chandeliers sporting diamonds, rubies and other colorful gems hung overhead, but the light they cast came from electric bulbs, not flames. Long gray marble platforms served as dining tables for the assembled monsters. More than fifty drugged peasants were ensconced along the tables, nests of tubes stemming from their arteries to provide all of the attendees with fresh succulents. A screen had been erected filling one entire wall; projected on it was a new film by Lena Wurtmueller.

The bits that Dom saw during the assault turned his stomach. The film documented the long and glorious heritage of vampires. The situations portrayed as magnificent achievements consisted of wanton massacres; German voice-overs explained that vampires routinely victimized only the Jews and coloreds. An individual of Teutonic purity had nothing to fear from "unsere nächtlichen Freunde." A number of scientific discoveries were attributed to vampires, discrediting the unclean villains (like Einstein, Curie, and Newton) who had stolen credit for these advancements in modern technologies. Portions of the propaganda came dangerously close to implying that vampires were cuddly creatures of the night. The culmination of this centuries spanning ancestry was finally actualized when all of vampire-kind had rallied behind the Third Reich. The absurd lies made Dom sick. (Ultimately, the coalition had put a curse on the film, resulting in the celluloid decay of all copies.)

The film provided a sardonic backdrop for the near-extinction of vampire-kind.

Individually staking and beheading hundreds of frenzied vampires was impractical, so the coalition had devised a more comprehensive method of exterminating the creatures en masse. Capitalizing on a Biblical quote, the sorcerers had cast a spell that "let there be light" in the cavern. Suddenly the vampire banquet was exposed to the vivid and deadly rays of the sun, handily teleported down from the high noon going on half a world away. The sudden intrusion of daylight was doubly unexpected since the Alps outside



lay in night's darkness. Within moments, most of the monsters had melted away like runny candles or burst into flames as if their meat were wrapped around incendiary devices.

Some, though, were fleet enough to escape the banquet hall with only minor burns. These few were chased down by the wizards-on-site, each of them armed with crossbows.

Dom pursued one vampire through narrow tunnels leading away from the abattoir banquet. Upon two occasions during the chase, Dom caught up with the runaway monster and engaged it in combat. Their clashes were too close for the crossbow to be useful—but Dom did manage to stab the creature once with an arrow. While the bolt deeply pierced the monster's chest, it narrowly missed its vile heart. At one point, the two grappled hand-to-hand and their grimacing faces were only inches apart. The vampire snarled curses in Romanian, while Dom's were uttered in ancient Greek. Unfortunately, even wounded, the vampire could muster strength far superior to Dom's mortal might. When the creature flung him aside, Dom's landing dislocated his shoulder. The pain threatened to make him pass out, but he remained conscious—and staggered after the fleeing vampire.

The tunnels eventually brought them to the surface. Now weaponless, Dom stumbled from the exit. He saw how the steel hatch had been quite bluntly torn from its durable hinges and cast aside. The vampire had done that with its bare hands; Dom was lucky to have made it through their scuffle alive.

The exit opened onto a spread of flat tarmac that served as a landing field for helicopters ferrying in SS officers who periodically visited the vampire's underground citadel. This evening, the tarmac was empty of any aerial machines—but not unoccupied. Dom could see a figure out there, it had to be the fleeing vampire. Its shape shifted, muscles and bones reorganizing themselves. A pair of membranous wings dropped out of its armpits. These pinions unfolded their vast expanses and poised for an instant, momentarily frozen-but-trembling above the vampire's figure like the sails of some seafaring vessel. The creature turned to glare back at Dom as he hobbled after it. It shook a now-taloned fist at the wizard and barked in a guttural voice, "Te blestem!" Then, with a single colossal beat, the wings propelled the monster from the tarmac. The vampire disappeared into the night.

He'd been too embarrassed to admit to the other wizards that he'd let a vampire escape. After all—it was just one little vampire; what real harm could it do?

And now here it was again—that same vampire—descending from the night sky—as if no decades had intervened, and the creature had just taken off and was swooping back to harry its pursuer.

What were the odds?

Valuable time couldn't be wasted calculating useless statistics. If Dom didn't act fast, this monster would be on him, ripping the flesh from his ancient bones. There was no chance Dom could dodge or outrun the beast, and he knew its physical strength was too much to handle unarmed. For that was what he was: unarmed. He'd foolishly ventured into the anomaly zone without weaponry. Now it looked as if he might pay a high price for that impulsive behavior.

Nearby, Aaron cheered the beast on, "Kill him! Tear him apart! Make him suffer!"

Dom decided to act reckless to disguise a brazen strategy. Taking a step toward the advancing creature, he punched it squarely in its tender snout. As the vampire recoiled, howling with shock more than pain, Dom danced back. His eyes darted left and right, searching the street for anything he could use against the monster. Abandoned cars, a squat blue mailbox tagged with some gang's cryptic symbol, a fruit stand outside a deserted deli, potted ferns flanking the entrance of an empty ethnic restaurant, incidental debris like discarded bottles, flattened plastic containers, crumpled fast-food wrappers—none of which could serve as a weapon against his undead adversary.

His brash audacity had gained Dom a few precious seconds, but he was still screwed.

The vampire recovered quickly, although its nose probably still stung. It snarled, spit venomous fluids, cursed the wizard, and pounced anew. Its wings spread in an enveloping canopy, the vampire drove Dom to the ground. It lashed at him, but he squirmed enough that its claws scraped naked concrete instead of tearing his Armani suit. Contorted by its frenzied bloodlust, the vampire's face loomed close, jaws snapping and eyes flashing. Tucking his legs into his chest, Dom delivered a tremendous two-footed kick directly into the beast's compact chest. Had it been a normal man, the blow would've cracked its ribcage and sent it flying...but the kick barely vexed this creature.

Rolling on his side, Dom explored an alternate tactic. Again he drew in his legs until his knees pressed against his chin. He took a deep breath and drove both feet out to connect with the creature's wings where they curled to encapsulate its prey. His expensive

shoes pierced the membranous wing fabric with a hideous ripping sound. The vampire's squeal of agony immediately followed. Dom thrashed his legs, widening the tear all the way up to the arm that supported the wing. The creature's screams grew louder—and seasoned now by anger—fury—mania.

Scuttling on his elbows and knees, Dom escaped the vampire's clutches—only to be thrown to the ground anew as the creature wheeled and threw itself on its prey with wild abandon. Dom felt the thing's teeth gnash at the back of his jacket.

"I will kill you quick, wizard, but expect your posthumous torment to last for days!"

*Time to use some magic*, he told himself. Until now, Dom had been too disoriented to marshal his thoughts to concoct a spell that might ward off the vampire's vicious assault. And his state of mind was getting no better as the battle continued. Fighting off hysteria, Dom chose a simple repulsion incantation

The spell sent the creature tumbling. It landed on its back, its wings fluttering about like windswept curtains. Confusion tinged its squeals.

Dom used the brief respite to craft a more concise spell: something aggressive and less defensive. He devised an invocation that would turn flesh to stone—*that* should stop the monster. He was in mid-recitation when someone attacked him from behind. Fists pummeled Dom. The battery interrupted his concentration. His mystic syllables became jumbled as Aaron beat his father to the ground.

All along, the golem had been yelling insults and invectives and denunciations, urging the vampire to flense the meat from Dom's bones. Consequently, Dom had not noticed the rant grow louder as the lad had stepped forward to join the fray. Now, though, Aaron's accusations spat directly into his cringing face. "—responsible! You could have saved her—but you let her die! Traitor! You murdered her because she loved *me* best of all! You—"

While Dominic had never really understood Aaron's paternal hate, he'd always accepted it as a mild emotional aberration, one the lad would outgrow. He was aghast at how Aaron had cultivated that hatred into a passion he was forced to express as murderous inclinations. Much less: *now*; now was the worst possible time for the lad to throw a tantrum.

Clambering erect, the vampire relaunched itself at its prey.

"Sorry, lad," Dom muttered as he jabbed his elbow at Aaron's head. Connecting with his temple, the blow sufficed to interrupt Aaron's rage. He staggered back from the wizard.

Dom jumped aside as the vampire crashed by. One of the creature's talons snagged Dom's slacks and ripped a gash that lacerated his thigh. As the vampire passed, its wings took on a coarse stiffness.

Left half-recited, the spell's effects were only partial. Calcified into solid granite, the vampire's wings pinned its still organic body on the ground. It trashed and twisted and hissed and growled, but its own pinions immobilized the monster.

Dom got the chance to enjoy the inhalation part of a relieved sigh before Aaron resumed his physical assault. The wizard's breath rasped out his mouth as he collapsed under the lad's fevered onslaught.

There were things Dom wanted to say to Aaron, long overdue explanations that might deflate the lad's fury—but he could only get out curt snippets between the grunts of pain as each blow and kick struck the wizard. “—wait—oof—don't—she wasn't—ow—stop—unk—your real mother—“ The lad ignored these incoherent utterances.

And then suddenly—Aaron was no longer beating on his father. It took a moment for this to penetrate Dom's battered awareness. Realizing the assault has stopped—but still wary—the wizard uncurled from his fetal position and peered around him.

Synder/Sindy had finally resolved their internal dispute. Apparently Synder had won, for he had stepped up and interfered with Aaron's violence. Urging him to “Calm down,” the Fed had Aaron in a necklock.

To the side, the vampire continued to thrash and spit, but the imposing mass of its stone wings held it quite firmly in place. It ranted away in Romanian, but only the wizard knew that language and his attention was focused elsewhere.

His head still throbbed, but Dom needed to caution Synder not to agitate Aaron—lest the lad—

Too late.

Invisible forces took hold of Synder's arms and pried them from around Aaron's neck. Synder's borrowed eyes went wide with shock. His arms continued to bend away even after Aaron had been freed, further and further, out and around until both elbows began to bend the wrong way. With a pair of grisly *crunches*, his elbows snapped. A dry gasp escaped Synder as he staggered back.

The golem had imagined himself out of harm's way, inflicting unfair injuries in the process. Synder had merely tried to calm him down—and had been rewarded with two broken arms. The punishment hardly seemed to fit the crime. Aaron's fury had fiercely

contaminated his entire personality (and all of the psyches belonging to the skin cell donors), so that a murderous rage was all he felt. Every thought he had was drenched in antipathy. His hatred had completely unbalanced him. And with all the power wielded by his collective psyches, the manner in which he expressed his anger was tangible and deadly.

With great regret, Dom realized only one solution would end this crisis. For more than his own neck was at risk here. If Aaron continued to distort reality with his “overactive imagination,” the entire world would soon be endangered.

A certain karmic balance was at play in this. Dom had infused the golem with life, it was only fitting that he should be the one to extinguish that spark.

But before the wizard could rally himself to cast a spell that would put Aaron to sleep (for Dom could not bring himself to destroy the lad while he was still conscious)—Dom found he couldn’t move his limbs. Half risen from the asphalt, he was frozen in mid-crouch.

Aaron had acted first.

“You’ve connived everyone to torment me, haven’t you?” Coming close, Aaron leaned over to spit on his immobilized father. “Bribery, promises of power, outright threats—you’ll do anything to guarantee my suffering, won’t you? Wasn’t killing Mom enough?” He delivered a strong kick to the frozen wizard, toppling him so he now lay on his side with arms and legs extended in grotesque fashion like an overturned turtle. “I’ll bet you even had a hand in murdering Joan, you callous bastard!”

Aaron continued to kick Dom’s splayed figure, catching him along his ribs and finally right in the side of the head.

Dom’s vision blurred as phosphenes filled his eyes, but that impairment only lasted a few moments before he felt his consciousness deteriorating. This wasn’t unconsciousness creeping upon him, this was something else—something completely different, new, *deadly*. It wasn’t even the spiraling into darkness that heralded death. Dom could feel his psyche eroding away, fading...

## 27.

For long minutes Dusty stood there staring down at the pavement where his father had last been. The bastard was gone,

imagined away; all that was left now were Dusty's ugly memories of his hated parent.

*You were never there for me—or for Mom, he fumed. Especially when she needed you most! You should've saved her, but instead you refused to even come visit her in the hospital! I was the only one with Mom when she died...and dammit—her last word was your name—not mine! I'm glad you're gone! I wish you could've suffered more...*

He'd expected to feel some elation upon destroying his father, but all Dusty felt was exhausted. He'd hated the man for so long, and now that he was gone...if anything, Dusty felt an emptiness in his gut...an emptiness in his life. Without his father, who was he going to despise?

This day had torn Dusty's life asunder. Within the space of several hours, he had exterminated the person he hated most of all—and the person he'd loved above all else.

*It isn't fair, Dusty lamented. Why can't my life have some happiness in it? Why am I cursed with this uncontrollable imagination?*

And stuck with the job of cleaning up the messes left behind by it.

Strolling over, Dusty surveyed the flailing monster. Its stone wings still pinned it in place.

"Well," Dusty scowled at the thing, "you weren't very useful, were you?" Like everything else his imagination had conjured into existence for Dusty, this latest monstrosity was nothing but a disappointment. (Unaware of the creature's real nature, Dusty believed it was a creation of his subconscious mind.)

"—curse you—you and your mother—" hissed the trapped bat-thing, finally speaking in English. "—curse everyone you hold dear—"

A scowl darkened Dusty's face. "What was that about my mother?"

"—your mother mated with—"

Outrage spurred Dusty to concentrate on imagining the mouthy nuisance away. But—it had slurred his mother; its punishment needed to be more extravagant.

Yes, he thought. *I won't just uncreate you—I'll abolish you and all the rest of your kind—all the things spawned by my damned imagination—all of them will never have existed!*

## 28.

A ripple passes through the moment as history rewrites itself. Consider the following equation:

If Dusty erased Dimitru and the rest of vampirekind, there would have been no vampire confederation to enter into an alliance with the Nazis back in 1943. Dominic D'Salle would never have joined forces with other wizards to fight the Third Reich...and Dom would never have met the Lady Gwendolyn.

Because Dom wasn't there to rescue Gwen, she perished at the hands of a coven who used her as a sacrifice to raise a demon that promptly slaughtered the thirteen novices. It fed on their and her bodies.

Without Gwen in his life, Dom never ended up in California for the Summer of Love. Consequently, Dom never saw the *Science News* article about dust and so never had the idea of building a golem out of dead skin cells instead of clay.

Aaron never existed.

Since Aaron never existed, he never ran away from home to become Mr Black, who in turn never came to the attention of the Environmental Purity League's Dark Department, and Johnny Wolfbreath was never assigned to exterminate him.

By the same token, without Aaron no weird occurrences happened, and there was no Mr Fox to come to the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Deprived of his obsession with tracking Mr Fox, Special Agent Frederick Synder lost his workaholic disposition, and his partner's marriage suffered no estrangement.

Johnny Wolfbreath never killed Synder.

Without an assimilated vampire to commandeer the necromancer's body one afternoon, Sindy the courtesan was never murdered in Johnny's bed. She lived to graduate college and go on to patent numerous pharmaceutical miracles.

No Aaron, no Mr Fox, no Mr Black, no Mr White, no Mr Brown, and so there would be no Chuck Green to meet and woo Joan Brenner. No one would ever take a romantic fancy to her, and the lonely girl would grow into a spinster with too many cats.

Because no Chuck Green existed to come live in Philadelphia and meet, woo and ultimately destroy Joan Brenner, Dusty (who didn't exist because he was Aaron/Chuck) experienced no traumatic breakdown. The city's population did not vanish. Dusty

wasn't there to uncreate a father he'd never had. Nor was he there to wipe all trace of vampires from history.

Although producing several positive consequences, the equation ends in a paradox. By eradicating all vampires, Dusty changes enough of the past so that he is never born—so he doesn't exist to uncreate the vampires in the first place. It's a nasty loop that goes nowhere and gets progressively uglier with each rotation.

Isn't it a good thing it never happened?

## 29.

“—curse you—you and your mother—” hissed the trapped bat-thing. “—curse everyone you hold dear—”

A scowl darkened Dusty's face. “What was that about my mother?”

“—your mother mated with—”

Dusty furrowed his brow to concentrate on punishing the bat-thing for slandering his beloved departed mother—but he never got the chance to finish his thought.

Synder/Sindy hit Mr Fox from behind.

From the onset, this stranger had disturbed Frederick Synder. He'd had always suspected Mr Fox had some integral connection with the strange incidents, but he'd never really believed Fox had *caused* them. Now he knew better. Fox had drawn upon his power (whatever it was) to pry loose Synder's chokehold, breaking Johnny's arms in the process. And God only knew what he'd done to that guy who drove up in the limo—the one he kept calling his “father”—he'd just faded away like a ghost. Now Fox looked as if he was about to exert his barbarous power yet again—to destroy this vampire. While neither Synder nor Sindy had any love for creatures of the night, they were more concerned about what Fox might do when he turned his deadly attention on them again. Once the vampire was destroyed, Synder/Sindy would be the only victims left standing...but for how long?

It had taken the full determination of both Synder and Sindy to grit through the awful pain of two broken elbows and get moving.

Propelled by a running start, they'd thrown Johnny's broken body at the man. Their injuries prevented them from beating him with their fists, or even grabbing something with which to bludgeon him—but they still had the rest of Johnny's body. It could easily



serve as a battering ram. Once knocked over, Mr Fox could be kicked into unconsciousness.

But there was no need for further violence.

The momentum and bulk of Johnny's juggernaut body was enough to do more than knock Mr Fox aside. It sent him reeling, stumbling with pinwheeling arms. When he finally fell, his head hit the concrete curb with a gruesomely wet *thunk*.

"That was a bad sound," announced Sindy. "Did we kill him?"

Still half-distracted with ignoring their painful elbows, Synder crouched down to examine the man, as best as could be managed without the ability to lay hands on him. "He's still breathing," Synder confided to his head-mate.

*Might've been better if he wasn't*, she replied. This time, though, Sindy confined her remarks to a psychic exchange inside the head she shared with the federal agent.

*Be nice*, Synder chastised her. *He didn't try to kill us.*

*But he would have—if we'd given him the chance.*

*We don't know that for certain...* But privately, Synder was inclined to agree with her. The rest of the man's actions had revealed a violent side that Synder had never associated with Mr Fox. It was like Fox hated everybody.

"What do we do now?" Sindy asked aloud.

That was the prize question right now. Stranded in an empty city with an unconscious crazy and a vampire that appeared to be trapped by its own inexplicably rigid wings. What indeed were they going to do?

*Look!*

"What?" Synder gasped. At first he swung Johnny's head to and fro, but then he realized that whatever Sindy had seen had been seen with the same eyes he used. He turned their head back the way it had been...but still saw nothing. "I don't see anything," he told her.

*Whatever it is—it's not solid*, she responded. *Over there, where that limo driver was when he disappeared...*

Synder peered, squinted, cocked his head, leaned forward a tad—but still saw nothing. No wait—there was something there...a haze...that was becoming a smudge. "What the hell is that?" It seemed to be man-shaped.

*The limo driver faded away*, commented Sindy. *Maybe he's fading back.*

"You know how absurd that sounds, right?"

*After everything we've seen, nothing sounds absurd anymore.*

She had a point.

Moving Johnny's damaged body closer to the indistinct apparition, Synder circled it to examine the anomaly from all sides. His scrutiny revealed nothing more than he could already see: a human shaped smudge that faded in and out, not fast enough to call a flutter, but not slow enough to display any detail. Was the man returning from oblivion? Or was this simply some kind of lingering afterimage?

*...halfway back, came a foreign thought, but I need help...the rest of the way...*

Both Synder and Sindy made Johnny's body jerk with surprise, but in different ways. Synder's reflex brought their arms up, but their forearms dangled uselessly—and painfully—at the elbows. Sindy's response involved ducking their head and jutting their chin forward. Together, these moves made Johnny look like a cartoon dancing in panic.

"What the—" Synder blurted out.

But Sindy seemed to understand what was going on. "What can we do?"

*...remember me...*

"We just met you," Synder complained. "How are we supposed to remember you?"

Again, Sindy took the lead. She conjured a mental image of the limousine driver and shared it with the Fed. He'd been a handsome man—that Sindy had immediately noticed. Consequently, other details had stuck in her memory: his wavy hair, his classic chin, his articulated hands, his expensive suit—too expensive, now that she thought about it, for a chauffeur.

Joining in, Synder reinforced her mental picture of the man.

Gradually the man-shaped smudge took on substance. The flickering reduced to an elongated pulse. The man's image became progressively more defined with each oscillation. He sprawled on the pavement, half-risen on stiffened outstretched arms. He turned his head to smile at them.

Once he was solid, he slowly rose to stand erect. Thanks," he sighed.

"You're welcome," Sindy responded.

"What the hell happened to you?" Synder wanted to know.

"Aaron wished me away," muttered the driver. Suddenly, he adopted a defensive pose. He glanced about with fretful worry. "Where is he?"

"You don't need to worry about him." It was too painful to point with his arms, so Synder tilted his head in the direction of the unconscious figure. "He's out like a light."

The driver visibly relaxed once he saw Mr Fox's condition. Even so, he went over to check the lad. While crouched over him, he murmured a few glottal syllables accompanied by a flourish with one hand, fingers extended in strange fashion. Standing, his gaze remained fixed on the supine figure. In a low voice he announced, "Okay. And now he'll stay that way until I figure out what to do with him."

When he turned to face his rescuer, the driver's expression changed to one of compassion. "That must really hurt," he remarked, gesturing at their bloodily dangling forearms. "Let me fix them."

"What—" Synder started to object, but Sindy quelled his protest.

*Hush, she admonished Synder. Don't you recognize a powerful wizard when you see one?*

The driver stepped over and cupped their left injured elbow in the palm of his hand. With his free hand he grasped the dangling forearm and lifted it aloft until it was in its proper position. "I'm not sure, but I expect this might hurt a bit," he advised Synder/Sindy. Then he muttered some arcane syllables...and the ghosts felt a warmth that rose to a caustic burning sensation. Synder reflexively made to pull the arm from the driver's clutches, but the girl held fast. *Ah-ah*, she cautioned.

A moment later the heat subsided and the driver released their arm. The broken joints had been restored, the torn flesh healed; there wasn't even a scar. As Synder/Sindy gaped at this miracle, the man repeated the process with their other arm. Within moments, both injuries were gone as if they'd never happened.

"Better?" the driver asked them.

"Who the hell *are* you?" whispered Synder with Johnny's mouth.

A sadness dragged at the driver's face as he threw a sidelong glance at Mr Fox's sleeping form on the ground. "He thought I was his father...but I was just a misguided wizard...tampering with spells beyond my understanding..."

## 30.

These two had endured an awful lot of unpleasant circumstances, none of them deserved. They'd even lost their lives as indirect consequences of Aaron's very existence. The ordeals they'd suffered entitled them to some kind of explanation.

"I am known as Dominic D'Salle," he told them. "All of this—" He bowed his head and waved a hand at their surroundings. "—is my fault."

As best he could, Dom proceeded to explain things to the composite being.

When he was done, they gawked at him through Johnny's widened eyes. For a protracted period, no one spoke. When finally Synder tried to introduce himself, the wizard smiled and told him, "I know who you are...both of you in there. And I know how you got there."

"But—how?" blurted Synder.

*Because he's a sorcerer*, Sindy chided him in the privacy of their shared head. *But then*, she realized, *there isn't any privacy in here—or anywhere. If this man is really a sorcerer, he can do all sorts of fantastic things—like healing our broken arms. Why should it surprise us that he can also read minds?*

Synder understood her train of thought.

The sorcerer nodded, indicating that he agreed.

Initially, Dom was impressed with how these two spirits had accepted everything he'd told them. But then, they'd already encountered necromancers and vampires, not to mention their own posthumous survival inside the assassin's mind. They were no strangers to strangeness.

"So," grunted Synder, "*that's* really a vampire?"

They all peered in the creature's direction. Having eavesdropped on the wizard's long explanation, Dimitru Bodescu glared from behind the stone contours of his immobilized wing.

Dom nodded. "For now."

"And always, you meddler!" spat back Dimitru. "I am everlasting!"

"They're arrogant curs, huh?" muttered Sindy.

"He talks as if you two know each other," Synder observed.

"We clashed," sighed Dom. "Long ago and far away...back when his kind tried to help the Nazis."

"What—back in World War II?" gasped Synder. "The Nazis had vampires working for them?"

"How *old* are you, Mr D'Salle?" Sindy asked in a whisper.

"We never 'worked for' the Nazis," snarled the anchored vampire. "If you hadn't interfered, we could have nurtured the Third Reich into actually achieving their Thousand-Year Reign!"

"He says that as if it's a good thing," Sindy exclaimed in real shock.

Dom shrugged. "A totalitarian world would've been perfect for vampires, especially if they were the ones living in the high castle."

"It can still happen!" crowed Dimitru with sudden zest. "Our numbers may be small these days, but mankind is weak! We will triumph and the entire planet will be our feeding grounds!"

"Well," Dom materialized a kit bag. From it he drew a fire axe whose handle was longer than the depth of the valise. "If that's going to happen, you won't be around to enjoy it." Hefting the axe high, he stepped forward and decapitated the creature with a solid swing of the glistening blade. The head rolled forth, its hateful grimace glaring up at the wizard. He kicked it back to lie with the rest of the body. While Dom rooted around in the kit bag for additional devices, the vampire's body started to smolder.

Synder/Sindy recoiled from the rising heat.

Dom finally found what he'd been looking for. He held up a bottle of rubbing alcohol and squeezed it, sending a jet of liquid to fuel the imminent pyre. He liberally doused the creature's slumped form, although the fire apparently needed no accelerant. An internal occult conflagration burst forth to consume the monster.

Stepping back, Dom shrugged as he remarked, "Just to be on the safe side."

"You can never be too careful with vampires," Sindy remarked with a touch of experience.

The composite person turned away before the blaze petered out, while the wizard continued staring at the embers even after they had dimmed.

Finally, Synder broke the silence: "So—does everything return to normal now?"

"I'm afraid not," confessed Dom, his gaze still locked on the sputtering grease-stain on the ground.

"But—with Mr Fox—I mean, what did you call him?—Aaron? With Aaron out cold, shouldn't the things his mind affected revert?"

"It doesn't work that way. The changes he made are permanent." The wizard wasn't sure if he could adequately explain things to them. In truth, Dom only comprehended portions of the circumstances, and he'd learned those fragments from scanning

Aaron's mind. And how reliable was that information? The lad hadn't really understood his own power.

"What about Philadelphia's people?" Sindy asked. "Can't you bring them back?"

Dom only shook his head. He could not meet their eyes, so remained staring at the vampire's cinders.

"That's terrible!"

It was time to steer their inquiries away from matters the wizard didn't fully understand.

"You two are lucky to have made it through all this," Dom remarked. He peered at them over his shoulder. "What's the future hold for you?"

"Uhh..." Synder's deeper voice grunted.

"Oh my—we *did* survive, didn't we?" chirped Sindy's lighter tone.

With hands held out as if to ward off some imposing wall, Dom informed them: "Before you ask, let me assure you—you're dead, both of you. There's nothing I can do to bring you back."

"We're not even ghosts," Sindy lamented. "We're just duplicates of our original selves. We're stuck here in Johnny's head, aren't we?"

"I'm afraid so," admitted Dom. "At least I can confirm that he's completely gone from your head, as is the vampire you mentioned being in there. Whatever you did, it thoroughly erased all trace of their personalities."

"I guess we can look forward to an interesting life from here on," Synder reflected aloud. "That is—" He squinted at the wizard. "—if you plan to let us go..."

Dom had to laugh. "Why would I restrain you? Or harm you in any way. Frankly, I'd be interested in staying in touch. Your 'condition' is quite unique: copied essences living in a foreign body. You cannot resume your original lives, and somehow I doubt you'll want to continue on as Johnny Wolfbreath—after all, he was a hired assassin. I can help set you up with a new identity. I have the necessary connections."

"What about *him*?"

"Who?" asked Dom,

"Aaron." Synder gestured toward the slumbering figure. "Your son. What're you going to do with him?"

After a pause, Dom glanced over at Aaron where the lad snored by the side of the road. "I...don't know..." He really had no idea.



The dilemma troubled the wizard.

When Aaron woke, his rage would be reborn, and he would use his power to lash out. His obvious target would be his hated father. There was no point trying to explain things to him; his loathing for Dom would swat aside all expositions. The risk was too great to allow him to wake—the personal risk and the global risk, for Dom feared that after slaughtering his creator, Aaron would embark on a crusade of mayhem the likes of which mankind could not imagine. But Aaron *could*. The first time things didn't go his way, Aaron's "overactive imagination" was liable to erase all life from the Earth in an unconscious fit of pique.

Leaving him asleep was a hazardous option too. As long as the lad slept, he could wake.

Dead, the golem would no longer present a threat to anyone. But Dom could not bring himself to disassemble his son. Aaron might not have been of his flesh, but Dom and Gwen had raised him as if he were their own offspring. The wizard could not look at Aaron without remembering his lost sorceress. Destroying the lad was unthinkable.

Advisable, perhaps, but still unthinkable.

The safest compromise Dom could devise was to leave Aaron sleeping. He'd craft an ironclad spell to insure the lad remained comatose. Being made of dust, he would need no food, no water, no air. He could be sealed away where no one would ever find him.

Dom tried to convince himself that this was humane.

## 31.

Joan woke from a bad dream.

It'd had something to do with Chuck's estranged father, but the details were evaporating even as her mind scrambled to collect them. In the end, all she retained were impressions of empty streets filled with people staring at her. *Which makes no sense*, now that she thought about it. *If the streets are empty, where are all those gawking people?*

If she tried to go back to sleep, the dream would start up again and force her back onto those haunted empty streets. Wanting no part of that, she heaved a mighty sigh and sat up in bed.

Beside her, Chuck mumbled in his sleep, but did not wake. He pulled the displaced blanket snug around his thin shoulders, and soon was back in slumber's warm embrace.

From the gloom visible through the bedroom window, dawn had yet to nibble at the eastern horizon. There were several hours left before either of them were due at the library.

Employing caution, Joan disengaged herself from bed so as not to rouse him again. She stood for a moment beside the bed, gazing down at herself in the dim illumine of distant street lamps. She'd gone to bed wearing panties under one of Chuck's T-shirts. Their lovemaking had left her naked. She pouted in the dark.

*Why would anybody want to stare at me in the first place?*

She'd always thought she was too skinny...but Chuck had never made any complaints. He was even satisfied with her tiny breasts. During foreplay, he would spend forever just kissing and caressing her diminutive bosom.

She loved him so much. And he loved her. They were a perfect couple. Even Chuck's Mom thought Joan was a catch. She was coming by that evening, Joan reminded herself, and they were all going out to dinner—if the weather held.

Which was a silly thing to think—for the weather was *always* fair when Chuck wanted it to be.

It was chilly in the apartment; Chuck preferred to sleep with the window open. Joan pulled on the Pretty Reckless T-shirt she had discarded during their playful wrestling. Wandering from the bedroom, she passed through the darkened living room of what used to be her apartment but was now *their* apartment and found herself in the kitchen.

It was too early to start preparing breakfast, dawn being only a few hours away. Besides, for all her efforts, Joan couldn't cook worth a damn; Chuck was the household chef. She almost poured herself a cup of coffee from yesterday's leftovers, but then decided to splurge and perc a fresh pot of java.

After a few minutes, she got her Calvin & Hobbs mug and filled it with hot coffee. She added a hefty sprinkle of cinnamon, then settled down at the counter that separated the kitchen nook from the apartment's living room.

For a while Joan sat there, sipping coffee and trying to find something to think about. She grabbed a magazine from the ragtag pile on the counter, but put it back after briefly leafing through it. It



was one of the issues of *Psychology Today* that Chuck had brought home from the library; it held nothing of interest to her. Oddly, she couldn't think of anything that did interest her. Except Chuck, that was. She dimly remembered being into jazz music once upon a time, but lately her tastes had shifted to classic rock tunes favored by Chuck. She used to enjoy bicycling, but not so much these days. Now she preferred to stay at home on weekends, curled up in bed with her honey.

This mental lethargy often came upon Joan, especially when she was the first to rise in the morning. But as soon as Chuck got up, her attention centered on him and her mind came alive with new ways to love him.

Sometimes she felt like a supporting character in someone else's dream.

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