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SUPERVILLAINZ

ALICIA E. GORANSON

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Suspect Thoughts Press is a terrible infant hell-bent to publish challenging, provocative, stimulating, and dangerous books by contemporary authors and poets exploring social, political, queer, spiritual, and sexual themes.

**This book is dedicated to the next author who
writes fun, believable, transfolk into popular lit.
Get cracking.**

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Prologue—December 2000, Friday Night

Tonight, Devon Manetta decided he would not get angry. Two months ago at the club, one of his friends had rolled her eyes at him and said, “You are such a girl,” for no reason he knew of. He had snapped and hit her in the jaw. That had shut her up. He had heard that line every day from cashiers glancing at him and every time he had to whip out his ID. When her curled lip and his shaking hand had reminded him what gossip would flow from this, he had pleaded with her for forgiveness. He had not known he had it in him. He had run home afterward and beaten his pillows before sobbing into them. She had avoided him since then and, thankfully, was not here at the Chanukah party this evening.

The punk music and laughter from the living room softened, as Devon stuck his head in the refrigerator of the tiny kitchen. The house was filled with three stories of college students, and was easy enough to hide in since nobody knew half the people there anyway. He snaked his hand into the back, searching for the six-pack of Labatt Blue he had brought with him. When he reached into the cardboard holder, his fingers plunged into four empty slots, and he had only drunk two, three at most, himself. Beer didn’t simply disappear at his own apartment. He touched the metal top of a nearby Sam Adams and considered passing on the frustration to someone else. Chances were, the owner was right behind him, so he grabbed one of his own and shut the door. His breasts ached under their bindings from the bending, so he popped the top and took a swig.

The hostess Samantha had her leg on the table behind him, showing off her new pleather bell-bottoms to the crowd of dykes by the back door. “Sam!” Devon said. “Is there someplace else we can keep beer?” A girl grabbed Sam and began whispering in her ear, so she did not respond to him. He filed a mental note to write his initials on every bottle in big black letters. They couldn’t be saying anything worse about him than they had already.

Another group of excited girls slipped in the back door. The cold wind itched his buzzed scalp and rolled down the collar of his sweatshirt. The girls headed to the living room three abreast. One of them put her hand on his back. “Excuse me, can we get by?”

He started to say, “There’s room,” but then stopped before he had to explain to her the logistics of why. He pressed himself against the refrigerator while they passed and ascended the stairs. The stoners’ room was on the top floor, but he needed to stay clean past his next doctor’s appointment. He clenched his fist and pressed it against the wall to loosen it.

He returned to the living room, when Samantha shot by him and

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cranked down the music. When the girls started to protest, she said, "Guys! I'm serious. Amber said they just spotted one of the supers! You know Rose, the woman who bags groceries down at Shaw's? She got attacked by some of the guys who live in her building. Someone told them she always comes in late on payday. They had her pinned down outside her building, and a super jumped down and knocked them around. Tied them up and the cops got them. It's all over the radio."

The clique by the front door started talking to each other and then broke out their coats to go investigate. The unopened bottles they left behind were snatched away immediately.

Devon found an alcove just large enough for one person and pulled a neon inflatable chair into it for himself. He listened to the account once Samantha had found the station, but it was not anything he did not already know. The reporter's description of the postmodern gargoyles matched the few blurry, nighttime pictures of the superheroes which every newspaper in the country had run for months. They were flying this time, or at least bounding like great frogs off the ground. They never stayed long enough for interviews, or even to see if the perpetrator they had subdued was arrested, and their appearances often were called *drive-bys*. No one was clear if there were two or five of them, and only Boston was infested so far. To Devon, they sounded like a bad frat prank, so he sat back and waited for his own reputation to heal.

He shook as Samantha touched his leg. She was crouching in front of him, and he had missed her completely. "I'm really sorry for bumping you," she said. "Are you enjoying the party?" He shrugged. A willowy, Scandinavian girl with shoulder-length dyed-purple hair stood behind her, trying to catch his eye but not thrilled to be doing so. Her sweatshirt had an image of a naked Santa licking the boots of an elven dominatrix. She was some transchick, so he regarded her as fairly harmless.

"Bit here was just saying that you looked like Divine on a bad day," she said and giggled.

Devon's face fell, and the hazy space behind Samantha sharpened. "What the hell?" he said and squeezed his armrest. Samantha turned ashen. Bit flushed, and she ran up the stairs.

Samantha rose and wavered as she tried to chase Bit and soothe Devon at once. "Oh, wow, I didn't mean that," she said, putting her hand over her heart, "I thought you knew each other..."

He pulled himself to his feet and held his lips over gritted teeth. He pushed his way through the kitchen cliques to the back door. He passed a girl with a Labatt Blue label in her hands. He yanked open the door and stomped over the sagging, weather-beaten porch before things could get any worse.

Thought you knew each other.

He huddled in a corner of the snow-covered driveway. He thought

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of when he came out to his mother; how she had stared at him and asked if he was serious. She had mentioned that she knew a transman, a biology professor who had visited her university recently, and asked if Devon knew him.

How about an "I love you?"

He crouched on his boots and lit a cigarette. The smoke burned inside his chest as he inhaled. His fingers grew numb and, after the first cigarette was finished, he cupped his hands under his armpits.

The back door squeaked. Devon did not turn to see who Samantha had sent out to placate him. "Hey," a nervous female voice said, and he glanced at the transchick, wrapped in a thick hiking coat.

He stared at the white ground. "Fuck off."

She stood stiff with her hands in her pockets. "I wanted you to know that, um, I didn't mean anything by it."

The wind slipped between them and he watched the white air rise over his face. He stood and crushed the glowing ember in his hands.

"Sometimes, I can't control what comes out," Bit said. "Sam's taking it pretty hard, too."

Devon pulled another cigarette out of his pocket and handed it to her. "You want one?"

"I don't smoke," she said.

He grabbed her by the coat and swung her against the fence behind them. Bit yelped and tried to push him away, but he took her wrists and pressed them against her stomach. With his free hand, he jammed the cigarette into her mouth. She held it there. He whipped out his Zippo and lit the tip, the orange light illuminating her red lips wrapped around the filter.

He hissed at her. "Smoke."

She worked one of her arms free and grasped the end. She sucked in a breath through the tunnel of tobacco and fiberglass, and pulled the acrid tar into her throat. She coughed, but her eyes never left his. She took another drag, holding it inside, and then purged it with a soft cough. The lit end burned into ash as he held her. He dropped her hand and stepped back.

"This really tastes like shit," she said. "But if it'll keep me here, can I have another?"

Devon squatted down on his boots again, and gestured for her to join him. "This isn't like soda," he said. "You need to take shorter breaths."

She knelt by him. The smoke was relaxing her, as if her body knew what to do with it. She shook her head and said, "All us freaks know each other, huh?"

Devon nodded. "Or we end up that way, I guess."

They stayed outside until the party dissolved. They talked about

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how their bodies and minds betrayed them every day. She had amazing things to say, like their bodies were strange husks in odd shapes that had to be mastered like playing a cello. Their minds were raging oceans filled with clanging vessels, which had to be docked one at a time. He split his pack with her and forgot that he was supposed to be inside, schmoozing to prove that nothing was wrong with him. By the time he left with her, it was too late.

That was the thing about Bit, he would think often. She would run away, but she would always come back.

Chapter 1—July 2001, Friday Night

Bit thought herself the greatest fool on the planet. She had spent all day dying her hair red, bringing out her eyes and selecting her best “Bitch Goddess” T-shirt to accentuate her breasts, but her date hadn’t even shown up to the women’s sex party. Bit had arrived fashionably late, but in time to catch the sociable moments of the evening before the guests broke away with the same girls with which they had arrived. The high rise apartment had the yellow walls and shag rug out of a Ron Jeremy porn film and the girls claimed every horizontal space, leaving Bit out on the balcony.

The sickly-sweet fumes of the laundromat next door wafted up on the summer humidity, and she ran her fingers over the divots in the chipped railing. The glass door and the air conditioner were not enough to drown the cries of the girls inside, whose bodies contracted around the fingers inside them. She considered jumping but it wouldn’t get her laid any quicker.

Club Icarus still was open, and Devon would be there, even if he and Bit knew each other too well to screw anymore. Her roommate Markie might be up for a few rounds of cards if she hadn’t picked up a date of her own. They could curse Sandy the Absent together and since it was past ten, Devon’s names for Sandy would be more colorful than Bit’s own.

She slid the door open and stepped softly onto the path that the bodies had left to the kitchen. A goth girl ran her black nails down the chest of a plump boi who drove his strap-on into her. A geekette with thick frames and luscious lips slipped her skinny hand into the wetness of a girl covered in faerie tattoos. Bit walked very quickly across the floor.

She stopped by the kitchen to pour herself a glass of soda for the road. A knock rattled the door. The party’s hostess left her half-naked biker babe pressed against the wall and tiptoed by Bit to peek out. Satisfied, she undid the latch and let in Sandy, who was followed by a scrawny girl with a long neck. The girl’s cheeks were too wide and her shoulders were too broad. Sandy had herself a replacement prettier than Bit.

Sandy whispered the hostess a long apology for starting late and being unable to find a parking spot. Bit waited to be noticed. Sandy lit up when she spotted Bit, and gave her a hug as tight as her own corset. “I’m glad you made it,” Sandy said. “Who are you with?”

Bit shook her head. “She didn’t show. I was just leaving.”

Sandy pouted in sympathy and reached back to grab her girl’s wrist.

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Bit stepped around them and put her hand in the doorway as the hostess was closing it.

"Sorry about that," the hostess said, "I hope you come back again." It was a very small world, and Bit didn't doubt that she would. Bit hurried down the stairs until she had hit the pavement. She had a piece of paper in her back pocket with Sandy's address and phone number. She pulled it out as soon as she passed a trash can. She glanced at the words, "Mall Street, Allston," as they fell into the barrel. The rhyme stuck in her head and she kept it there all the way to the bus stop.

Devon would have killed for a good jazz bar, but no one he liked went to those sorts of places, so he ended up at the converted garage called Icarus. He leaned on the club's table and, over the dance music, tried to catch the gossip and nacho bowl from the gang of bois around him. A game of pool clattered in the corner of the smoky club, but bois were waiting for the pros to finish showing off their shots so they could join.

Devon kept himself relaxed in his boots, black jeans, and leather vest, but the bois were feisty and cute; if he weren't their age, he'd feel like an old pervert. He had chosen the vest for a tawdry elegance, like a bouncer, to hide his flab. His hair was uneven in the back and regrew faster every other square inch. He wiped his pudgy nose and wished his chin fuzz would turn into a decent goatee sometime this year.

The big boi next to him, Galeno, tapped him on the shoulder with the ferocity of a woodpecker. Devon turned to her and pulled the Bono Fly sunglasses from her face. "We're inside," he said. "What is it?"

"Check out the honey in the white T," Galeno said, and gestured to a blond dyke in ear-length hair and blue low-risers revealing the ubiquitous Celtic knot tattoo on the small of her back. The honey took the only stool left at the bar across from them. The other bois poked each other and nodded in approval.

"Oh, her," one of them said with a wide grin. "I've seen her shopping at the White Hen across from my place. She's all right."

Devon elbowed Galeno. "Looks like she's alone. Why don't you go get her?"

Galeno wagged her finger at the girl. "Sure, right after you."

Devon snapped his fingers and pushed his chair from the table. "Okay."

Galeno's eyes bugged, and she began drumming the table in anticipation. Devon ignored her and tossed his head back as if he had hair while he approached the honey. She had pink nails and scuffed engineer boots. She was not looking his way, so he swung a left into the men's room to check up on his face, hair, and clothes. He brushed off the nacho crumbs. He washed his hands. He smiled a couple times for practice. He considered all the things he could do if she said yes. Asking

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a girl to dance was not as difficult as dealing with people at the nonprofit screaming at him for press releases due next week.

Devon came out and surged right to the bar. He slipped to the honey's right and called the bartender for the same as she was drinking. She was reading over a flyer, advertising tonight's dance. It read, "Female superheroes admitted free. Proof of superhuman abilities required. Abilities involving consuming alcohol are ineligible."

Devon leaned on the four inches of countertop available to him and winked at her. "Hey."

The honey sized him up and jerked back. "What?" she said over the thumping bass of the stereo.

He raised his voice to a shout. "Hey, I'm Devon. I like the knot tat."

"Thanks, so do I. Hi, I'm Alyssa." She gave him a quick smile that flushed her cheeks a little. She thrust the flyer at him, "They wouldn't let me in for free."

Devon scanned it over and returned it. "Huh?"

"I said, they wouldn't let me in for free," she said. She wobbled on the bar stool but caught herself before she fell over.

Devon kept himself from reaching to help her. "That really sucks. So, what's your power?"

She giggled and leaned into his ear. "I got into Harvard. I'm a junior, and I haven't killed anybody yet."

The bartender handed Devon his beer and took his money. Alyssa giggled at something only she could see, so he stepped back toward the bois.

The honey brushed her bangs from her face and waved him to her. "So, why're you in here?" she said.

Devon raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"This is a dyke bar. Do you turn into a girl at midnight or something?"

Devon bowed his head to her and spun around. "Yeah. Nice meeting you." Galeno was the only boi left at his table when he returned. She patted the chair beside her. She picked up a bottle cap and hurled it at the game of pool the bois had started, in spite of the pros nearby. "Andy worked up the nerve to take a spare table, so these are free and clear," Galeno said as she handed him the abandoned nacho dish. Devon joined her, while she glanced at the honey and took a sip of the beer he had left behind. "No luck, huh?" she said.

Devon shook his head and took a corn chip. He looked up at the door, and fiddled in his pocket for subway tokens. He almost had a heart attack when someone tapped the top of his head. Bit leapt on him and gave him a hug with a playful grin and one raised eyebrow. "Hey, you," he said and returned her embrace. She grumbled and stroked his shoulders back. "Grab a chair," he said, and pulled one out for her.

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Bit flopped down and sighed. "Guess what, big shock. Sandy came to the party with someone else."

He snatched his old beer from Galeno and handed it to Bit. "No shit. Tell me all about it."

Bit smirked and waved the bottle away. "You already got me smoking. I don't need any more bad habits."

He glowered at her and took her wrist gently, holding up her arm to show her her own bitten-down fingernails. "Uh-huh," he said. "Don't worry. I saw Markie go home by herself, too. I don't suppose it's been a good night for anybody."

"Last freakin' call," the bartender shouted as the DJ cut the music at one in the morning. The staff began to wipe down the tables in full view of the patrons.

"I guess it's time," Devon said, and heaved himself to his feet, "Bit, walk with me?" They followed Galeno to the door and waved her goodbye. The buses were not running at that hour, and the closest T stop was blocks away. Kids from other clubs spilled out into the street like soda from a tipped-over can. Bit guided Devon through the sea of sports jerseys, sideways baseball caps, and sneakers too white to be living in the city. As soon as they hit a side street which led to the Red Line, they darted down it to get away.

The road ahead was silent to their relief. A different fence guarded every house: rusted leg-high wire with white paint flaking off or wooden, painted with grass-roots slogans. The trail of beer which hung in the air melted away. Devon stumbled occasionally, and Bit barely caught him every time.

Devon took her shoulder and collapsed under a streetlight where the sidewalk had buckled. "Can we stop here? My boots are being toescrews again." Bit let him fall and collapsed near him, allowing the blood to rush back into her heels, as he loosened his bootstraps. A rancid whiff from the trash can across from them made her nose crinkle, but a passing car dispersed it a little. "You have to have a cigarette in there," she said.

He patted his empty vest pocket and shook his head. "You're too late."

The light over their heads went out. Bit stood up as silently as she could and scanned the street as her eyes adjusted. She reached down for him as he laced his boots. "Let's go." He nodded and hustled down the street with her, clomping his heels on the gritty pavement.

The lamps ahead of them showed the sidewalk underneath was clear, so they did not expect a tall white man with long stringy hair shuffling in from the side street to block their path. He kept his hands behind his back as if taking a night stroll. He was covered in bulky

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sweats, heavier than his frame seemed. Bit and Devon slowed their pace and tried to move around him but he put his arm out in their path.

"Wallets." He lifted something heavy enough to slow his hand from his pocket.

Bit swung her head around for a direction to bolt but Devon kept still. He fingered his billfold and the sharp edge of his license that stuck out for easy access on bar nights. The age listed was legal but the gender had raised suspicions before. He wiggled the leather free and offered it as close to the man as he could without seeming too forward.

The man swiped it with his empty hand and nodded to Bit. She breathed slowly and closed her teeth around her tongue. She trembled the same as when she watched AIDS documentaries of people's bodies falling apart. She could scream, but it would sound too low for pity from sleeping neighbors. She gave the man her few bills and her license, then pulled herself away from his sweaty palm. He put them with Devon's money and looked up for a moment, waiting for something. When it did not come, he pointed what he held in his hand at her crotch.

"Empty them," he said. "Your pants."

Bit slid her pockets inside out to show she only had a few T tokens and a set of keys. Devon shifted his balance to one leg in case she did something stupid. The man fluttered his fingers. She dropped them into his fist.

The scratch of gravel crunched underfoot down the road ahead of them. A hint of light glinted on the black metallic shape that stood on two legs and came toward them.

The man did not seem to have heard it. He twirled Bit's keys around one finger and snapped at Devon. "Yours, too."

The silhouette behind him was too perfect to be human. It walked silently, like a dancer with faultless balance.

Devon wrapped his keys tight in his fist and threw them at the figure. Bit almost hit him. The man leaned over toward Devon and jerked his thumb behind him. "That was stupid," he said. "Go get them."

The street light above them sputtered on.

Devon did not move. He watched the figure in its armor covered in a dull finish, shaped like an Emmy with tight leather gloves and an Expressionistic hawk's head, beak shut. It was taller than Bit.

Finally, the man turned to see it.

"*Motherfucker,*" the Hawk said, gnawing in a low electric voice. Without stopping, it struck the man on his cheek. The man gripped his face and cried out while spitting on the Hawk's chest. He dropped his gun and Bit's keys on the pavement.

Devon shouted at Bit, "Run!" and took off past the Hawk for his own set. Bit snatched up her own, and heard another thud over her. The

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man lost his balance and collapsed on top of her, crashing her into the road. She crawled out from under his quivering bulk, and shook off the trickle running down her right temple. She touched the opening in her skin and the raw nerves brought her back. She picked herself up as a metal leg smashed into the man's gut.

"How do you like that?" the Hawk said, and flipped the man on his back with the next impact. Bit held her hands to her chest and ran ahead.

Devon saw his own keys in the light, and after he swiped them up, saw Bit scurrying back down the road to the club. She was unsteady in her heels and fell to the sidewalk. He caught up with her and helped her up.

He tried to keep her still to check her wound but she batted his hand away. *"I'm okay,"* she said and pointed at the fallen man and his assailant. *"It's going to kill him."*

Devon shook his head. *"Not our problem."* The Hawk was hung motionless over the man, as if stopped in mid-swing. Devon rubbed his eyes, and the Hawk sprang to life again. His stomach bubbled. Maybe time had slowed.

Bit shook herself away from him, *"We have to call the cops. Come on!"* She hurried to the nearest door, and banged on it. *"Fire!"* she screamed, and her voice cracked. *"Police!"*

Devon scanned the sidewalks for a payphone and saw a group of high school boys heading his way from the clubs. They wore hip-hop T-shirts and their hair was cut on the level. They stared at him like he was a junkie as he hustled over to them.

Devon panted. *"Do any of you guys have a cell phone?"*

A couple of them nodded. *"What's up with you?"* one of them said, staring him down.

Devon pointed to Bit, leaned against a fence. *"My friend's hurt. Can you call 911?"*

"No problem, man," another boy said. He pulled his phone off his belt and dialed zero.

The Hawk let out a digital roar that shook the air.

"Holy shit!" the boy took the phone from his ear. *"Is that a...no way!"* He took off toward the fight, and all the boys but one followed him.

"Just hang on," the remaining one said to Devon. *"I'll call for you after I make a few."* He snapped open his phone and chased after his friends, shouting, *"Man, you got to get down here. You won't believe what we're got."* The boys stood in a circle around the beating and watched spellbound.

Bit's breathing was erratic so Devon sprinted over to her. She gripped his shoulder. *"Let's get out of here. We can't stay."*

Devon took her elbow and helped her to the ground. *"You're not*

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going anywhere," he said. "If you pass out, I can't carry you. Without a shopping cart, at least." He put her own hand on her wound to keep the pressure on. He took off his vest, reached under his shirt, and unwrapped his breast binding. He gritted his teeth as it came loose, and fought through the blood rush like his chest was asleep. He rolled it around her crown until it became a lopsided turban with a dark patch on the long side.

Bit cried out with every pass over the gash but she grew quieter as her head turned numb. She tried to stand but Devon took her arm to prevent her. "I can walk," she said in a mutter.

"Sure you can," he said. He watched her eyes for a glint of stability to return.

The club-goers trickled from every direction into the intersection. They completed the circle around the Hawk as it continued to strike the whimpering man. The shortest, cutest girls worked their way to the inside of the ring. House lights flicked on and the residents shambled out in robes and night shirts. When Bit had finally calmed down, over a hundred people stood cheering in silent awe. They whooped as the Hawk gave them his middle finger and performed touchdown dances. They imitated its howls and it tried to direct them with simple "follow the leader" games. No ambulances arrived.

When it grew tired, the Hawk stepped away from the near-dead man, but excited fans in every direction blocked its path. Those it approached chanted and waved their fists in the air. A few people started to push it back into the circle. It waved its arms as if it had surrendered but more hands reached out to urge it on. It grabbed one of the boys egging it back and tossed him aside. A mass of arms swarmed over it, hoping for a touch. It crouched down and leapt twenty feet into the air. Its clawed feet caught the edge of the rooftop, which crumbled under the weight, sending it back into the sidewalk below. The mob descended, grasping at every inch of its body for a souvenir. The Hawk flailed, sending out taser-like electric shocks from its arms as the crowd yanked on its limbs and head, working chunks of armor to reveal strips of white flesh beneath.

Soon, its power failed and the mob continued consuming its body.

Devon and Bit were ready to make a break when they heard a gunshot. The crowd took off in every direction and a mass of panicked spectators poured toward them. Sirens grew louder and police cars swooped in on both sides of the street. They pressed themselves against the fence to keep from being caught in the rush.

They were not the only ones. Two skinny boys stopped in the center of the mass and struggled over a bundle one of them held. It fell to the ground as they grappled with each other. Bit rushed away from Devon

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and fought through the swarm to them. When they were not looking, she swept up the bundle and joined the flow of people back to the club's street.

Devon stomped the pavement and called her name, but she did not return. He faced the fence and buttoned his vest, then threw himself into the mass as well. It dissipated in front of the Icarus but there was no sign of Bit. He slammed his boot into a wall and decided to go home. He hoped she would do the same.

The clubbers held their panic long enough to slip over the train's turnstiles without paying, and Bit followed their lead. The subway arrived before the police did, so Bit claimed a seat and cradled the bundle in her arms. It was wrapped in a worn Fugazi T-shirt from one of the boys, and Bit felt the pointed tips of the plastic ears inside.

It smelled vile. Pieces of the wearer's skull rattled inside. The base was sharp, as if cracked by the gunshot. Some of the clubbers stared at her and her prize, but she glared back. She could keep people away.

Bit transferred to the bus and made it back to her apartment. It lay two floors over a Thai restaurant neither Markie nor she could afford to eat in. The staircase wore her out by the time she reached the top. Inside its bare plastered walls and scuffed wood floor, she dumped the Hawk's head in the bathtub and phoned Devon. His answering machine picked up.

"Hi," she said, and collapsed in a kitchen chair. "Wow. I made it back okay. Oh my God, you'll never believe what I got here. Tell you what; I'll meet you at the ER tomorrow. I should probably go. Hope you're okay, too. Bye."

She stripped and unwrapped Devon's bandage. It was soiled beyond saving and she tossed it in the garbage. Her arms had bruises and her legs were scraped, but nothing was broken or sprained. She showered and took the black broken head with her. The bone fragments scattered over the floor, but as she bent to scoop them up, she became woozy. She left them and tossed the head out of the shower while she recovered.

When she was done with herself, she wrapped the Hawk's head in fresh newspaper and stuck it in the freezer, covering it with boxes of frozen peas and ravioli. She returned to the bathroom and swiped up the rest of the skull fragments from the tub and tossed them in the trash. Markie was always on her case about keeping the bathroom clean, but tonight, she had to sleep.

Chapter 2—Saturday Morning

Markie opened her eyes to sunlight and printouts of her favorite Japanese porn on the walls, smothering the ratty yellow wallpaper beneath. For a few minutes, she had some pleasant daydreams after she smacked her alarm off. She had no lover beside her to further distract her, or to complain about being hit instead of the alarm, so Markie gathered her consciousness quicker than usual and sat upright. She did not have as much time to catch the bus as on a weekday. A minute's sleep was worth an hour's rest, or so her mother had said, but she would have to catch up in the office lavatory later that morning.

She stuck her feet into her Cookie Monster slippers and cruised into the kitchen on autopilot to start the coffee pot. It was Saturday, so she chose an extra rich blend. She would awaken the barest minimum of brain cells to process personnel applications for jobs that the company was not planning to fill anyway. She would abuse her T1 access to the fullest extent possible. Maybe fifteen webcams at once. Maybe Kim had a webcam.

She thanked goodness for Kim, the cute little flirt from Tae Kwon Do class. She would find out tonight if she really was a screamer. Feedback was nice.

As the pot boiled, she stepped into the shower and yelped as a small sharp stone cut her foot. The stone was as white as the shower floor and hard to spot. She kicked around to find it, and sent it down the drain by accident.

A rank musk drifted into her nose, and she checked the shampoo bottle to ensure that nothing had found its way inside and died. It was still 99% pure white gunk inside. She turned off the valves and threw aside the curtains, and noticed Bit's T-shirt and jeans stuffed into the tiny bathroom wastebasket. She pulled them out grimaced at their stains, and dropped them back in.

Markie slipped on her own T-shirt and hurried to Bit's room. Bit's radio was on low even though she had no reason to be up so early on a weekend. The room was very neat as usual. Only a rug and a mass of computer cables littered the floor. Bit lay snoring on her side, arms wrapped around a pillow. There was a large scab on her head, and a few scrapes on her cheek. A peppy girl on the radio sang, "Hey Markie, you're so fine! You're so fine, you blow my mind! Hey Markie!"

Mickey. The song was "Hey Mickey." Markie needed that cup of coffee soon. She shook Bit awake with care. "Hmm, head shots," Bit mumbled and opened her eyes.

Markie ran her finger around the scab. "Are you okay? What happened to you?"

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Bit winced and slid her own hand up to paw Markie away. "Got mugged, but 's okay," she said, "Got rescued by one of the supers, before the crowd made it go pop. Am I making sense?"

Markie shook her head. "Uh uh. But you're all right?"

Bit kept her eyes closed but gave Markie a thumbs-up. She shifted her legs to a more comfortable position. "Yeah," she said, "I'm going to meet Devon later. I need sleep now."

Markie shrugged. "Okay," she said. "You better call me at work if you need anything. Seriously. No martyrdom. Oh, Kim's coming over tonight."

"Sure," Bit flopped away from her and the sunlight from the hall. "Probably won't be here anyway." She threw the covers over her head.

The coffee pot hissed, and Markie hurried off to empty it. She retrieved a fresh garbage bag from the kitchen and dumped Bit's ruined clothes inside. More of the white rocks fell into the bag, as well. She picked up a couple, examined their wavy texture, but could not identify them. She sealed the bag and washed her hands several times.

She checked the freezer for the cold Pop Tart she always ate on hot mornings, and frowned when she located the box in the wrong corner. A large, football-sized object wrapped in newspapers sat where her Pop Tarts should have been. It was wedged tight, so she let it go.

She dressed, slipping on her silver rune necklace with the ratty ribbon. She gathered the trash bag, pastry, and cup, and ran outside to search for an accessible dumpster. The one next to the local Dunkin' Donuts two blocks down was unlocked so she threw it in there.

The screech of her bus slowing down caught her attention, and she dashed up the street to catch it. No one was at her stop, so the bus steered back to its original route. She tossed her coffee and Pop Tart onto the street and jogged alongside the accelerating bus. She banged on the sides and shouted, "Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

The bus slowly pulled to a stop, and the door opened for her.

"Morning, Markie," the bus driver said, with a wink in her eye. "Looks like you lost your coffee."

"Yeah," she said, panting while she emptied a pile of coins into the little glass pyramid. "The shit I'll do for a girl."

Bit kept her eyes closed as long as she could, but her shades could not hold the sun back all morning. She trudged to the bathroom, hoping Markie had left her enough hot water, and saw the empty wastebasket. The skull fragments were gone and would not find their way to the baseball field down the street which had plenty of woods behind it for an unmarked grave.

She scraped together all the identification she had left; her health plan, credit cards, and a photo ID from her last job six months ago. It

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wasn't enough. The hospital would want insurance paperwork, and she did not have her license. Without it, the ER staff might call her "Mr. Bitters" by accident. They did not use first names, even though retail clerks and telemarketers did. She considered bringing a "Trans 101" book in case she might have to become the Wise Teacher to the ER staff. Any stress or contradictions in her story would mark her a whiny, cross-dressing bitch. It was horribly stressful to be a goddess.

She glanced at her bank statement. The money she had squirreled away as a Perl and JavaScripter during the boom years was disappearing fast. None of the job fairs she had attended were delivering their goods. The local supermarket even said that she was overqualified for any open positions. She had reached the point where she could come home at three in the afternoon and automatically know that there would not be anything good on television until four.

Bit checked her email before leaving, in case Devon had written. Her newsgroups were busting with opinions on the Hawk's death, but Devon had sent her nothing. She ordered another license from the mass.gov website, which informed her she would receive it in the next seven days. She left her computer and stuffed the Hawk's head into her backpack. She shivered at the icy newspapers wrapped around it. Remnants of dreams flitted through her mind. Had the Hawk really had wings? No. Had it come to her in her bedroom, throwing her bureau against the wall? No. Had it done the Macarena? Actually, yes.

The Hawk had moved once.

She locked the apartment and walked down to the convenience store to buy a *Globe*. She settled down at the bus stop and unfolded it in her lap. The headline read, "Vigilante Shot, Stripped." The front page had a pixilated shot, taken by someone from the crowd with a cell phone camera, of the Hawk's body on the ground. Little red squares surrounded the dark spot, which appeared to be its neck. White fleshy dots formed an arm and a leg exposed from the rest of its black body. Shapes that might be people moving at light speed whizzed away in the background. She wondered how much the head would fetch on the Internet. Probably jail time.

"The Hawk-headed member of the unknown vigilante group was found dead last night at the intersection of..."

Bit skipped down the page, and found a section on the mugger.

"...the victim, whose identity has not been disclosed, was taken to the Boston University Hospital, then transferred to an undisclosed facility, according to hospital records. The hospital spokesperson stated that the man's injuries were life-

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threatening and required treatment that the hospital could not provide. The police report states the man was found unarmed, though

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Bit flipped ahead, as the bus pulled up. There were very few passengers, so she found a seat by the emergency exit, and continued to read.

"The police have not ruled out the possibility of his involvement in a felony prior to his encounter with the vigilante."

Bit read it again to confirm that it did say "possibility." She chuckled. Devon and his anal public relations editing would get a kick out of it.

She threw her head against the seat. She should have called him before she left. Scanning the rest of the article, she jumped when she read:

"...officers have confirmed that the body of the vigilante has been returned to the family for burial."

Her scab began to throb again. Perhaps it was not such a good idea to sleep after a minor concussion.

The side of her neck was burning. In the seat across from her, a stout man in a white button-down shirt and tan slacks was staring at her. His stubble was skewed like a cat petted in the wrong direction. His little eyes were wide, and the sides of his mouth quivered as she turned to him.

"Damn sons of bitches, right?" he said. Bit lowered her eyebrows in confusion. The man tapped his head at the same spot as her bandage. "The ones who did that."

Bit turned back to her paper, but after a few seconds, he continued. "Rest of you's okay, right? They didn't try nothing else on a girl's pretty as you."

She put her paper down. "No," she said. "Thanks for asking, but I need some time for myself, okay?"

The man waved his hand and looked away. "Sure, sure," he said.

She spread her paper open and tore through the rest. The obituaries were of little help. None of the dead were young enough to go prancing around in a mechanical suit. Nor had any of them died yesterday. She would have to wait a few days for the paper to print their names. Nothing else in the paper jumped out at her.

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Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed him still staring, and turned to glare.

The man slid his thigh on the seat as he turned to face her. "Just worried about you," he said, "I know what you are."

Bit's hair bristled.

"I mean, I think it's great, all the things that you've done for yourself," he said with a fatherly smile. "You're so brave to be yourself and all that and then have some punks mess you."

Bit had seen that fascinated expression before, on the faces of toy collectors evaluating desirable goods. If the bus had been going to Harvard Square, there were half a dozen shops where she could round up a posse of fantasy geeks to scare the crap out of this guy. Pagan and polytheistic folks of all genders who knew the old tales that made peasants shiver at the edge of deep forests, and many of them could bench-press over 300.

"It's okay. I visit a lot of websites with you ladies on them," he said, scooting across his seat to be closer to her.

She touched her cheekbones and had the urge to wrap her head in a scarf. She scowled at him. "That's great. Go have fun with your ladies, my stop is coming up."

The man's eyes lit up, as if his brain had restructured her words to be some tacit approval. "Oh, you need help or anything? I know you can probably handle yourself but you could use the help. Hate to see your beauty hurt anymore."

Bit rolled her eyes. Less than a dozen people were on the bus, and none looked chivalrous. "Okay. What is it that you want to do?"

"Can I at least take you out to breakfast?"

She hoisted up her backpack. "Fine, let's get off at the next stop." The man thanked her profusely. The bus stopped, and he followed her out. When they were a few yards from the bus, she turned to him. "Oh crap! I left my paper on the bus!"

He gestured to a stand down the street. "I can buy you another one," he said.

"You don't understand. I had a letter in it. Wait here!" She hustled back onto the bus and deposited another dollar in the slot. "Drive," she whispered to the bus driver. He closed the doors and sped off before anyone else could get on.

Bit sat back with her newspaper and leaned against the window. The bus rattled her head every time it hit a crack in the road. Her legs shook slowly, on their own.

It was very hard to be a goddess.

As he wandered into the ER, Devon kept telling himself that Bit had been running all her life. She had run from him the first time they met.

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He yawned and hoped she had had more sleep than he did. He discovered her on the carpeted floor in the emergency room's lobby. Very few seats were left. People strained to hear the television suspended above them. Bit had her backpack between her legs, and a newspaper folded neatly over it. There were no bags under her eyes and she appeared healthier than the previous night. He almost smacked her for worrying him so.

He crouched down in front of her and his tight black jeans almost split. "Hey, knucklehead," he said. "All I get is one phone call? Next time, you spend the night at my place, okay?"

She chuckled even before she looked up at him. "A night in your bed? And where would you sleep?" She beamed at him, but he did not return it. "Hey, joke, Captain Grumpy."

He rapped his palm on his forearm. "You didn't even look for me," he said.

She stroked the backpack. "You're right," she said. "I'm an evil, evil person who dumped you without a good reason. Unless I had one."

He cocked his head to the side. "This is going to be good."

She fluttered her eyes, and then let the exhaustion and dull pain sink in. "First, I'm really hungry. I'll tell you if you grab me some breakfast."

He was about to tell her to get it herself, but her smile was faded. She was in line for the doctor. "Sure," he said, "what are you in the mood for?"

She stared at the ceiling tiles. "I'd love an onion bagel, plain cream cheese, and an orange juice, if they have it."

He pulled himself to his feet and scanned the room for the sign indicating the direction of the cafeteria. "I'll be right back." He took the stairs down to the ground floor. He wanted to bake the bagel himself. Chop the onions and boil the dough into an imperfect circle. Then mix, age, and process the cream cheese for her. Squeeze the oranges into a paper cup and toss the rinds away. Wash his hands clean of their sticky nectar and present it to her on a silver tray with a flower.

All he was able to do was cut the hard bagel in half and dump the packet of cheese, plastic knife, and juice bottle into a paper bag. The cafeteria did not sell flowers and the ones in the gift shop were too expensive.

Devon brought the bag upstairs and offered it to her. She thanked him and offered him the newspaper. "Did you see this?"

He glanced at the headline and handed it back. "Yeah," he said, and sat cross-legged in front of her. "The mugger guy's in intensive care somewhere. So, what about this reason you have for ditching me?"

She pointed at her backpack and pushed it toward him. "If I'd stopped," she whispered, "I wouldn't have been able to keep this. Let

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me know what you think of it.”

“It won’t bite, will it?” he said as he took the pack and examined its shape.

She shook her head. “Don’t let anyone else see it, okay?”

She devoured the bagel while he bounced the pack in his lap. When she was done, she looked at the clock and sighed. “Actually, I’d like to be alone for a little while. You don’t mind, do you?”

His stomach was queasy from his fast food muffin breakfast, and the stench of medicines and cleaning supplies. “Not a problem,” he said, “Meet you outside in a couple hours.”

Devon ruffled her hair and hustled away with the pack before she could hit him back.

Every street around the hospital was clogged with traffic, and every sidewalk was a stream of white-coated interns and haggard visitors. He had no idea where to examine the backpack without being watched. Further down the sidewalk, he spotted a McDonalds. Its men’s room had a lock that required a token to operate, but the frame was busted and the door did not shut properly. Devon entered the pea-green restroom and claimed the only stall. The toilet seat was covered in yellow droplets. Devon shook his head and wondered about most males. He wound an inch of toilet paper around his fist and wiped it clean.

He sat and pulled down his pants, in case anyone peeked under the stall. He unzipped the pack and pulled away the newspaper. In the light, it appeared like a fairly cheap Halloween mask. Pieces of dulled steel covered its face for effect. Dark hunks of molded plastic peeked out of the top, imitating feathers over the crown and around the Hawk’s inset eyes, behind which was a green overlay. It could be night vision, or infrared. Most gear like that protruded from the face though. They could be cameras that fed an image to an onboard computer, which processed the image and returned it to the display. Or he had read too many articles on the latest high technology and actually did not have a clue.

He had to show this to Ryan, the technojunkie on his favorite bleeding-edge mailing list. She had been boasting she had picked up a prototype for the next release of Pentium chips. This mask would show her. He wanted to see her face go even whiter, her jaw hit the floor, and her mouth form the words, “Can I play with it?”

He stripped off the rest of the newspaper and admired the fierce beak. There was a soft flopping inside and it did not smell right. He turned it over, and discovered two singed leather straps hung over where the ears would be, and a broken chinstrap. He reached into the padding and touched a helmet inside, smaller than those typically worn

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in the armed forces, but similar in shape. A microphone sat over the mouth, and a tiny speaker was in a depression beside the space for the left ear. The right ear's speaker had fallen out, but he felt a cavity behind it, and reached in it with his pinkie. He touched a small cylindrical device with three frayed wires hanging from it. The device was warm, as if it were still running, even though its power supply must have been severed.

He snatched his hand out. The head was not dead yet. He tossed it to the floor, as if it had bitten him.

He leaned forward and took it to his lap again. He tapped the device in the ear. It was not loose enough to pull it out. It might have some identification. The other pieces of the head were blank, with no engravings or labels. Ryan could figure it out.

A pair of feet shuffled by outside and someone knocked on the stall door. He stuffed the head back in the pack, and prepared to leave and wash his hands.

Bit emerged from the hospital with a bandage taped over her wound. The scab pressing against her head itched as she left the air-conditioned emergency room. Devon sat on a bench nearby and waved to her. His legs were propped up on the backpack, and he was flipping through a copy of *Popular Science*.

"How did it go?" he said.

She puckered her lips to one side and narrowed her eyes. "Pretty well. I got shuffled between three different doctors before someone would look at my head. This orderly mentioned that they don't like dealing with head trauma. They don't really understand what's going on."

He rolled up the magazine and tapped the space on the bench beside him. "That was it, though?"

She shuffled into the seat and leaned on her thighs so he could spread out his arm behind her. "Yeah," she said, "They stuck me with an intern, really intense, and she had fifty other things on her mind. She put cream on my face and bruises that made them tingle in a not-so-nice way. Oh, and she wanted to keep me for a twenty-four hour observation since I blacked out, but she let me go. I'm not complaining."

"It's because you're a pain in the ass," he said. She scowled at him and he shrugged. "Hey, I'm just calling it like it is."

She tapped the pack with her toes. "Did you like what you saw? You think we can find out who was in it?"

"It was like nothing I've ever seen," he said. "Whoever was in it had to be an idiot to get chewed up like he did."

She looked off at the trees across the walkway. "You didn't mind me ditching you for it?"

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Devon stretched his arms in the air, rolling around his shoulders in their sockets. "I wish you'd told me sooner."

She scratched her temple. "Priorities," she said. He swung his feet off the pack and stared at her until she blushed. "What?" she said.

He grinned and sat back. "Nothing," he said. "I just like doing that." He heaved the pack in her lap. "I think someone I know can tell me where this came from. You probably don't know Ryan, but she's..." he nodded his head, "geeky."

Bit perked up. "Ooo," she said, "Then why are we sitting around here?"

Devon slid to the edge of his seat. "She's over in Somerville, but when we meet her, go easy on her. She's a little shy."

"Aha!" Bit said, "So she doesn't have a social life and thus no one to tell?"

Devon gave her the finger. "Come on. You can ask her yourself."

The bus stopped in a neighborhood with enough trees to blot out most of the sky, next to a tall brown church whose foyer appeared to be tacked on from another church. Bit humphed at it. "You know," she said, "there's having a plain church, which I get, but a plain church with those Greek columns and that white trim... It's kinda schizophrenic."

Devon led her away down a street into which the soil had eroded from the lawns of every house. "I know what you mean," he said. "One summer when I was a kid, Saint Mark's put all this money into a trellis with vines around the sanctuary door. The winter killed off the vines, though, so they put up plastic ones next year. Then those twisted and warped in the summer. I used to steal them to freak people out."

Devon stopped in front of a deep-blue gingerbread house, two stories tall. All the drapes were shut except in the windows where air conditioners jutted out. Six square feet of lawn, surrounded by an aluminum fence as high as his chest stood between the house and the curbside. Devon opened the gate and hopped onto the front steps. He pushed the doorbell, which rang the opening notes to "Satisfaction."

A shorthaired skinny geekette wearing a black T-shirt, black jeans, and thick black frames poked her head out. Her breasts were completely hidden by the T-shirt, her lips were thin and nearly white without their makeup, and her face could have been mistaken for a young boy's. Bit's eyes widened. Ryan had been fisting the girl covered in faerie tattoos at the sex party.

"Oh, hi, Devon," she said in a low quiet voice. She bowed to him and the tips of her lips broadened slightly. She surveyed Bit up and down, and almost broke out into a recognizable smile. "Hey, welcome. Nice to see you again."

Bit blinked. "Good to see you, too," she said. "You looked like you

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were busy last night so I didn't introduce myself. Everyone calls me Bit."

Devon gripped Bit's waist and spun her around, to show off the pack on her back. "You have got to see this," he said.

Ryan backed into the house and threw the door wide for them. "Sure, come in. It's just me here. Everybody's at the computer fair."

There was a pile of shoes by the door, so Bit and Devon popped theirs off. The entry room, lined with sofas and a massive wide screen television, was filled with cookie boxes, porn magazines, and remnants of Chinese take-out dinners.

"Forgive the mess," Ryan said. "Big game last night. Dice and alcohol, you know." She took them up the staircase without slipping on the paperbacks piled on each step, and into a small room decked with band posters from obscure electronica groups. It had a mattress on the floor, an overflowing bookcase in one corner, and piles of computer parts scattered around. Ryan sat on a corner of the mattress and gestured for them to do the same. "I keep meaning to get a real bed," she said, "so I can move some of this stuff under it."

Bit settled down at the other end. She slid off her backpack and yanked out the Hawk's head. "Guess where we got this?"

Ryan nearly pushed her eyelids into her scalp. She reached for the head, but stopped. "Is it okay if I..."

Devon knelt on the floor beside her and gestured to the head. "Please. Any idea what it does or who made it?"

Ryan leaned over and plucked it out of Bit's grasp. She held it against her chest, confirming that it was much larger than her own head. She tossed it and listened to it rattle. Bit closed the pack and watched her closely.

Devon tapped the side of the head. "I think that's a transmitter in the right ear. It's still working. Be careful."

Ryan grabbed a flashlight and explored the interior of the mask. "You guys were at that whole super frenzy thing last night?" she said, "That poor person in the suit." She shined the light on Bit's bandage. "You aren't injured badly, are you?"

Bit shook her head. "I'm really okay," she said. "But guess what's the number one question people are asking me today."

Devon snapped his fingers at Bit. "She's always like that."

Ryan put the head aside and dropped the flashlight in it. "Well, don't get any more hurt," she said. "I can do a little poking in it today, but I'll take it into work on Monday for some real tests."

"That's great," Devon said, and stood up. "I know you probably have some other things to take care of, so we'll let you know if any other body parts show up."

Ryan snorted. "Don't push yourself. There's a lot of people posting online that they have some. There's even a bunch of kids calling

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themselves 'Supabaggas' claiming the pieces are trophies."

Bit snickered, as well. "And Hot Topic will probably be selling their T-shirts soon."

Devon checked his watch and yawned. "We should probably get going. It was good to see you again." He bent over and shook Ryan's hand.

"You too," she said, and shook Bit's loosely. She leaned back and bit her lip at Devon. "Do you need to use the bathroom or anything before you go?"

He shrugged. "Sure," he said, "I remember where it is, too." He wiggled his eyebrows at her and tromped off to find it.

Ryan turned to Bit and draped her hands in her lap. "Positive you're okay?" she said, "You're looking at me kind of odd."

Bit held her chest upright and drew a deep breath. "Yeah," she said and looked away. "I was just ticked about the party, and you seemed like you were having a good time." Ryan nodded. "But I'm not mad at you," Bit said. "Don't take it like that."

Ryan took one leg in her arm and held onto it. "I appreciate that, but it wasn't all that great for me either."

Bit leaned toward her. "What do you mean?"

Ryan frowned. "I didn't really want to go. That girl I went with put me up to it. It's just that everybody kept staring at me like I wasn't girlie or boy-y enough." She shifted onto one arm. "I just wanted to have fun with her, and I did, but I didn't know anybody, and I wasn't a part of what they were doing. And neither were you."

Bit caught herself biting the remnants of a fingernail and released it. She nodded and stared at a crack running down the wall behind Ryan. The room was quiet for a while.

"I know," Bit said finally, and sighed. "There was a mix-up, and everybody was too busy to say anything."

Ryan raised her eyebrows. "You could have left anytime. I had promised to stay with Vanessa."

Bit closed her eyes and saw the outline of too many doors in her retina. "Well, most of the time, leaving isn't any better than staying. Let me tell you how loud my roommate is sometime."

Ryan giggled and pointed to her headphones. "It's no different here," she said.

Bit shook her head and laughed. Ryan leaned over to embrace her. They remained still as nervous warmth flowed between them.

Devon cracked open the door, and they jumped apart. "Am I interrupting something?"

Bit stood up. "No," she said. "We were just getting me ready to go."

Ryan tossed a blanket over the head and stood to join them. Her hands were wedged squarely in her jeans. "I'll let you guys know

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whatever I find, as soon as I can. Promise." She led them downstairs and back to the burning sun outside. They slipped their shoes on as she gave them final handshakes, and she bolted the door when they returned to the street.

Devon waited until they were a block away before he turned to Bit. "Okay, before I start making small world jokes," he said, "where did you know her from?"

Bit swung her empty backpack on one arm and let its breeze cool her. "I saw her at the party last night," she said. "She didn't have such a great time either."

He smirked, and kicked a pebble into the street. "You see, this is why you have to hit the bars. Parties are for party people."

She spun the pack around and intentionally missed him. "I'm a party person," she said, "You're the recluse. I'm just learning from you."

Devon nodded. Hormones had had a nasty effect on his social life, too.

Chapter 3—Saturday Night

Markie tossed open the door to her bedroom and bounced onto her squeaky mattress. She had the lights on low while struggling out of her pleather pants. “Don’t look!” she called out until they were on the floor and her white cotton undies in full view. “Okay, you can open your eyes now.”

The little white girl, in pigtails, ripped canvas skirt, and Doc Martins crept around the corner.

“Don’t be afraid,” Markie said, and rubbed her arm around the empty spot on the bed. “I won’t leave any visible marks.”

Kim crossed her arms and tapped her boots. “You better not,” she said. “Now I know where you live.” She reached down without bending her knees and unlaced her thigh-high boots. When they were off, she leapt onto the bed and lined up the tip of her skirt with Markie’s hand, inviting her to reach up and find a surprise. Instead, Markie stroked her shoulders and collarbone, distracted by batting around one of her pigtails.

“Cut it out,” Kim giggled. She took Markie’s hand and put it between her ample breasts. Kim leaned forward to get a better look at a printout of a naked catgirl awash in tentacles behind Markie.

“Oh, that,” Markie said. “Don’t worry. The squid vibe’s not coming out tonight.”

Relieved, Kim nuzzled her again, and guided Markie to her breasts, ass, and belly. Markie held down Kim’s arms and legs so she could lick her ears and neck despite her shrieking from the tickling. Markie kissed Kim’s red cherry lips to silence her and lost herself in the taste. Markie tried to smear the red all over Kim’s face, but the lipstick was more persistent than she was.

Kim gripped Markie’s fingers and dragged them up her skirt, but Markie felt very little wetness and wondered what she could do about it. She pulled off Kim’s top and stroked her sides while she nibbled her nipples. Kim shivered and arched herself with every touch.

“Jeez, relax girl,” Markie said while she laid her down. “We’ve barely started.” Kim ground her crotch slowly into Markie’s leg, picking up speed as Markie worked over the undersides of her arms. Once again, Kim guided her back to the erect points of her breasts, and moaned. Her cheeks were not flushed and her genitals were hot from friction, not blood. Markie lifted herself off the quivering Kim. “Do you do this with all the girls you screw?” she said. Kim did not relax, and leaned over to lift Markie’s shirt off.

The glass shattered behind the wall in Bit’s room. A loud thump shook the floor and the wall vibrated as a heavy object smacked into it.

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A low growl was followed by the crackling of raw wood being ripped open and splintered, mirrors shattered, mattresses torn, as if an animal was going wild in there.

"Is that your roommate?" Kim whispered, and drew the covers over her.

Markie glared at her. "I hope not," she said. "She shouldn't even be here." She grabbed her cell phone from the nightstand and began to dial 911. She dropped it as the intruder in Bit's room pounded on the wall and howled. The floorboards creaked as it left Bit's room and walked down the hallway toward them.

Kim scanned the window as if she was ready to jump from it.

The door pushed open slowly, and the hallway light outlined a black inhuman form peering at them. It glanced at the shirt and jeans on the floor. Kim let the sheet cover her loosely for fear of revealing the shape of her near-naked body. Markie waited and calculated the time it would take to grab the phone inches away, or the lighter for her incense to set off the smoke alarm.

The creature stepped toward the bed. Its face was a carved Lion with its maw open. It smelled of sawdust, and its metal claws were tipped in blades. Markie jerked herself upright. The creature halted, as if it were startled.

Markie gripped her sheet and spoke in quiet. "You know," she said, "whatever happens in this room tonight, your mother is going to find out about it."

It turned its head back to the door, and held up an arm to cover its eyes. It spoke in a filtered bass voice, like a protected witness on a news show. "I'm sorry," it said. "Would you know where I can find a guy named Jessica Bitters?"

Kim crept deeper under the blankets. Markie kept still, just in case. "Jessica's my roommate," she said quietly. "And she's probably off at her friend Devon's."

The creature bent toward them. "She is?"

Markie nodded, but when it did not acknowledge her, she said, "Yeah."

The muffled voice of the person behind the mask mumbled, as if speaking to only itself.

"Did she give you anything to keep?" it said, still facing away. "It would have been about a foot in diameter."

Markie shook her head.

The creature mumbled to itself again. It lowered its arm to turn back to the hallway. It covered its eyes again and said, "Did you see if she had a gun, too?"

Markie lay back on her elbows. "No way," she said. "She hates guns."

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It bowed slowly in her direction. *"Well, be careful around her,"* it said. *"We believe she shot my brother last night."*

Markie blinked. The white rocks from the trash had seemed quite brittle.

The creature slipped out the bedroom. It took care not to pound the floor but the apartment was so old it could not be helped. It paced back to Bit's room, which then became silent.

Markie listened to Kim breathe for a minute, and then slid her legs out of the side. Kim withdrew from the covers but kept them across her chest. "You think it's gone?" Kim said.

Markie ignored her. She walked out to check Bit's room and then came back in. "Ah, fuck," she said, and slammed the door so hard it popped back open. She sat on the edge of the bed, and put her head in her lap. "The room's wrecked," she said. "I need to clean it up. You want to help?"

Kim nodded and put her clothes back on. As she dressed, Markie took her cell phone and punched in a few numbers.

"Calling the police?" Kim said.

"Uh-uh," Markie said and pressed the phone to her face, "Devon."

Devon perched on the end of his futon while Miles Davis poured from the radio. He stared at the long ragged cut that ran down the edges of his boots. A chunk of concrete was wedged between the sole and toe of his left boot. He picked up a pair of tweezers and carefully removed it. His cleansing supplies lay next to him; his saddlesoap, favorite boot black, a long-stemmed lighter, a ceramic cutting board, aerosol leather conditioner, and a set of damp and dry cloths. The operation would take all night, if need be, because people would notice otherwise.

Above him, his music, books, and movies were scattered on shelves encircling the one room apartment. The kitchen corner of his room was taken up by a tiny sink and two electric burners, with no place for anything more. Dishes sat drying on the unused radiator. Dirty clothes overflowed out of their hamper, but the laundromat was a good walk away and they did not smell that bad yet.

He undid the boot's laces and caressed the leather surface with saddlesoap lather. With the cloth, he washed away everything but the boot itself with its tired, dulled exterior with the bits of brown cracking through. He cleaned the other boot while the first dried, and then popped open the polish. He brought his Zippo lighter's flame to the black and evened out the tarnished leather surface.

Three knocks rapped on the door, Bit's standard announcement after he had weaned her off of "shave and a haircut." He smothered the flame with the polish's lid, and set it on the floor. He should have had to buzz her in. His complex's entrance must have been propped open.

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"Hang on," he said as he hoisted himself up. "Doing guy stuff."

"Need another ten minutes?" she shouted back.

He unlocked his door. Bit had changed into a tight orange T-shirt, without any trademark product placement or social commentary. Her jeans and black sneakers were fresh and dust-free. Her eyes were sharp without any dark rings or red streaks. She gave him a quick hug and stepped inside. "Hey, you," she said as she leaned against the closet door for him to pass by. "Any word from Ryan yet?"

Devon shook his head and pushed the supplies on the futon aside. "Not for a few days, probably. You eat yet?"

"Got a wrap at the corner," she said. She picked up one of the boots. "Give it to me straight, doc. Are they going to survive the night?"

He snatched it away from her and petted its tongue. "Don't pick on my babies, or I'll have to say something about your hair, and I've been really good."

Bit reached up to touch her red bangs. "What about it?"

He sat in his imprint in the futon's mattress, and reopened his polish. "Nothing," he said. "Just that someone's eager to hide that she's really a blonde."

"Oh, screw you," she said and plopped next to him. "I've been hanging at the bookshops in Harvard Square all day. The clerks always look down on blondes."

Devon rubbed the burnt black onto a cloth. "Excuses, excuses," he said.

"So, what do you want to do tonight?" she said, seeing 9:00 flashing on his radio. "We're down to videos or movies."

Devon stared at the four little walls that seemed to be leaning in toward him. "Movies."

Bit edged her way to the computer corner of the room under Devon's only window. "I'll check the shows," she said, and bent down to switch the multiplug's power on.

A shrill whistle screeched too fast for them to react. The window broke into shards that cascaded down onto her. Another metal humanoid, bulkier than the Hawk, flew over her back and hit the floor behind her. The creature reared up to its full seven feet. It had the head of a Wolf, mouth open with bared fangs. It was as black as the Hawk, but with more shine to its steel carapace. It had knives attached to the backs of its leather gloves. The room rattled from the Wolf's collision.

Devon's muscles twitched as if they were ripped from the earth, and he rolled off the futon, leaving his boots behind. He threw open the door, but Bit was not by his side, so he stopped and looked back.

The Wolf wrapped its arms around Bit as she stood up, and yanked her to its chest. Bit kicked at its armor, and spat on the Wolf's helm. She screamed and shook her body but her cry diminished as she ran out of

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air. The Wolf released one of its arms and grasped her throat, squeezing as she gagged and coughed. It spun her body around. Her eyes grew bloodshot and her struggles began to slow. Her open mouth gurgled.

Devon glanced at his television, his cold lava lamp, and even the futon's frame on which his cleaning supplies sat. Inspiration hit, and he grabbed the aerosol leather conditioner and the long-stemmed lighter. Bit's breathless chokes were becoming less steady. He aimed at the Wolf's neck, which was covered by a dark green plastic, not armor. The Wolf grunted and turned slightly to lay a heavy black eye on him. Devon flicked on the lighter, and sprayed the blue and orange flame up the back of the Wolf's mask.

Its squeal almost drowned out the thump of Bit hitting the floor. She gasped and crawled on all fours toward the doorway. The Wolf grabbed its own head and shook it. The stink of roasted hair bristled in Devon's nostrils. He reached down and dragged Bit to her feet. She wheezed as she sucked in all the air she could.

As they bolted for the door, the Wolf's paw jerked Devon to a stop by his shoulder. The thick glove dug into his tendons and then released him, casting him to the ground as if he had been hit by a small car. Bit staggered out the door and the floorboards groaned as the Wolf hunched down, ready to spring at her. Devon gripped his shoulder to dull the agony and tossed himself from the Wolf's path. The Wolf hunkered down another inch and the cheap, narrow boards underneath it shattered. The Wolf plummeted into the basement. Sawdust and splinters showered into the air.

Bit hurried out of the complex as the Wolf leapt out of the hole. The books and compact discs on the shelves above them cascaded down as the Wolf landed, and the floor under its feet bent but did not break. It shot down the hallway, in pursuit of Bit.

Devon gritted his teeth and waited for the throbbing in his shoulder to subside. Curious neighbors slipped open other doors in the hall. He wondered if anyone would call the police and risk the wrath of the slumlord who would jack up their rent to pay for the damage.

The dust settled on his ruined floor, buried in the fallen media from his shelves. His monitor had tipped over and its smashed viewscreen was mixed with the window's debris. His boots lay unpolished and dusty.

He stood up, pulled his own door closed as hard as he could, and inched his way around the hole to the bathroom to get some ibuprofen. He popped four pills when the phone rang.

It was Markie.

Bit gulped down all the steamy air she could, and cleared the steps with a quick jump. The headlights from a stream of cars trying to beat the

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next stop light blinded her. She propelled herself forward, against their flow.

The crash of the Wolf bounding into the street jolted her. She could not hear its feet slapping the sidewalk but did not glance back. After a couple of blocks, her calves started to burn. Her shoes were barely broken in from running errands. Her eyes watered, and she held them open to let the wind wipe them for her.

A traffic light hung ahead at the bottom of a small hill. Two lanes of unlucky cars were trapped there. Bit zigzagged into the furthest lane and dug her fingers into the water runoff on top of the last car in line. Hefting herself over the smooth roof, she crouched down on the other side, as the Wolf jumped over the car and landed several feet away then continued down the street in the direction she had been heading. Eventually, its head darted left and right, and it skidded to a halt. She crawled back and hoisted herself onto the bumper of an SUV in the adjacent lane. The light turned green and all the cars raced up the hill, leaving the Wolf behind.

The SUV stopped at the top of the hill. Cars behind it honked and swerved around it in the right lane. The driver inside yelled at her. "...off my damned car!" She looked up, so her head was visible in the rear view mirror. A black spot grew larger behind. She dropped off the SUV, and cut across the incoming traffic which blared their horns at her, toward a nearby convenience store. They always had security cameras. Her feet grew numb as she reached the store, and her shins constricted themselves tight.

Bit pushed the glass door inwards and ran straight for the emergency exit in the back. The man behind the register cursed at her, but she was panting too much to make it out. She knocked the exit open, but no alarm sounded. Behind her, the glass door burst into pieces followed by the clang of metal against metal. She peeked back for a split second. The Wolf had clotheslined itself against the door's release bar.

She leapt over the Sunday comics and colored crates filling the back room and pushed open the heavy green door. With a yell, she grabbed a tower of bottled water and toppled it in front of the exit. She kicked the door shut behind her and scampered into a dimly lit parking lot. A small hole in the rusted wire fence led to trees and bramble. Her hands could not make fists. She slipped through the fence's hole as the heavy door banged open. The slosh of water poured onto the tar, and the splashes of the Wolf's feet echoed after it.

She ducked through the spaces where the brush had not yet grown, and escaped onto a street she did not recognize. Wood snapped behind her as the Wolf plowed through the foliage. She pounded up the sidewalk, dodging the few pedestrians who were still out. On her right was a wooden wall with a driveway entrance, but it was too far. Her legs

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were cramping hard. She was hyperventilating yet bringing in no more oxygen. The roar of the Wolf closed in.

Bit was so light-headed she did not notice the middle-aged woman in well-tailored running sweats, until she collided with her. "Sorry," Bit said by instinct. The Wolf on her tail was unstoppable, but she had never heard of it chasing an innocent person before. It had left Devon alone. It wanted her.

Bit grasped the woman by her arms and flung her headlong into the traffic. The creature would save her first. Bit took off before she had a chance hear the woman smack the street.

She kept running to the driveway. Car horns blared and brakes squealed and Bit huffed around the little house behind the wall. She crept up a passage to another street, and flagged down a cab.

"Where are you going?" the driver said, and eyed her cautiously as she slid in the back seat.

She spat out the first thing that came into her head. "Allston," she said in a hoarse voice, "Mall Street in Allston." The cab took off. She lay down, controlling her gasps. She remembered the woman's open mouth and crow's feet. She kept herself from the car's window but her trip to Allston was not interrupted. Her mind was as paralyzed as her body, and that was for the best.

Devon kicked at the mess that surrounded him. He held down an ice pack from his freezer against his shoulder and waited for the pain to melt away. He crept to the edge of the hole and peered into the basement with his junk scattered about. The floor was less than an inch thick. He might have broken through himself.

A lower-pitched knock at his door startled him. He cracked it open. A uniformed police officer, with a thick jaw and sunburnt cheeks, held up her badge. Her radio let off an occasional crackle and her glance held him in place. Her hands rested too close to her gun for comfort.

"Excuse me, Mr. Manetta," she said. "One of your neighbors called to report a disturbance in your apartment."

"Yes, officer," he said, "I had a break-in." He swung the door wide to reveal his chaotic room. She surveyed the devastation with a blank expression. He stood in front of one of the larger piles, in case he can still had any pot around that he had forgotten about.

The officer did not enter. "When did you find your place was broken into?" she said.

He lifted the ice pack off him. "I was here while it happened, around nine."

She pointed at her his shoulder. "The perpetrator did that?" He nodded. "Can you describe him or her?" she said, and pulled out a scratch pad, which had a Lisa Frank sticker on the front.

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"It was one of the vigilantes. The one with the Wolf head," he said and held his arm above himself. "This tall, black and shiny. It had on all this metal and plastic. It moved so fast, I didn't see too much of it."

The officer did not bat an eye as she wrote down what he had said. "How did it get in here?"

Devon gestured to the glass on the floor. "Through the window. It landed about where the hole is. It didn't go through at first. It was trying to jump at a friend of mine."

The officer took her pen and eyes from the page. "A friend? It was after someone in the room with you?"

Devon bit his tongue. "Her name's Jessica Bitters," he said slowly, "but her friends call her Bit. Six feet tall, her hair's red but it's purple on her license. She was about to turn on my computer when it broke in and grabbed her. I started hitting it so it let her go and did this to me. She ran out the front door and it went after her. I mean, after it went through the floor."

When she was finished writing, she nodded to his wound. "How's this doing? You need to see a doctor over it?"

He shook his head. "Swelling's almost down," he said.

The officer took out more paper and filled out a damage report. She kept staring at the hole. "Boy, that's something," she said when she was done.

Devon remained patiently still. "Tell me about it."

He signed her papers and she departed with a "thank you, sir." He returned the favor. He cleared off a space on his futon and lay down. He unzipped the mattress cover and took out his bank book. There was not enough left to come close to covering the repairs. The radio was broken so he hummed "Trouble in Mind" in his daze.

The phone rang again. He stumbled over to lift it up. He flopped back on his mattress before asking, "What do you want?"

"Devon," Bit said on the other end, "are you okay?"

He leaned into the phone and let his ice pack go. "Bit? Omigod, Bit? Are you hurt?"

"I asked first," she said in a monotone. "I'm alive. I got away, but it's probably still looking for me."

"Where are you?" He grabbed a pad of paper of his own.

"Intersection of Mall and Green Street in Allston," she said. "At a payphone. There's a park across the street with a two-seat swing set. You can't miss it."

He scribbled down every word, verbatim. "Wait for me. Don't move. Don't go home," he stopped to hear her breathe and tore off the scrap of paper. "Markie just called. Another one trashed your place. She's okay, but she said it thought you killed the Hawk."

The phone was silent for a moment. "That's really stupid."

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"I know that," he said and tossed the melted pack in the sink, "Look, we'll get you somewhere safe and then we'll deal with this, okay?" He squeezed the phone so hard, he accidentally hit one of the buttons, and it beeped.

"Still there?" she said when the tone had ceased.

"Yeah. Sorry about that," he said, and a chuckle escaped his nose.

She followed with one of her own. "Happens to the best of us. I'll be waiting. If I'm not here, it's chased me again, and I'll leave another message on your voice mail."

He glanced over the floor to find everything he could need for the mission. He scooped up all his vital paperwork from his mattress—anything that someone could use to rack up a bill in his name—and stuffed them in an old nylon backpack.

"I'll be there. They want you bad. Keep low. Don't come out at all, you hear me?"

"I won't," she said and hung up.

He slipped on his unfinished leathers and pulled the shade down over his broken window. He picked up a staple gun and nailed the shade shut.

He had a roll of bills meant to last the week, and a few train tokens. Galeno had a car, but she was out every Saturday night. He called her cell phone to make sure and got her voicemail. Markie had a car, but she had enough problems.

He locked his door twice and walked slowly outside in case the cop was still there, just to be sure. He descended the concrete stairs to the street but did not see her.

Angry horns and tires screeched on the road ahead of him. A couple of sedans swerved around a slow moving van from a twenty-four-hour florist. A cab headed his way, but its "for hire" light was off. There was no passenger inside, so he stepped to the corner and waved. It pulled up next to him. "Can you take me to Allston?" he said to the bald, bearded cabby.

"Sure," the cabby said and tossed his cigarette out the window.

Devon wedged himself into the back seat and gave the address. "You know your light isn't on?"

"Yeah," the cabby said, as he pulled back into the traffic. "It does that sometimes."

Devon rested the backpack on his lap and considered where to take Bit after he picked her up. It was hard to think in the start-stop Boston traffic, and with the bright lights of the truck behind him reflecting from the rear view mirror.

Except the lights were too low to be on a huge grille. He turned to glare at it. It was the same van as before, with the logo "Ariadne's 24-Hour Flowers."

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Devon leaned forward to the driver. "Excuse me," he said, "can you make a left at this light?"

The driver kept tapping his finger to the classic rock from the speakers. "Left? Why would you go left here? It's straight to Memorial Drive."

"I'll pay," he nodded his head. "I want to go to Davis Square instead."

The driver shrugged, and they drove onto a road dotted with fresh tar. Devon watched the turn signal of the van flash as it followed them, keeping several yards behind. The van matched their speed exactly.

They approached a residential street leading nowhere. "That's where I'm going. Turn here," Devon pointed. The driver spun the wheel. The van pulled to the side of the road but did not chase them. He guided the driver down a few random turns until they were far out of the van's sight. The cabby slapped his hand quicker with every new direction and soon pulled over.

"Out!" the cabby said, "This isn't a joyride, okay? Get someone else if you want to play games."

Devon kept his mouth shut and paid the driver with a generous tip. He dragged the pack out and remained on the lookout behind him. He hurried to the Davis Square subway stop on foot. When he arrived in the bright intersection, busy with restaurant-goers, he slipped behind one of the thick brown doors spotted with graffiti.

Inside, he counted to thirty. On twenty-eight, the van pulled up across the street. The side door cracked open and a slender thirty-something woman stepped out. She had back-length straight brown hair that flowed like a ribbon, and lipstick to match. Her stretch jeans showed off her ample hips. She wore a sleeveless top which shimmered purple, and suede boots with a small heel. Devon pulled himself into a cubby alongside the subway map. He let his watch do the counting for him. After five revolutions of the minute hand, he descended into the station, watching every person who passed out the corner of his vision.

She did not look that built. He could overpower her.

Davis was one long platform, visible end-to-end. He scanned the other riders but she was not among them. He stood on to the outbound side to see if she would show up and follow. He got on the next train. None of the other people seemed remotely like her.

At the end of the line, Devon ran straight for the bus maps. He had only heard scant rumors that Allston was connected to the city at all.

The woman was not waiting at that stop either, so he wasted another token getting back on the same train, before it resumed its route back into town. His hands were beginning to quiver, and the prickles under his flesh were growing, but his cigarettes were buried too deep in the pack to dig for.

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As the train returned to Davis, he saw the purple flash of the woman's shirt. He grabbed a paper from the seat beside him and shielded his face with it. She merged with the crowd wandering into the car adjacent to him. As the train shot off, she began talking into a cell phone, pressed against the glass that separated their cars. Her conversation lasted through three stops. Cellular service barely lasted through two.

The other end of the line was out in suburbia with minimal buses, so he put down his paper and stepped out at the next stop. The stations were safe, with witnesses and cameras. He turned against the flow of pedestrians as the woman emerged from the next car. She tossed her hair and came toward him, staring straight past him. As she drew near, he situated himself in her path. "Why are you following me?" he said. His hands ached for a smoke.

A few of the riders watched him closely as they hurried by, in case he tried anything on her. The woman did not meet his gaze. She waited for a break in the flow of people and sidestepped into it. She did not look back. He pushed through the crowd to catch up with her. "Why are you after me?" he said, walking quickly at her side.

"Get the fuck away from me, Devon," she hissed without turning to him, "or I'll scream."

He planted his feet and let the remaining passengers carry her away. The breeze from their movement crept under his leathers. Someone else from the van would take up trailing him. Too many people stood around to tell which would be the next. He checked his map for another route to Club Icarus. If Galeno would not answer her phone, he would have to ask her in person for her car.

He returned to the train and rode it to the stop nearest the club. He hailed another cab rather than take the bus.

The music pumped into the night air mixed with the buzz of the neon club sign. The bricks outside Icarus reeked of several brands of tobacco he would not touch with latex gloves. A dark shape whipped over his head. It should have made a thump when it hit the roof over the club.

He raced inside. The ID check girl put her arm out to slow him down. "Hey, Devon," she said. "Take it easy. We don't close for hours."

He smiled and handed her a bill from his shrinking wad. "I got a girl in trouble," he said with a wink to her, and headed for the boy's table. Two of them spotted him and let out a cheer.

Galeno slapped him on the back with her big arm. "Hey, man," she said, "I heard you were at the great superhero rip-a-thon last night. Couple of the guys saw you there."

He hugged her, and dragged up a chair from an empty table beside them. "Yeah," he said. "Don't remind me. They just trashed my place."

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Bit's, too. They're looking for her, and they've been after me all night."

She let him go. "You're shitting me," she said, and almost took a drink from her bottle.

Devon laid his head on the table to take a breather. "I wish," he said. "The one that has a head like a Wolf tried to choke Bit out. She's okay for now, but there's also another with a Lion's head and there's a woman, too. About early thirties, real skinny, you'd hate her."

Galeno glared at him. "I am all about the lovin' of the women, as long as they have a brain."

Devon sat up. "Seriously though, I can't go home and neither can Bit. Do you mind if we shack up at your place tonight?"

The smile fell from Galeno's face. "No problem," she said. "Do you need my car?"

Devon gripping her palm in solidarity. "Yeah," he said, "do I ever. First, though, I have to throw the fuckers off my scent."

The bois started eyeing each other over, and one leaned in.

"Damn," she said. "If Andy kept her face hid, hunched over, and wore a cap, she could pass for you."

Andy looked down at her own chest, and Devon's, and then she reached over the table to smack her. Devon did the same comparison and bit his lip. "You're right, though."

Andy leaned back to flipped him off. "Fuck you. I wasn't going to say anything but there's forty extra pounds over there that'll never touch this bod."

Devon rolled his eyes. "Oh, now who's getting all femme," he said. "Look, if they wanted to hurt me, they would have done it already. How about it?" He pulled out his money and slid it across the table to Andy. "Go out, have fun somewhere for an hour, and then you can come back. What's wrong with that?"

All the bois stared at Andy until she relented. "Okay," she said, scanning each of them, "but someone's coming with me." One of the bois volunteered to escort her. Andy stood up and ran a finger around the inside of Devon's vest sleeve. "You're still a little big for me. You can wear my hoodie but you won't stretch out any of my clothes."

Devon got up to join her, with his backpack in one hand. "You're amazing," he said. "I mean that."

They stood up to walk to the men's room to change. Devon locked himself into the only enclosed stall and stripped off his vest and jeans. Andy tossed him her hoodie and pulled on his clothes. She stuck her head over the stall. "Hey," she said, "pass me a roll of toilet paper. I told you your stuff was too big."

Devon tossed the spare roll over the stall to her. He peeked out of the door in his boxers while she stuffed herself and tucked her hair inside a baseball cap that he would never have worn. She caught him

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spying and pushed his door shut with a smirk. "So, have fun at Galeno's," she said as she swung the restroom door open. "Try not to mention that chick she's been pining over."

He nodded even though she could not see him. "I'm not breathing a word of that," he said. "And I owe you. Thanks."

She stopped. "Save it. What are you doing about pants and shoes?"

The hoodie covered his torso, and a black magic marker from the ticket girl increased his goatee, but his legs and feet were bare. His boxers showed off his packing. No one else had clothes that would fit, except Galeno who would need hers to drive.

"Tell you what," Andy said, and left the bathroom. She returned a minute later and tossed him a roll of black bondage tape.

Devon caught it and glowered at her through the stall door. "No," he said.

Andy shrugged. "Come on, Jake was saving it for a friend of hers. That shit's expensive."

Devon leaned against the wall and said nothing. Andy retrieved Galeno, who tapped her foot at him. "Come on," she said, "I'm not taking you home without pants."

Devon sighed. "Fine," he said and locked himself in. He wrapped the tape up and down his legs. He had to sit on the toilet to reach his feet, and the latex on the knees bunched up.

"I'm sure you look great in there," Galeno said. "Andy and her friend are out of here. I'm going to get my car. Jake'll let you know when I've gotten back."

Devon waved to her over the side. "I'm not going anywhere," he said. He sat on the toilet and propped his legs on the toilet paper roll so that other patrons would not see him. Galeno slid him the contents of his backpack under the door to him. Among them, he found his pack of cigarettes. He thanked God for small favors and after she left, he wasted time sucking down most of the pack.

He was calmer when Jake came in and pounded on the stall door. "She's here, man," Jake said and coughed in the smoky air, "Oh, we got to get you out of here before the staff sees this." Devon held his paperwork under his arm and followed her out, balancing as he walked on the slippery makeshift socks.

The boy's table hooted at Devon and his thick glossy legs. The rest of the club joined in, as if he had broken a glass on the floor. Devon closed his eyes and allowed Jake to lead him out the door, where Galeno's old ivy Honda waited for them.

Jake stuck her hands in her pockets and rested against the hood. "Andy called us on her cell phone," she said. "She saw your van going after her. She keeps shaking it, but it keeps finding her, so she's taking her sweet time getting back."

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Devon nodded. Galeno let him in the passenger's side door for him. "Thanks," he said. "I owe you guys big time."

Jake bent over to the window beside him. She grinned and eyed Devon's legs and crotch. "No you don't," she said, and went back into the club.

"Belt up," Galeno said to Devon, who did so. The console had dust and the floor had sand left over from the winter, but otherwise the car was clean for an old model. "Tell me where we're going," she said as she revved the engine.

Devon handed her the address. She promptly gave it back with a map of the city. He directed her into Allston, lined with one-story shops. Galeno put in a tape of Portishead, and Devon was entranced by how well the music fit the atmosphere of the deserted Boston. The tricky trance beat mimicked the energy behind closed doors. He stared out the window at the darkened stores and the illuminated coffee shops arranged like dominos, already fallen.

"There," he said, pointing at the swing sets on the right. "That's the park she said she'd be at." A payphone stood on the opposite side.

Galeno nodded and pulled to the fence's opening. Devon ran out of the car in his leggings, and shouted, "Bit! Hey, Bit!"

No one responded. The park was the size of a small bookstore, covered with tar and hosting a prefabricated jungle gym. A few bushes rested in the corner. No one was hiding in them. Devon kicked at one of the swings and ducked out of the way as it sailed back to him. He sulked back to the car.

"Give me your phone," Devon said, and Galeno wiggled it from her pocket. Devon dialed his voicemail and found two messages. The first was from Bit.

"Hey, Devon, I couldn't wait any longer," she had said, low with a touch of annoyance. "It was driving me crazy at the park. I'm at Sandy's place, nearby. I'll be hanging out at 457 Mall Street in Allston for a while. Come soon." Devon selected the second message, which was Bit again. "Come save me," she whispered. "We're about to run out of small talk."

Devon handed back the phone and wagged a finger onward. "She's at Sandy's," he said. "Further on down."

Galeno nodded and floored the gas.

Bit left the safety of the park on three occasions while she waited for Devon; twice to check the time and once to buy a watch. None of the shops nearby were open, so she gave up and hurried to Sandy's building. She tried to stay calm although every car that passed might have been a police cruiser hunting for her.

Guilt was best in moderation, but she was giving herself an overdose. She would not turn herself in.

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Sandy lived on the third floor of a house that was once a general store. The space where the store windows should have been covered with vinyl siding, but the shape remained. The front door must have been inset once, but a second door was installed in front of it to create a small entryway. The buzzer panel and mailboxes had the shape of compartments in an automat.

Sandy's voice was shredded by the intercom. "Hello?"

Bit pushed her mouth as close to the speaker as was sanitary. "Sandy? It's Bit," she said and paused, waiting for the intercom to shut off. It did not. "This is going to sound really weird, but I need somewhere to crash for a little while. Do you mind if I come up?"

The crackle in the speaker shifted. "I'm kinda busy tonight. Can you come over another time?"

"This isn't about the party," Bit said, and stopped. She scanned the walkway for some inspiration to make up a plausible story, but found none. "I was out with some friends, but when we stopped at the Lil Peach down the road, I got distracted and lost them. I think they ditched me, they were kinda out of it. Could I use your phone for a ride? The busses stopped running."

The door hummed and the latch unlocked. Bit skipped up the staircase to Sandy's floor and met her in her open threshold. Sandy had her hair in a kerchief, and wore gray sweatpants and an oversized nightshirt which drooped off her large body. She was frowning, but her expression changed to shock on seeing Bit's bandage and ratty hair. "Are you okay?" she said, and waved her inside.

"Yeah," Bit nodded and wandered in. "It's been a rough night."

The apartment was covered in terra-cotta-colored plaster, a little better than a communal dorm suite. It had a shared kitchen and living room, with four individual rooms linked off it. One wall was covered with placards and pamphlets from activist rallies of the last few years, all bearing Sandy's signature in the corner. A lush dark-ruby leather couch with a cracked, yellow stain in one corner stood out among the discount wood-and-wire chairs and tables. Bit spotted a phone beside the couch, but Sandy swooped in front of it.

"That's my roommates'," Sandy said. "Let me get you one from my room."

Bit was careful not to sit on or touch anything. She scanned the floor for any piles she should be wary of. She eyed the drawn curtains and waited for one to flutter. She held back from searching behind each of the doors.

Sandy bounced over to her with a cordless phone and offered it to her. "Is this a local call?" she said.

Bit shook her head, "But I promise I'll only be a few and I'll pay you back." She accepted the phone and began to dial, but Sandy interrupted

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her. "Just to let you know," Sandy said, "I'm expecting Laura to call soon. The girl you saw me with last night."

Bit nodded and finished dialing. She paced around the couch as the calling card company informed her of its special rates.

Sandy pattered around while Bit navigated the menu system. She casually got herself a soda from the refrigerator, on which a photograph of Sandy and the girl together was stuck with fruit magnets. Beside it was a "Thinking of You" card with Laura's signature. Sandy spent a minute rooting around inside, keeping the door exactly in Bit's line of vision.

Devon was not home, so Bit left him a message, and returned her phone. "He's not there," she said. "Could I stay a little while so I can try again later?"

"I don't see why not," Sandy said and zipped to her room to recharge the hand-held. "Can I get you something? Water, soda, iced tea?"

"Soda's good, anything clear," Bit said, and backed into the corner while Sandy scooted by to get her a glass. "Have the rallies been keeping you busy?"

Sandy let out an exaggerated sigh. "You can't imagine," she said as she fussed with a bottle, "but somebody's got to get people to show up with the old team leaving town. But it's not all bad. I met Laura there."

Bit nodded and tried not to comment further.

Sandy dropped two frosted cubes in the glass and presented it to Bit with an arm's length distance between them. "I'm sorry your friends skipped out on you," she said.

Bit puts her hand onto the kitchen counter. "I don't really mind," she said and took a sip. "I hadn't heard from you after the game. Why didn't you write me?"

Sandy turned around in mid-step, and shrugged, "You know how things get. I was busy."

Bit crossed her arms over her belly. "Same," she said, "Look, if I had..."

"Well, yes, but what's done is done," Sandy said, and pulled a plate of vegetarian dumplings from a steamer in the microwave. She thrust the plate at Bit for her to take a piece, which Bit did with reluctance. The air over the restaurant under her apartment often smelled more like the disposal than the kitchen, and cabbage reigned supreme over the other scents.

"These are really good," Bit said with the straightest face she could muster.

"Aren't they?" Sandy said. "I get them at the co-op." She gestured to the couch, and they both sat down, on either ends. "For the record," she said after eating a dumpling herself, "I only wanted to sleep

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with you."

"Ditto," Bit replied and licked her fingers.

"Good," Sandy said, presenting the plate again. "Have another dumpling."

Bit gingerly took another and chewed it well to keep her mouth full. Sandy put the plate between them and lay her arm over the leather armrest. "I was just thinking," Sandy said. "There are really too few of us to stay mad at each other."

"Uh-huh," Bit said, "No hard feelings." They sat and waited for a good topic to converse over. None came. "Do you mind if I call my friend again?" Bit said, gesturing to Sandy's door.

"Certainly," Sandy said and retrieved the cordless again. Bit took a dumpling while Sandy watched, and dumped it in the waste can when she was gone. Sandy slipped her the phone and excused herself to the restroom. Bit called Devon's phone again and left another message. She whispered in case Sandy was listening.

When Sandy came out, she flopped back on the couch and polished off the rest of her food. "Mind if we watch some TV?" Sandy said and pushed the power on the remote.

"Sure," Bit said and stretched out her legs.

Sandy surfed between the three channels she received and stopped on the clearest news show. Bit's gut dropped. A reporter was standing on the street on which she had escaped from the Wolf, and saying, "...rescued Miss Hendrat from being crushed in oncoming traffic, and then disappeared, two hours ago." A file photo of the Wolf hung in midair behind her. "Witnesses state that the vigilante was chasing the attacker, though accounts of this person are contradictory. At this time, the police have stated that they have no leads as to the identity of the assailant."

Sandy noticed Bit's eyes glued to the screen. She flicked to another station and muted the volume. "What did you do?" she said.

Bit turned to her, and threw up her arms. "Nothing," she said. "That Wolf and the others, they're after me for some reason. I don't know why. I promise I lost them before I came here."

Sandy scowled at her. "Did you hurt that woman?" she said.

Bit drew a leg onto the couch but released it. She still had her shoes on. She stared at them and blinked. "I didn't mean to," she said. "The Wolf was after me and I don't think I'd be alive, if it wasn't for her."

Sandy folded her arms and turned away. She fingered the phone beside her. "I see," she said. "Is there anything I can do?"

Bit shook her head. "Could you keep this visit quiet?"

"I'll be the pillar of discretion." Sandy said and winked. She switched the sound back on the television. "Too small a world," she said.

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Bit lay back and watched whatever Sandy wanted to put on the screen.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. Devon's voice broke through the intercom static, and Bit hopped up as she heard him. Sandy guided her to the door and shook her hand goodbye. It was as clenched and sweaty as her own.

She leapt down the stairs and tackled Devon in the entryway. His feet and legs were slippery from the tape, so he fell back from her pounce, landing on his ass with her on top of him. She laughed at his outfit. He grunted and smirked.

"Don't you run off like that again, ever," he said to her.

She glowed at him and hoisted him up. "Why'd we ever break up?" she said.

Devon jerked his thumb at the car outside. "Because you kept knocking me around like that," he said. "Come on, we're going to hide at Galeno's tonight."

She followed him out and patted the tape on his legs. "I can't wait to hear about how you got this," she said.

It did not take much to get the queers laughing on the way home. Devon and Galeno asked so many questions about her escape that it became a story, and a damned funny one.

"And I turn around," she said, "and the Wolf is buckled over in the doorway, right where the handle slammed into its chest. That was beautiful."

Devon smacked the plastic seat and shook his head. "I hope they got that on tape," he said.

Galeno took them onto the winding roads of Jamaica Plain to the rotary where festive murals of summer celebrations and popular videogame characters were painted on the stores. She wended her car through a set of one-way streets to a part of town where flags hung outside every residence. The flag outside Galeno's tall gray-stained building was unabashedly rainbow, but she pulled it down before taking them inside.

"No point in telling the supers where we are," she said, as she folded it under her armpit. "Kids rip it down a few times a year, anyways."

The three of them filed up a narrow stairwell, and Galeno shook her pocket to separate her keys from the coins. Devon kept scratching his legs. Bit let her shoulders loose, and did not dart her head around like a hummingbird. Galeno pulled her prize from her pocket and said, "I am the master of unlocking."

Bit slipped behind Devon. She snaked her arms around his chest and pressed close to him, purring. He leaned into her and hopped in

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place to relieve the itching against her jeans.

"Ta da!" Galeno said and escorted them into her home. It was a single room loft with a high white ceiling cut into odd shapes with support beams and pipes piercing the floor like a Dali painting. It was carved up by carpet scraps, linoleum, and bare wood. Her bed was on the left side, surrounded by videotapes, a cheap production camera, and a television with a simple mixing board on top of a pressboard entertainment center. Straight ahead was a battered workman's table, complete with vise and globs of fossilized tar, on which sat various craft tools, half-finished sculptures, and piles of tiny colored handkerchiefs. Strips of leather hung off a shelf over the workbench, covered in pockets containing leather sewing needles, hole punchers, and other craft gear. On the right was a full kitchen, in which an old refrigerator with a curved top hummed. Rough sketches of strong sorrowful men and fierce androgynous femmes hung on the walls beside cutouts from Hustler, Swank, and Maxim. A Twister game served as the welcome mat.

Bit investigated all the projects on the workbench while Galeno stood by, proudly.

Devon dropped his papers on the bench and claimed a spot on the bed while he unwound the tape from his body. He glanced over at the tapes and saw the names of Jake and her girlfriend on several.

"Hey," he called over to Galeno, "you've got amateur video of The Bondage Twins and you didn't tell me?"

Galeno shuffled to him, and tried not to step on the floor litter. "Keep your voice down, neighbors are sleeping," she said. "And it's not done yet."

Devon pointed to a date on the tape, indicating that it was seven months old.

Galeno pointed to the console under the television. "I have to edit it and find a wholesaler," she said. "I had this idea for ten-dollar porn, that anyone can afford, you know? I was doing it like *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. I got the worst porn stories off the 'net and had the girls act them out. We let them bitch about how bad they were, too. They're funny as hell, but I can't find a place that sells the blank tapes cheap enough." Bit smirked, but Galeno caught her. "What?"

Bit held up one of the tiny colored handkerchiefs. "Nothing," she said. "Still looking for someone to sell these for you?"

Galeno lowered an eyebrow at her. "Oh, I'm going to have to watch you guys," she said, "Those're to put the hanky code on your fingers. You know, black for heavy impact play, purple for piercing, yellow for watersports, the whole nine yards. And you know which finger you can put the red one on."

Bit grinned suggestively and twiddled her fingers in the air. "Is that

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a promise? Can I put a brown one on too?"

Galeno scratched her chin. "Brown and red on separate hands please."

Bit stood up and gestured toward Devon. "Yeah, but you still got your pants on, and someone doesn't."

Devon pulled himself on the bed completely, and threw a blanket over his bare legs and crotch. "No," he said. The bandage tape lay coiled in a mess on the floor.

Bit grinned and scooped it up. She pulled a section tight between her two hands and advanced on him. "Oh, come on, I bet Galeno's got a few spare buckets of lube around here."

Devon wriggled under the covers. Galeno skirted by Bit and dived on his legs. She let herself go limp.

"Oof," Devon said and shook himself to get free, "Get your fat ass off me, boi!"

Galeno kept still and stuck out her tongue at him. "I don't know, I kinda like where you are now."

Bit hopped onto the bed beside them. "Ooo. If you want the bottom half, can I have the top?"

Devon waved at her, but she held one of his wrists against the bedside. She kept out of reach with the other. "Fuck you," he said, "Let me go, or I'll pee in your bed."

"Do and you'll sleep in it, and then you'll buy me a new bed," Galeno said. She threw a leg over his chest, and straddled him. She took his free hand and pressed it against his chest.

Devon strained to pull himself up. "You're on my bladder."

"Let's see what we can do about that," Bit said, and kissed him hard. She worked his lips open with successive slurps and sucked his tongue into her mouth. Galeno stopped struggling and began to nibble up Devon's arms. Bit squeezed Devon's tongue and palm simultaneously, and he leaned into her touch. After a minute of passing energy, Bit and Galeno released Devon, who reached for Bit's lips and took her back. Her hand caressed his face, which reminded him that it was rough.

Galeno began to undress behind them. He reached up Bit's shirt and encircled her breasts, a handful each with solid little nipples hardening under his touch. He shivered as another pair of hands joined his under the shirt and clutched his wrists. Bit's mouth was as sweet as Chinese food. Bit rocked herself between the two bodies and breathed them both in. She guided Galeno's hands to her hips while balancing herself on one arm. Their lust rushed through her like white caps, and she grew wet for them. They started to pull Devon's clothes away, when the bed frame shattered under their weight and collapsed.

The short drop knocked the wind from them.

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"Goddamn it," Devon said as he gasped for air. "If it's not one thing, it's another."

The three cackled and lost their grip on each other, rolling around on the mattress. Bit leaned over and gave Devon a raspberry on his chest.

"Really, I gotta go," Devon said, squirming. Bit relented and he hustled to the bathroom. "When I get out of here," he said, "I'm still gonna screw the shit out of both of you."

In the wreckage of Bit's room, Markie returned to find Kim sitting quiet on the floor, the same as when she had left to pick up the phone. Kim was making spirals in the dust piles they had collected.

"That was Devon," Markie said. "He got Bit, and thank God, they're all right. They're hiding out at a friend's." She picked up her broom again, and Kim slid the dustpan in place on her knees. The remnants of Bit's window tinkled softly as the girls swept them away into a garbage bag. They had already filled two bags with the crushed bureau, slashed clothing, and bed stuffing. Finally, the room appeared organized.

Kim coughed from the dust in her lungs. "Are you tired?" Markie asked, "I can scoop if you are."

"I'm not tired," Kim said. She chased a line of splinters that had not made it into her dustpan.

The whirr of a car cruising past rumbled against the walls and the remnants of the breeze it stirred blew in the open window. The frame was intact but the glass and the wooden sash edges were cleaned off and packed away.

Markie stared at the lights in the building across from them. "I think we're okay for now," she said. "We can just cover the window, and we'll be done."

Kim stood up and stretched. She sat on a pile of rescued clothes and stared at her sparkling toenails. "What are we going to use?"

Markie approached the open hole and measured it with her arms. She glanced at a pile of blankets but then fanned herself with her arm as a bead of sweat left her brow. "There's some Saran Wrap in the kitchen," she said. "I'll get it."

When she left, Kim poked her head out the window. It was a straight drop, several stories to the ground. The nearest surface was the rooftop of the house next door. She peered at the roof edge but could not see any claw scratches. She shifted herself alongside the window as Markie scuffled in with the plastic roll.

"Take an end," Markie said. They carefully held each sheet flat and pressed it over the hole, as Kim used a free hand to rip off a piece of duct tape. They observed the plastic sheet sucking in and out with the air pressure. The room became motionless and the temperature rose.

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Kim put the tape down and held her arms to her chest. She trembled, as if she had come off a long bike ride. She made sure to catch Markie's eyes. "Thanks for letting me stay," she said.

Markie flashed her a quick smirk. "No problem," she said. "Thanks for helping. This would've taken me all night."

Kim stood close to Markie. "I meant it," she said, and drew her arms around Markie's neck and let her lips settle onto Markie's. They were both still. Markie's eyes darted as if they were awaiting instructions. She tasted Kim and her luscious lips, and then spat her out. She pushed Kim off her and shook her head.

"What the hell was that for?" Markie said. Her arms kept waving, as if casting phantoms aside.

Kim dropped her arms to her side. "I'm sorry," she said, "I was hoping that you were, like, asking me if we wanted to try this again."

Markie swung her head toward the ceiling. "Look, if I wanted something, I'd ask you," she said. She turned back to the door. "I think you should go."

Kim followed her and stopped at the threshold to Bit's room. "Yeah," she said. "Thanks for inviting me. I'm still the same girl, you know. Whatever you wanted is still right here."

Markie pointed to the kitchen. "And it can stay right there," she said. "I'm really obvious, okay? We're over."

Kim took her boots from the hallway and laced herself up. Markie stayed in the room and kept an eye on her from the doorway. When Kim was done, Markie returned to the kitchen and opened the door for her.

Kim made sure her pockets were filled with everything that had come with her. "Bye," she said as she cruised by Markie.

"Bye."

Kim spun around and caught her off guard. "If you're so honest," she said, "tell yourself why it took you three seconds to stop kissing me. I counted."

Markie looked away. "Whatever," she said as she closed the door tight.

Chapter 4—Sunday Morning

Bit woke up on a floor she did not recognize. Two sets of legs juttied out over the side of the futon above her and she realized she had lost out on the nocturnal struggle for bedspace. She sorted through the clothes around her until she had found her pants, but her pockets only had a little money and her keys. Her pills were still in the cabinet at home. They kept her face clear, her skin healthier, her face and body hair lighter, her boobs present, and a million other things that doctors could not measure. If a couple of days passed without them, she would grow irritable from her body subtly falling apart. It worried her as if she had bit the inside of her mouth and knew that a painful canker sore would grow there soon.

Bit scanned the room for cords and found a phone disguised as a ship in a bottle. She dialed Markie's cell number and waited for the first ring. And the second.

"Hello," a groggy voice said in the speaker.

"Hey Markie, I'm okay," Bit whispered, glancing at the lumps under the sheets behind her. "I was wondering if you could do me a tremendous favor."

"Like what?" the voice said, as if it had already done Bit enough favors for one lifetime.

"Could you bring my pills over?" Bit said, "The two brown ones in the cabinet over the sink."

There was some shuffling and sniffing on the other end of the phone. "Now?" Markie said.

"No, whenever." She crawled over the futon to peek out the window, only to see that it faced out back to a similar-sized tower of apartments. "I think there's a trashcan in front of the house next door. Could you put the pills in a McDonald's bag and toss them there?"

The phone delivered a scratching sound, similar to pen on paper. "Is Wendy's okay?" Markie said. "I hate McDonald's."

"Sure," Bit said. She wandered toward the kitchen, but she reached the end of the cord, so she headed back toward the receiver, "Just call me back when you do it."

"Probably be over this afternoon," Markie said. The phone remained on but she said nothing for a minute.

"Hello?" Bit said, then hung up. Someone had returned to sleep.

Eventually, Devon opened his eyes and followed Bit's wanderings around the loft. Her hair was wet and stringy. She had a white paper in her hand. He plodded over to her, and peeked his head around her side to read it.

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toothbrushes – any
Crest Mint – Devon
Jericho Hair Coloring, Burgundy – Bit
Mach 3 + blades – Devon
Gillette Shaving Foam – Devon

He grinned. “You’re so domesticated,” he said.

She pointed to the pot. “There’s some coffee brewing,” she said. He took the cup she gave him and poured himself some. He washed his cotton mouth free. He reached up to touch his own hair but thought better of it.

“I’ll make some breakfast,” he said. “After I get clean.”

She pattered to the workbench and continued her list. “I don’t have much money left,” she said. “My ATM card’s at home, but I’ll pay you back.”

He glanced at his pile of valuables on the floor by the television. “I’ve got mine,” he said. “I can loan you a little. If you don’t pay me back, I can always out you to the supers.”

She kept staring at her list but stuck her middle finger in his direction.

Devon showered and checked the cabinets for breakfast. Galeno had plenty of Sugar Smacks, Cinnamon Toast Crunch, and Fruit Loops. He pulled out flour, eggs, and butter. This was a flapjack morning.

Galeno arose from all the fuss and claimed the bathroom as Devon began his mixing. When she came out, she joined Bit by the bed, far from Devon to avoid the splatter. She grabbed some *Glamour* magazines and flipped through them.

Butter and maple syrup saturated the air. Bit plugged in Galeno’s laptop and searched the Internet for any records of “Ariadne’s 24 Hour Flower” shop but found nothing. She slumped on the workbench and eyed the wall. Behind the entertainment center was a black-and-white photograph of a tall punk girl with short spiked hair and a dark lipstick smudge on her cheek. The girl wore a plaid zoot suit, and her arm was wrapped around a younger Galeno, whose lips were puckering at the camera.

Galeno lay on her chest on the floor. She was flipping through the magazine at the top of one of her many piles. The girl had so much energy, and the sex had not mellowed her out at all. Last night, Bit had kept score. Herself – 3. Devon – 2. Galeno – none. It was odd seeing her without her requisite beer, nachos, and bar table.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Bit said aloud. She put a hand to her mouth, but the words had already come out.

Galeno rolled on her side to face Bit. Her lips made a straight line. “Yeah.”

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Bit leaned over the bedside. "Are you okay if we stay here?" Bit said. "In case you guys want to get together?"

Galeno drew a deep breath and let it out fast. "Yeah, it's fine," she said and drummed the magazines beside her.

Devon splattered oil as he poured another dollop of butter on the griddle. Bit made sure he was all right, and seeing he was, grinned and shook her head. Galeno was still watching her when she turned back. "How long has it been since you've seen her?" Bit said, too fast.

Galeno stopped drumming, and traced the math on the floor with her index finger. She whistled. "Two years." She tossed a *Glamour* magazine to Bit, open to a photo spread. The model had the same eyes as the girl in the photograph. A trail of sequins ran over nude hose up the model's legs, and around her waist. Her tank top was metallic, with just too much cleavage. She had wild white hair shining atop a radiant face.

Bit handed the magazine back. "Goddamn," she said.

Galeno returned the magazine to the pile. "Yeah, screw this," she said and grabbed a *Time*. Bit loaded up a browser to find something equally innocuous.

After a few minutes, Devon dumped a short stack of buttered flapjacks in front of the two of them. He aimed his wooden spoon, covered in batter, at Bit. "I'm wondering, out of a hundred-something people, why us? I mean, where did the supers get the idea that you shot the Hawk guy? And they didn't even come after you until you were at my place. What was up with that?"

Bit sunk her tongue into the slice of the griddle cake and sucked out the apple chunks Devon had mixed in, "Beats me," she said, "There could have been another one watching us when we got mugged. Like, backup."

Devon ladled a scoop of batter onto the range for himself. "And didn't do anything to help the Hawk out?" he said.

Galeno tapped her plate to scoop up the syrup. "Maybe they were taping it," she said, "They could sell it to whoever for thousands. Sweet deal."

Bit put her feet up on the bed. "So, who do they sell to?" she said, "The pics in the paper are garbage."

Devon turned back to her. "Oh, come on, they've got military hardware. Gee, I wonder who would want their pictures."

The sugar puddle on Bit's plate flowed toward the laptop's keyboard so she put it on the floor. "If they're military and I got away, their tactics are lousy," she said, "None of them would let themselves get taken down like the Hawk was."

Galeno heaved herself up so she could see both Bit and Devon. "Even if they saw Bit steal the head. How the hell did they know who

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you are, Devon?"

He shrugged. "Maybe they ran my face through some FBI identification program. Maybe crazy legs over there was screaming my name too many times. Beats me."

Bit stared at Devon's pile of identification papers. "Or our driver's licenses," she said.

Devon and Galeno blinked. The pancakes splattered more oil from the range.

"You said the Lion kept calling me 'he'," she said to Devon, "Well, my license has a big M in the gender box."

Devon raised his eyebrows and did not mention what his license read. "Except, how did they get our licenses?" he said, "From the cops? The mugger guy had them stuffed in his pocket."

"You'd know," she said, "That part's still a blur to me."

Galeno stood up with a gleam in her face. "They've been operating for a year, and the cops haven't arrested them? You know what that means? Cahoots or payoff."

Bit took her plate to the sink. "Great. Sure you still want me to stay here?"

Galeno joined her and shrugged. "As long as you don't go out at night. Why not?"

Devon turned up the flame to cook his own breakfast faster. He stared at the black bubbling surface of the skillet. "You know, the mugger guy shouldn't be alive," he said, "After what the Hawk did to him."

Bit leaned against the counter and watched the soot particles on the linoleum.

Galeno sat nearby on a padded metal stool. "I hear about some guy whaling on another like that," she said, "It's always personal. Money, girls, or some honor crap."

Bit furrowed her brow at Galeno. "So why'd he wait until we showed up?"

"I don't know," Galeno said, "Life's funny like that."

Bit rolled her eyes at her. "You'd have thought that they wouldn't want witnesses."

Devon tossed the last flapjack on his plate and switched the stove off. "Maybe they did. I thought the Hawk called him a motherfucker before he turned around."

Bit ran her fingers through her hair. They hit a tangle and she started to carefully undo it. "Why?"

Galeno bit her lip. "Maybe the mugger was working for them," she said.

Devon drained the grease from the skillet into a metal can. They listened to it crackle.

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Bit pushed herself from the counter and paced. "Uh-uh," she said, "They had to be just following him. They knew where he operated and just wanted to catch him in the act."

Galeno fluttered her fingers on the backs of her hands. "What if it was a performance?" she said, "What if they paid this guy to mug you, so the Hawk could save you? It's a great way to get more press. So they taped it, but something went wrong. People go crazy in front of cameras sometimes, especially when you use real managers, don't ask me why. The crowd got out of control, so they ship the mugger out to some private hospital to keep him from blowing the scheme. They get the licenses from his pocket, and they see you running off with the head on film."

Bit crossed her arms and walked to the other side of the room.

Devon put his plate down, and chased after her to calm her. She twisted around and stopped him with a stare. She dug her nails into her fist. He threw up his hands and returned to his food, as it was getting cold.

Galeno took a deep breath and picked up Bit's shopping list from the counter, as well as her own case of art supplies on the floor. "I got to run to class," she said, "Devon, I'll pick up your clothes from Jake."

He perched on her stool while he finished chewing. "Okay."

Bit's fingers returned to the knot in her hair. She noted that Galeno had not taken her laptop, and rushed back to it to recheck everything she thought she knew.

When Galeno came home that afternoon, Bit and Devon were in a silent funk. Bit had turned to the news magazines and given Devon the laptop. He put it aside as Galeno tossed a bag on his lap, filled with his leathers, jeans, and boots. The room was almost as hot as the outdoors, so he checked them over for damage and put them with the rest of his belongings. Galeno turned on a bad seventies cop-and-robber flick to get some noise in her apartment.

The phone rang during a commercial break. Bit dashed to the receiver but waited for her host to pick it up. Galeno listened to the caller and offered it to her, "For you. Don't make it a habit, okay?"

Bit nodded and accepted it. "Hey, Markie," she said.

"I put your meds in a Taco Bell bag," Markie said. Her voice was hard to hear over the wind and engine rushing, "I found the can, no sweat, but some of the neighbors were out so I circled the block until they were gone."

Bit leaned into the receiver, straining to make her out. "This means the world to me," she said loud, in case Markie was having the same trouble.

"Yeah, and guess what?" Markie said, "Before I left, I got a visit

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from your new friends, the police. Well, one officer."

Bit located the volume control for the phone, and turned it up. "I figured they might show up eventually. How did it go?"

"He only wanted to know where you were," Markie said, "I said, last I knew, you were at Devon's. I mean, I can lie pretty well, but not that well. He didn't ask about your room, so I don't think the landlady knows about it yet."

Bit paced in the corner. "Okay, thanks for everything," she said, "I don't know how long I'm going to be here, but I'll keep in touch." She placed the phone down, and the two sides of the bottle ship linked perfectly. She lifted and hung the phone again to appreciate its fit.

Galeno took a handful from one of her cereal boxes over the sink. Bit bounced over to her and grinned. "Galeno," she said, "If you get a second, could you pick up my pills from the can next door? They're in a Taco Bell bag."

Galeno nodded. "Sure," she said, "If you give me a hand tying the handkerchiefs later."

"Deal," Bit said, and Galeno rose to find her sneakers.

Devon grabbed his slacks and leapt into them. "I'll get it."

"Bull, you will," Bit said, and walked to the front door.

Devon hustled after her and slipped on his boots. "It's like fifty feet away," he said, "You're being paranoid."

Her voice broke while she leaned over him. "Devon, I don't have anywhere else to go."

"That's your problem," he said. His fingers whipped the laces tight against his feet, and he stuck his two remaining cigarettes in his vest. "I'll just be a minute. And if they see me or catch me, I won't come back."

Bit did not budge. "If you go out there, I'm coming with." She grabbed her own sneakers and slipped her feet into them.

Devon sighed. "You are not going out there."

She buckled her belt to make sure it was secured. She tossed her hair. "Give me a reason not to."

Devon threw up his hands. "Bit, I really need a smoke. I'll only be five minutes, and I'll have your meds."

Galeno's eyes were raining fire as she forced herself between them. "Guys, why don't you both get out of my apartment. Do whatever you need to do to clean yourselves out and then, maybe, I'll let you back in."

"Now, wait a second," Devon said, but Bit grabbed his shoulder. She gave him a quick stare and then looked out the window at the sunlight. He buttoned his lip and followed Bit out the door.

Galeno shook her head and collapsed on her bed in peace.

The bright day washed over Bit and Devon like a searchlight. The gray

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buildings hid their occupants as if behind panes of one-way glass. The porch creaked slightly, liable to snap if they waited too much longer on it. Two little boys with chalk were drawing exotic monsters on the sidewalk nearby. Devon whipped out a cigarette and hunted for his lighter.

"Ah, fuck," he said, and put his hand over his mouth when they looked up at him. They soon lost interest and returned to their monsters.

Devon crouched on the steps and searched through his pockets for his lighter. Bit tapped his shoulder and motioned toward the trash can. She stuffed her hands in her jeans and made her way to it. Devon scanned up and down the road for cars.

Stringy filth clung to the edges of the trash can. The tip of the Taco Bell bag peeked out under an empty carton of energy drinks. Bit took a breath and plunged in her hand.

One of the boys dropped his chalk. "Hey," he said and ran over to her. He wore a hip-hop T-shirt with a blue stain the same color as a slurpy. "Are those drugs in there?"

Bit gripped the bag but did not pull it up. The kid pushed himself on his tiptoes, ready to go after the bag if she did not take it. "What makes you say that?"

The kid shrugged. "I saw some girl throw them in there from her car," he said, "She almost hit me."

Bit pulled out the bag and shook the concealed hamburger grime off. "Well, yes," she said, "These are drugs. Expensive ones, too, about a hundred dollars in this bag."

The boy leaned forward, over an invisible line in the ground. "No way. Can I see?"

Bit opened the top and pointed it at him. "Knock yourself out."

The boy's face scrunched down. "Those're pills," he said, "Not drugs. Get your facts straight."

Bit took her bag back and shook her head at him. "Sorry about that," she said, and returned to the porch. Devon was knocking his cigarettes against his hand. He watched the boy return to his monsters and took a step onto the sidewalk. "Hey, kid, you got a light?"

The boy saw the cigarettes and said, "Uh-huh." He sped down the street, while the other boy kept drawing.

Bit glanced anxiously at the spaces between the houses, in case the boy returned with company. She listened to her pills rattle and bent down beside Devon. "We should go out back," she said.

Devon kept hammering the cigarettes into his palm. "He'll come back."

Bit stared at the street end. She swore she could see the sun move by the time the gentle tap of the boy's sneakers signaled his return. He stopped before them, out of breath, and handed Devon a magnifying

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glass with a lens as big as his face. "Here," he said, "This is what my brother uses."

Devon took the glass and shook his head. "Sorry," he said, "I don't know what your brother smokes but this isn't strong enough to light it."

"Gimme that." The boy snatched the glass back. He took out a black scrap of paper from his pants and put it on the cement sidewalk. He knelt down, and held the glass over the paper. His eyes widened as if he was drawing on a grain of sand. The sunpoint of the paper glared back and sputtered into flame. The boy picked up the burning paper and offered it to Devon. "Here you go," he said. "You're stupid."

Devon took the paper and nodded, "Thanks." He dipped the cigarette tip into the fire and stomped the paper out. Bit reached in her jeans and gave the boy a couple of dollars. Devon sucked down a drag and blinked at the boy. "And you're a real asshole," he said. The boy smiled, and hurried back to his chalk.

Bit poked her head around the side of Galeno's building. "C'mon," she said as she heard a car pull into the street, "Let's finish this out back."

The rear of the building only had four feet between the house wall and a tall picket fence. It was shaded completely. Sand, butts, and junk food wrappers covered the ground. Bit knocked on the gray wood planks that separated the properties.

"Didn't they used to put these out front?" she said. She dry-swallowed her morning dosage of pills.

Devon read the graffiti written on the underside of a balcony jutting out above him. There were a few band references, but the rest was illegible.

Bit put her fingers around the base of his cigarette. Before he could stop her, she snatched it and sucked down once, then she handed it back. She rested against the fence. "Stress sucks. Whenever I get pushed like this, I start thinking about suicide." Devon frowned at her but she rolled her eyes at him. "Not that I would. But, for a second, I wished I had thrown myself into the street instead of that woman."

Devon watched his smoke drift away. "You don't want to go that way," he said, "Too painful, and you might end up like Christopher Reeve for the rest of your life. Now, slashed wrists in a hot bathtub, you're all set."

Bit bunched up her bag around her bottles. "I don't know," she said, "If you're going to go comfortable and painless, then pills in an abandoned building are the way to go. I wouldn't want to freak Markie out. This is just between me and the universe."

Devon chuckled. "You said it. I can't stand people who attempt suicide to announce how lonely they are. If you're going to throw

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yourself off something, do it where the animals will get to your body first."

Bit knocked on the wood behind her and brushed her hair back. "I threw myself out of the second floor of my house once," she said, "I was in seventh grade, and my algebra homework was too much for me. It was only ten feet off the ground, but I'd heard that it was the throwing that killed you. Boy, was I disappointed."

Devon snickered. He kicked up a clump of Twinkie wrappers. "All my friends were into the knife thing. It wasn't as fun as huffing though. I got a fresh can of paint from my dad, and it was like eating Mexican food underwater in the sky. I was sneaking Ritalin for a while, which got me hyper. I wished I could autoerotically asphyxiate. All the guys I heard about were doing it, but it was a bitch to keep horny with that bag over my head."

Bit stomped the wrapper with her foot and played with it. She did not lift her head. "I always regretted it afterwards, and I started wishing my dad had molested me or something. There was this girl I knew in middle school who was raped in her own bed by her brother. Her parents hushed it up. She still had to sleep in that bed every night. She took the pill route. I so wanted to be her."

He flicked his face fuzz, just to feel it. "You would have fit in with the knife crowd," he said.

Bit shook her head and stuck her elbows against the fence. "I'm too old to be thinking about suicide," she said. "It's such a kid's thing. Sometimes, I feel like there are all these parts of me, and they age at different rates. My stress side's stuck in prepubescence, and I wish I could send it to boot camp."

Devon took another drag and lit the last cigarette off the dying ember. "Well, if all this doesn't help it, nothing will," he said. "Do you want to go for a walk?"

She grimaced as the sunlight peeked between the homes. "I shouldn't," she said. "Just in case. If you pass by a convenience store, could you pick me up a comic or three? I don't care which."

Devon stepped away from the wall. "How about a book?"

She grinned back at him. "No, pictures," she said. "Go have some fun."

Devon withdrew a few hundred dollars from a nearby ATM, almost emptying his bank account. He slipped the money under his shirt, then bought a small stack of comics for Bit and a selection of body paints for Galeno's next video project.

Bit was still behind the building when he returned. She spent the rest of the afternoon on a borrowed blanket, flipping through her presents several times; first for the story, then for the art, and finally for

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the advertisements. When they returned inside, Galeno seemed satisfied by the body paint, though she wondered if a stick of gum might have had the same effect. Devon found his Zippo lighter in his pile of documents and wedged it at the bottom of his jeans pocket. He provided some food money, and they ordered out subs. Devon had steak, Bit had chicken parmesan, and Galeno had a vegetarian fried in meat drippings. They sat around the window behind the bed, mesmerized by gray houses turning a rosy pink in the setting sun.

As they finished their food, Bit pointed at the television. "Before that thing goes on again," she said, "We should call Ryan and see if she came up with anything."

Devon backed himself off the bed and balled up his greasy wax paper. He dunked it in the trash for two points and gestured at the phone. "May I?" he said.

"Yeah, go ahead," Galeno said as she followed him over. "I want to know, too."

Devon dialed Ryan's number. Bit joined them huddled around the receiver.

"Hello?"

"It's Devon. We're hiding out so if you tried to call me at home, that's why I didn't pick up." He wobbled his eyebrows at Bit for effect.

"Oh, hey," she said, "Yeah, I found a few things. There are a few engraved serial numbers but they don't mean anything to me. That transmitter device has an internal battery, but it was dead by the time I opened it. I just replaced it with a CR2032 and now it's constantly sending out a pulse of some kind. I'll bring it into work tomorrow and figure out the exact frequency. It uses a serial cable to connect to the suit so I figured out the pinouts and attached it to my computer. You know what it was outputting?"

"You know I don't know," Devon scolded.

"A Java bytecode," she said, "With a simple string that says, 'Shutdown.'"

Bit brushed her hair over her ear so she could listen better.

"Why wouldn't it?" Devon said.

"Well," Ryan said, "I can't figure out if it does anything else. Either the suit ignores it, or the device is expecting to pick up some signal that tells it to say something else. Maybe a nearby broadcast."

"Anything else?" Devon said. Bit and Galeno breathed in his face, making him queasy.

Ryan kept going as if she had not heard him, "And another thing, if this is military, that's a security risk. Why not something proprietary? Java is slow as shit, especially on a piece of hardware that has to react quicker than your body."

Devon wafted the air away with his hand. "So," he said, "Any ideas

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why they want to transmit that?"

"If they mean to let the average programmer take a swing at it, then yeah," she said.

Bit leaned into Devon's ear and whispered, "Transmitter's a leash?"

Devon widened his eyes in surprised. He mouthed the words, "Good point," and returned to the phone. "Hang on," he said, "If the transmitter shuts the suit down when it isn't being told not to, doesn't that make it like an electronic leash?"

"Uh-huh," she said quickly, "That's pretty much what I thought."

Devon bent his head back in surprise. "Then, why didn't they pull the plug on the Hawk?" he said.

"I don't know," Ryan said, "Did they want to? Maybe there were too many watchers to risk it."

Bit and Galeno eyed each other with curiosity. Devon's amazement fell from his face. "You are making sure that signal doesn't leave your house, right?"

"Already thought of that," Ryan said, "I've been dampening it with wet towels and chunks of lead from work. I thought about destroying the deerie, too, but you guys wouldn't have appreciated that."

"Thanks," Devon said, "I don't want to stay on too long, because we're all paranoid here. I'm at Galeno's," he read off her phone number, "And let us know what you find out tomorrow."

"No problem," Ryan said, "Call often."

Devon hung up and moved away from them to get some fresh breaths.

Bit played with the tips of her hair and paced over the Twister mat. "Wild guess," she said, "That van you saw is the broadcaster."

"Probably," Devon said and shrugged. "The range could be for miles, though."

Galeno popped on the television and took a spot on her bed. "They might be out again," she called over to them, and pulled the shade over her dark window. "We should watch the news."

The standard local and national news stories sped by with no references to the vigilantes. Devon went to the fridge to get himself a soda when Bit yelped. He spun around to see a crude drawing of Bit's face staring out from the screen.

"Police are looking for this woman tonight, in connection with the case of Miss Hendrat, the victim who was saved by one of the vigilantes after she was thrown into the street last night," the announcer said, "Jessica Bitters is twenty-three and lives in the Somerville area."

They cut to a police officer in bright camera lights, making his scruffy mustache appear bushier. "We think she may know something about the person who did this," the officer said. "We don't know if this was an accident, and we'd like this resolved as quickly as possible."

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Bit crouched on her tiptoes. She glared at the screen, daring the officer to mention the “tranny” word in connection with her. The officer did not.

Devon brought her a soda. “Easy,” he said, putting his arms on her shoulders. Bit’s fingers climbed over his and dug into his skin. “How did they know it was me?” she said, “I didn’t see anyone I knew or...wait. Sandy. I told her.”

Devon slowly released his grip. “Settle down,” he said, “It wasn’t her. I kinda mentioned your name to the officer who came to my apartment.”

Bit’s hands fell off him like rotted fruit from a tree. “Kinda?”

Devon inched away from her. “Well, what was I supposed to say? I brought over some chick I didn’t know, and some vigilante busted in after her? You know how dumb that sounds?”

Bit rose up, her mouth aghast. “You could have used another name.”

“I couldn’t think straight,” Devon shrugged, “And I’m not the only one chucking people around to save their skin.”

Bit sighed and shook her head once. “Well, you’re stuck with me now,” she said.

Galeno stood up and put her hands out to separate them. “Children,” she said.

“So,” Devon scowled at Bit, “You feeling like committing suicide right now? ‘Cause it would make my life a hell of a lot easier.”

Bit turned away and mumbled, “...doesn’t solve anything...”

Devon leaned in toward her but Galeno remained firmly in the way. “What was that?” he said.

“I said, suicide doesn’t solve anything,” she exhaled fast, almost a chuckle, “Homicide does.”

Devon stopped and scratched his chin. “You’re serious.”

She waited a few seconds and blew the air around her. “No,” she said. “Can’t I rant without you taking it personally?”

Galeno stepped away as Devon sighed and rolled his eyes up toward the sky. “Why me?” he said. Bit came over slowly to him, and he spread his arms out for her. Galeno picked up a half-folded handkerchief by her workbench and finished it.

When they released each other, Bit gestured over to the brown bottles on the countertop. “Sure you don’t want to try some?” she said to Devon. “They’re good for what ails you.”

Chapter 5—Monday Evening

Markie stepped out of her office building and joined her co-workers in the first raindrops that had fallen in many days. A boy passed carrying a radio on which the announcer shouted, “The Northeast Heat Wave is near the end! Hallelujah!” Markie turned to one of the other office girls. “Please,” she said. “This is nothing compared to my grandma’s place in the Philippines.” She waved goodbye and kicked one of the puddles forming on the street. The rain crept under her cheap Sears pants suit, and she hurried to get to the subway.

The rain dredged up the stench of rotting vegetables through the steam grates. The concrete around her absorbed no odor. Markie cupped her hands over her mouth and nose. She would never be rid of it.

It was the same as the day she had thrown her rosary down the garbage disposal, when she was nine. She had doused it with water, and listened as the grinding blades tore it to shreds. Her mother’s gift had vanished, but not the words that had come with it. “You’re old enough for this now. You’re not as much of a bother as you used to be.” Despite the warning, the rosary had not stopped her mother from pulling an imaginary zipper over her mouth. Markie still had to be reminded to sit upright, or keep her head sunken down in prayer. She had the privilege of tasting the coarse wafer and acrid wine on the condition she received a week’s worth of reminders that she could never be good enough for anything.

Life had been better in the days before the rosary. She could be silly and unashamed when she was allowed to remove it during playtime or bath time. So down the sink disposal it went. Markie spent three hours in perfect freedom, chasing dogs and girls in her prefabricated Portland neighborhood.

When her mother rinsed off the dishes after dinner, the sink stopped up. She flicked the disposal on and off but the water would not go down. The remnants of the macaroni, weenies, peas and mashed potatoes floated up. Markie’s father had changed into his overalls and unscrewed the pipe over a bucket. When the stoppage drained, he pulled forth the ball of matted vegetables and wooden beads. Markie fled to her room. Her mother chased her and thrust the soggy clump at her.

“Where is your rosary?” her mother said. Markie had only shaken her head. Her mother had made her sit very still and slipped the squishy mess around her neck.

The smell of Palmolive and mush made her want to hurry to the toilet, but Markie had not removed it because she was witness to a miracle. Apart from some minor chipping, the rosary was unharmed. In

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the days that followed, she had considered tempting her God by setting the rosary on the railroad tracks, losing it under the lawnmower, or cutting it apart on the highway. However, her mother had checked her neck every morning and evening for weeks. There was no telling what she might do to Markie if any additional miracles happened.

Markie understood that there was something worse than being a bother, and that was being a girl who had no God.

As the Divine resurrected Himself in Markie's nostrils, she slipped a cherry cough drop in her mouth to drown Him out. The well-scrubbed rosary was far away in a locked box in her closet, under a stack of dyke smut, so that she always knew where it was. Until she had moved to Boston and had the space to think back, she had never considered that her mother's own rosary hadn't smelled right, either.

A tire bounced over a pothole, sending a wave against her outfit. She glanced at the city shops for an Army surplus store where she could pick up a gas mask. A pot of coffee might do the same trick. She hustled down the steps to the T and headed to Davis Square for her favorite coffee shop.

The rain tapered off as she emerged into the square and made a beeline for Kasha's Coffee. Her sneakers squished, soaked as she was. As she entered the coffee shop, the comforting aroma of dried beans and chocolate calmed her down. The air conditioner was still running full blast. She took her place in line and ordered her cup of heat.

As soon as the dark roast latté hit her fingers, a raven-haired girl in boot cut jeans, thick glasses and flip-flops waved to her from the end of a nearby couch. Markie swiped the last free wicker chair and sat across from her.

Markie tasted the girl's mouth before she took her first sip of coffee. "Hey, Amber. You and Carrie still going together?"

Amber spoke low, like a librarian. "Of course. I'm glad you made it. I heard about your roommate on the news. How's she doing?"

Markie scootched closer. "God," she said. "Everyone has been asking me. As far as I know, she's fine. She emailed me this afternoon saying she's bored out of her mind. That's about it."

Amber took a dignified drink from her cup. "How did your date with Kim go?"

Markie shook her palm at her. "Dramafest," she said, "I find out she's never been with a girl. The less said, the better, okay?"

Amber widened her eyes to get Markie to continue, but it did not work. "Fine," Amber said. "Maybe you should tell me what I can ask about."

Markie let the coffee and foam run down her throat, becoming one with her cup before returning for air. "Politics," she said. "Oh, and why do they have the air conditioning up so high?"

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"So you'll buy more coffee," Amber said. "You know, not everyone has your email. Perhaps you should put out an announcement about Bit. Three people asked about her today at the bookstore, and one I didn't even know."

The chatter of the gathering drinkers around them was annoying, so they leaned in closer to hear each other.

"It was flattering at first," Markie said. "But now it's Bit this and Bit that and I didn't think anyone had heard of her until now. I hate it when other people drop their problems on me. Someone else can be her publicity agent."

"Do you think she did it?" Amber said, "Push that woman, I mean."

Markie shook her head and chattered her cup on her knee. "No. C'mon, I could kick her ass any day of the week."

Amber sat quietly and finished her cup. "I hope she makes it out okay. Sandy's organizing an Anti-Superhero rally on Saturday. Are you interested in going?"

Markie shrugged and reached for her pocket notebook. "Who else will be there?"

Amber drooped her shoulders in frustration. "I don't even know where they're holding it. These things are always set up at the last minute. I think they're going to say that the vigilantes are targeting queers, because of Bit. They broke in Devon's place, right?"

Markie put a finger to her lips. "And my place. But keep that to yourself. My landlady will freak."

Amber leaned up from the back of the couch and whispered, "When did they do that?"

Markie pressed against her ear. "Saturday night. Same time as Devon's."

Amber began to say, "Wasn't Kim over..." but stopped. Kim was standing over them, in a dripping green poncho. Her hood was pulled back, and she wore dark violet lipstick and thick mascara, untouched by the rain. Her hair was the messiest Markie had ever seen.

"Hey, guys," she said to the cold faces that stared at her.

Markie sat back and dropped her leg to the floor. "Don't you have class now?" she said, and eyed the poncho. Kim would wear a mesh T-shirt in a snowstorm if it was a club night.

"Not for a little while," Kim said. "I thought I'd see you there, but, wow, you're here!"

Amber cocked her head, waiting for Kim's next move. "I don't think there are any more chairs."

Kim's eyes skirted the room like a claustrophobe's. "I'm not staying. I wanted to talk to you, Markie, about Saturday."

Markie took a swig from her cup and slid off the chair. "Okay, but be quick."

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Amber draped her legs to save Markie's chair for her. Markie followed Kim back into the warm soggy weather outside Kasha's. The mist hung even, and spilled into the voids cut by the pedestrians and cars. They stopped around a corner.

"I was out of line the other night," Kim said, "I wanted it to be special, but, shit. What's done is done."

Markie fiddled with her necklace and locked her eye's on Kim. "Right," she said, "I still don't want to see you."

Kim bit her lip and nodded. "I'm not looking to be friends or anything," she said. "It's just, I was there when the Lion thing wrecked your place and they're still after your roommate. They haven't come back, have they?"

Markie brushed the droplets of water collecting on her hair. "No."

Kim exhaled in relief. "I remember those claws. I dreamed about them, after you. One of those dreams that turns into a memory, and you think it's true, you know?"

Markie grew quiet. "Yeah."

"Your roommate, she's still okay, right?" Kim said. She stuck a foot out as if it was hard to keep still.

"Oh, Christ," Markie said, "You and the world want to know. Yeah, she's great. Never better. I brought her damned pills over so she doesn't have to go anywhere. So, fuck off, okay?"

Kim took a step away from the wall. "Fine, but I'm not the only one who wants to help. There's a rally getting started, and I've got this friend Melanie who can take her in if she needs..."

Markie stamped the ground and glared at her. "You had to come here and tell me that? You want to do the human shield thing, then you can go over to Galeno's and ask her yourself. Just quit following me."

Kim shut up and blinked at her. Markie spun around before Kim could continue and left her. Inside Kasha's, Markie emptied the remnants of her cup in a gulp and returned to her chair as Amber's legs swung away. Amber remained quiet and waited for Markie's glower to soften.

"So, did you handle her easy?" Amber said.

Markie lay her palms up in her lap. "Girl needs to be put down. She wanted to know about Bit, too. Whenever Bit gets out of hiding, she is going to have so many dates, I don't want to hear her complain ever again."

Amber fiddled with a newspaper at her side. "Well, at least you won't have to worry about her as much when her parents get into town."

Markie froze. "They're coming?" she said, "When? Who told you? Bit said it would take her own death to get them to come up from Philly."

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Amber mimicked Markie's confused stare. "They didn't call you? One of the customers at the bookstore told me."

Markie leaned forward. Two of her fingers gripped the metal rune on her neck. "Who?"

"Mel something, I think," Amber said, "Skinny, about my height, long brown hair, kinda ritzy. She said Bit's mom had asked her to find Bit before she gets here. She said Bit isn't answering her phone or anything."

"So why didn't you tell her to see me?" Markie said, "Hang on, was her name Melanie?"

Amber laughed. "Yes. She said she'd already seen you and you didn't know where Bit was."

"But I've never met that woman, and I know exactly where Bit is," Markie said, too loud. She clamped shut. She spun her head to confirm none of the crowd had heard her.

Amber adjusted herself in her seat and rested her cheek on her finger. "So, where did you get that name?"

Markie glanced at the shop's entrance. "Kim," she said, "She was like, this woman Melanie could take care of her. What did you tell her?"

Amber took a few short breaths and rested her forehead on her manicured hand. "Not much. I said she should post to some online lists, maybe ask around the co-op in Central Square, or Icarus," she said, "I didn't get a bad vibe off her. People see the rainbow flag outside and treat us like we're a queer phone directory anyway."

Markie shook in her chair. "Fuck, Kim works at the co-op."

"Does she know where Bit is?" Amber said.

"Maybe. I think I just told her."

Markie excused herself and darted outside, behind Kasha's. A few people-shapes treaded along the misty street, but none with Kim's build. She halted at a corner as a train of cars drove by, oblivious to the weather. Markie spotted a green pile of plastic under a hedge. She pulled it out to confirm Kim had been wearing it minutes earlier. She knew at least six bus stops within walking distance that she could check. She spat on the ground and grumbled back to the coffee shop.

Bit would have to take care of herself.

Pipes crisscrossed the ceiling over Bit's head, banging while the neighbors took their evening bath. She waited for them to stop shaking. Devon peeked down at her from the bedside and reached over to turn up the television. Almost seven channels came in, mostly news, sitcoms, and infomercials. Bit closed her eyes to ignore the racket and lay on her belly so she could see no higher than the television. Taped to the workbench behind them was the address and phone number of the nearby nightspot, where Galeno had gone for karaoke.

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As the banging grew more frequent, Devon stroked his temples and got to his feet. "I think I need another walk."

The shades were drawn. Bit rolled on her back as he stepped over her. "At night? Do you think you'll be okay?"

Devon sat beside the door and stuffed his feet into his footwear. "I guess so," he said. "I don't want to go stir-crazy on you or anything."

Bit nodded. "Okay, but leave me your wallet in case you don't come back."

Devon buttoned up his vest. "In your dreams. I'm only going around the block anyway. Don't have too much fun while I'm gone."

Bit kept the television on as background noise while Devon pulled the door open and closed. The loft grew to twice its size, and the pipes went silent. She re-read most of Galeno's magazines and cracked the window to cool off. She dreaded the first news program to come on. An anchorwoman with immaculately coifed hair announced a follow-up in the investigation of the Hawk's murder.

"The police spokesperson made a public statement tonight that they are very close to finding the person who shot the Hawk vigilante on Friday night," she said, "There has been a break in the case, which will be announced as soon as tomorrow."

Bit clicked the power button, and the woman's face dissolved into black. She glanced at the piles of videotapes which bloomed like a spider plant around the bed. Half the tapes lacked cases. Most were dubs, with their labels applied kitty-cornered, and titles scratched on so fast that "Jungle Slaves V" appeared almost the same as, "Janet's Frenzy X." Galeno had not included any descriptions.

The lens of a silver video camera poked out from the pile, as if watching her paw through places she did not belong. She put a tape called "Crossdressing Businessman" over it. She scrunched her nose at the tape. Straight crossdressers freaked her out. The camera begged to be used, so Bit pulled it out and attached it to the VCR.

She slid in a blank tape, and flicked on channel 3. One of the femme portraits on the wall appeared on the screen. She zoomed it in and out, wiggling the buttons to be in control. She turned it at herself and yelped at the figure which moved exactly like her on the television. Her own reflection never seemed right. Its shoulders were too wide, the collarbone too thick, and the legs seemed to disappear into the belly without hips to mark the transition.

The camera's tripod lay against the entertainment center but she preferred to play with the camera herself. She put the camera down and reached around the tripod to loosen its joints. She took one of the legs and began pumping it up and down with her best porn moans. She practiced her performance and hit record on the VCR to give Devon something to laugh at later. She sucked the handle, and whimpered with

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a wink to the camera.

Several knocks echoed off the door. One of the neighbors must have let Devon back in. She set the camera down on some of the magazines and skidded over the Twister game to the door.

"Back already?" she called out.

"Uh-huh."

She undid the latches and pulled the door open.

The Wolf and the Lion stood side-by-side against the entryway. They surveyed her with only a slight twist of their necks. She looked back but the window was not wide enough for her. They could take their time.

Bit's breath formed condensation against the Wolf's muzzle. Her reflection warped in its silvery-coal coat. The Wolf took a handful of her shirt and pulled her against him. The metal suit was warm, like the back of a refrigerator, and she opened her mouth to cry out. The blades on the Lion's hand wrapped around her neck and pulled in slowly. She gasped and flailed her arms and legs.

"Make a sound," the Wolf whispered, *"We end it here."*

Bit squished her eyes shut and forced her neck against the blades as she tried to nod yes. The Wolf pulled her into the shallow hall as the Lion let her windpipe spring back. The pain dissipated like smoke. The Wolf sucked in its own air through the mask. Its lips must have been moving. Behind the green glass, its pupils darted in several directions. It was scared.

The Lion grasped her wrists behind her back and slapped handcuffs on them. A bladed finger ran across her cheek and forced itself into her mouth, pulling it open. She spat on the dirty steel, as the Lion stuffed a bleached sock inside. It bound her feet, and then slid a blindfold over her eyes. The ground fell away from her as the Wolf slung her over its shoulder and dragged her outside. She shifted herself to keep the cuff's edges from tearing into her, and clenched her stomach to keep the hard shoulder from digging any deeper. She saw a flash of a streetlight glinting off the Wolf's armor. Light could peek through the space where the blindfold lay over her nose.

She was hurtled up, as if strapped to the top of a moving vehicle. The Wolf shook in the air yet landed with silence. Its arm on her waist did not let go. The shoulder swung her around and she bit down on the sickly-sweet sock. The rumbles of traffic were far below her.

At last, she plunged down. The Wolf landed on the street, but half its body kept going. Bit hit its neck. The Wolf groaned as the Lion helped it to its feet. *"Easy on that knee,"* it said in a slightly higher pitch than the Wolf.

"Damn. My fault, not the suit's," the Wolf said. It took a practice step forward, and balanced itself.

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Bit chewed the sock, as her internal liquids sloshed about. The back of a van creaked open. The Wolf dropped her on the rubbery floor, smearing her cheek. A workstation hummed against one of the walls. The Lion and the Wolf stepped over her, and a heavy boot grazed her back. She let out a muffled yelp.

By the workstation, a younger woman's voice said, "Take it easy. She's not going anywhere."

An arm reached over Bit to slam the back door shut as the van started. The driver did not speak. Something ruffled beside the workstation, and Bit turned her head toward it. Through the slit in her blindfold, she saw a dull brown package. As the van shifted into the road, Bit did not resist the momentum and slid closer to the package. She waited until her captors began talking to themselves.

She squinted to make out several short lines, in the space usually reserved for the send-to and return addresses. The first line on the main address was short, as if it only had three letters. Two long dark lines ran around the package, but they grew in size as the van shook. They were spaces, not lines. There were actually three packages stacked on top of each other. Only one of their addresses faced her. As they took a corner, she relaxed and let her forehead hit one package. The rippled smoothness of duct tape on the edges of the brown paper stroked her forehead. She exhaled and her breath blew back a foot down her chest. The boxes must have been at least that high. A hand gripped her cuffs and pulled her back.

Several minutes later, the van slowed and stopped. The woman stepped over her and retrieved the packages. She passed them to the driver, who climbed out, and returned after a few seconds.

An armored bulk leaned over her. "*They'll see what you did, soon,*" the Wolf said. It rustled as the woman stood over her and took its arm.

"Will you please sit down," the woman said, "You might hurt your leg more."

The arm shook, and the woman stepped away. "*Do you want me to go to the hospital?*" the Wolf said, "*Is that what you want?*"

The van was silent for a minute, before the driver started it up again.

A bench on the wall groaned as the Wolf sat down. Bit ached, and she closed her eyes to survive the rest of the ride.

Devon stopped his walk to admire the moon's reflection in a puddle. It trembled as the subway ran by, protected behind a cage running parallel to the street. Only machines shared the road with him. The world was comfortably genderless. It did not assume there was something wrong if it and Devon were not processing their latest issue. Two young dykes in overalls passed behind him, chatting away about a crazy work

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schedule. He shook his head and waited for them to depart.

He tossed a pebble in the water to skew the reflection again. The moon was fast. He looked up. Two telephone cables hung across the roadway. The cables were the perfect distance apart to frame the moon, but it slipped under the higher cable and escaped its prison.

The rush of a large vehicle snapped his attention to the road, and he stepped back to avoid getting splattered with the water. He leaned against the gate behind him and saw the Ariadne's 24-Hour Flowers van pass by. His heart jumped, and he broke into a jog, following it as it shot away in the opposite direction from Galeno's place. It had not noticed him. He hunkered over, put his hands in his pants, and headed home.

He had passed through neighborhoods before where the lights stayed on all night behind drawn curtains, so he did not find the busted lock on Galeno's building too surprising. He checked the street for any signs of the phantom van, then went up the narrow stairs. He paused halfway to watch the crack of light coming from the loft door. The bed inside did not squeak, no footsteps shuffled, and the pipes overhead did not break. He scratched his chin. Galeno would return in a few hours, but Devon got antsy waiting five minutes for the Quik-Pic at the convenience store.

"Bit?" his voice rose quietly. He pushed the door wide and leaned inside. Her shoes lay by the Twister game, next to Galeno's backup sandals. The tripod leaned against the bed. His legs appeared on the television. His eyes followed the cable to the camera, which waited for him to pick it up.

His skin shivered and his clothes gripped him tighter, like in college, when he had to change in the women's locker room after a workout.

He pressed the rewind button on the VCR, and the screen turned to static. While he waited for a picture, his attention wandered to the walls and furniture, which had changed color slightly. The entertainment center sat on its haunches. The videotapes and paper cups coiled around the bed, waiting to strike.

He released the button when he saw the two sets of metallic legs on the television, with a pair of jeans and socks in between them, struggling. The Lion bent down and snapped cuffs on her legs. He hit the stop button and turned away.

He picked up a strand of her hair from the pillowcase, and twirled it in his fingertips. It was strawberry blond, from near her scalp where the dye had not reached. He blew it off his hand and watched it twirl to the ground. He grabbed a pen and scribbled a note for Galeno. "Watch the video. I know I fucked up. I'll be back later tonight or tomorrow. Don't wait up."

He taped it to the camera, and stomped out of the room, quietly

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locking the door behind him.

He tried to pull his eyebrows and cheeks up to liven his face and not scare anyone on the staircase, as he tromped down the stairs, but he passed no one. Outside, he kicked a glass bottle across the tar, wondering who else was listening to its grating ring. He crossed the street to hit it again.

It was time to get drunk. His brain needed greasing to let any punches it was planning to throw slide out. Friends would only try to help him. He had to get trashed with strangers.

He shuffled back to the main drag and stuck out his thumb. Cars sped by so he sat on the embankment to rest. Five minutes later, an old blue two-door Toyota pulled up. It had plastic and duct tape over the passenger side window in the back. A razor-burned man in his mid-twenties leaned over and rolled down the glass next to him. His hand had chinks in the joints like a chimpanzee's. His black hair was messy, and his Motörhead T-shirt hung off his body as if he were still breaking it in.

"Where're you going?" the driver said.

Devon bent down to meet his gaze, man-to-man. "Doesn't matter."

The driver chuckled and unlocked the door. Devon brushed the soda cans off the passenger's seat and strapped himself in. The car smelled of coffee, but not tobacco.

The driver pulled back into the lane. "I'm heading to New Hampshire, getting stocked up for a party," he said, "Sure you want to come all the way?"

"Yeah," Devon said before the driver had finished talking. A bleached tree-shaped air freshener dangled off the rear view mirror. Devon kicked aside the concert flyers, McDonald's wrappers, and newspapers under his feet to get comfortable.

The driver flicked on the radio and a heavy angry tune burst out. "I'm Gene," he said, "That's with a G. Ain't a boy named Sue."

"Devon," he pointed to himself, and adjusted his shoulders against the plastic seat. "These are some sweet wheels. Did you fix them yourself?"

Gene nodded and snapped his finger against the dashboard. "Got her at a state auction for five hundred. She'd been hit head-on. Almost lost my pointing finger trying to pull out the frame. Omigod!" he cranked up the radio, "Nobody plays Sepultura anymore."

Devon let the Brazilian bass speed rhythms pound away, though they were a poor substitute for a beer. Gene tapped his brakes to the beat, but stopped when the cars behind him began to honk. When the song finished, Gene stopped slamming his head, turned down the volume, and pulled onto the northbound highway. He floored the accelerator, rattling the little car.

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Gene's eyes were glued forward, but he shouted over to Devon, "So, what's up with you, man?"

Devon scratched his forehead and felt the ghost of Bit's hair wrapped around his finger. "Nothing," he said, "that a case of Heineken won't fix."

Gene chewed with his mouth, even though Devon did not see any gum or chew. "It's a long drive for a beer," Gene said, "You need to kick somebody's ass? Or you running?"

Devon peered out the window at the overhead lamps. "Yeah," he said. Gene kept his mouth shut until he could tell Devon was not explaining anything.

Gene reached over to turn up an infectious Beastie Boys riff, but paused and cranked it down when he noticed Devon was not in the mood. "My dad had an oil drum out behind our house," Gene said, "I used to kick the crap out of it. I remember why I made every dent in that sucker. Never did me any good, though. A hundred dents and here I am, same as always."

Devon turned back to him, "I bet half of them were over girls."

Gene laughed. "You know it, brother," he said, "Maybe ten or twenty of them, but not all."

Devon drooped his arms alongside the seat, but touched something squishy and pulled them back. He leaned against the window. "You got a girl?"

Gene shook his head and released one hand off the wheel to twirl in the air. "I'm biding my time with this one chick," he said. "She's always on my case to clean up this car, but I spend enough time keeping her running. She says she wants me to be a better man, but, hell, she keeps taking classes for all these jobs she quits after a month. I don't think she knows what she wants. Not me, for sure. Maybe someone like me who isn't a fucker with a dirty car."

Devon smirked. They stared at the red eyes of the vehicles in front of them, and the broken road that fell into their headlights. Devon rested a finger on the window crank. With a few turns, he could stick his head out the window like a dog and scream out to the rushing world that it could go to hell.

Half an hour outside the city, Gene worked over to the right-hand lane and shut off the radio. "Can you keep a secret?"

Devon nodded. "Pretty well."

Gene's eyes darted back to make sure they would not hit anything, before returning to Devon's face. "You ain't a fag, are you?" he said.

"No," Devon said. Not in any sense Gene would get.

Gene swung his head back to the highway. "Cool," he said. "Then I can show you the Boneyard."

After a couple of miles, Gene stopped by the guardrail on the

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highway's edge. Next to it, the road sloped downwards into the black woods. Gene jumped out of the car and motioned for Devon to follow. He gathered up an armful of newspapers from the back seat and locked the doors after Devon was out. He jerked his index finger to the woods and grinned. "Come on," he said, "It ain't far."

The slippery grass sparkled from the passing headlights, and Devon hoisted himself over the guardrail. His boots dug into the soggy earth. "Will anyone else be there?" he said.

Gene shrugged. "Maybe; I ain't seen anyone there before." He swung his legs over the metal and with slow steps, sidled down the embankment. The woods were too dark; for all Devon knew, Bit could be in there.

Gene broke into an easy walk into the trees without waiting for Devon, so he rushed to catch up. He kicked through the prickles which grasped at his jeans. "How'd you find this place?" he said as he stumbled to Gene's side.

Gene took out a tiny flashlight that barely showed six feet in front of them. Dead scaly branches dotted the ground and did not indicate a path. "Just meant to, I guess," he said, "This way. Don't let the briars get you too bad."

The scent of musty earth hovered in the air, held by a fine mist. Devon kept a few feet behind Gene, in case he had to turn tail. The soggy leaves muffled his steps, but even with the highway behind him, his presence was too loud. Anything in the forest with a clue would sense him.

After several minutes, the highway sounds were a dull whisper, and the moonlight shone down where the trees were spaced apart. Devon wiped off the condensation or sweat on his brow. "You know where we are?" he said.

Gene did not slow. "Uh-huh," he said, "Those trees point the way." Devon shook his head at the earth, lost with a madman. The ground leaves rustled, and he ran to catch up.

He did not expect Gene to stop when he did, and almost hit him. Gene surveyed the invisible domain and spread out his arms. "This is it," he said slowly. "Welcome to the Boneyard."

The space was pitch black, as if the moon did not want to look there. The ground was matted down with a few scraggy tendrils poking through.

Devon spun his head around. "Why do you call it that?"

Gene chuckled and pointed the flashlight at a spot next to Devon. "You almost ran into it, man." The light hit a naked car engine, rusted except for its silver fan blades. "That's the first one I ever saw here. It's from an '85 Honda Civic, first year they were built. Nothing salvageable left. It's just the bones." Gene pointed out an old grille frame nearby,

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twisted and brown, and then another engine behind. "Help me clear away these leaves," he said, "I've never been here after a rain before."

Devon kicked the slimy leaves away as Gene knelt and uncovered a ring of stones with charred wood inside. He crumbled up some of the newspapers and laid them in the center.

"Fire won't last long tonight," he said, "We gotta be quick." He took out his Bic lighter, but stopped. "You got one?"

Devon slid his Zippo from his pocket. "Yeah." He flicked open the top and set the newspapers ablaze. Gene balled up the rest of the papers and set them aside.

Lawn mowers, air conditioners, and piles of car parts surrounded them, gutted. No roads or paths led to this circle, as if the piles of ancient mechanical junk had fallen from the sky.

Devon swallowed but did not approach any of the pieces. "You know where this stuff comes from?"

Gene shrugged, "Lots of Boneyards. This is the one that called me. Come here." He knelt beside a truck engine half as tall as he was. Devon cautiously left the fire, in case the blaze spread.

"This is how it starts," Gene said and waited for Devon to approach. He ran his finger over the rust and smeared a grungy line across his forehead. "Now you." Devon shirked back. It was tetanus in powder form, eager to find a break in his skin. With care, he anointed himself with the oxide.

Gene returned to the stone circle and threw more papers in it. "Now," he said, "We stand on opposite sides of the fire, face away, and jack off."

Devon's fingers almost grabbed his packing for dear life.

Gene shook his head and turned his back to Devon. "Don't worry, I ain't looking."

Devon stood across from him to make sure and faced the Civic engine. A belt buckle jingled behind him and the splat of saliva hit the ground. When he heard Gene going at it, he reached down and unzipped his fly. His fingers snaked their way through the decompression hatch of his briefs and gripped the shaft of his cock. A little shudder rippled under his skin as his fingertips pressed into the phantom bloodstream and pulled it out. He resigned himself to another Oscar winning performance. Devon cradled his shaft and balls, running his middle finger up and down the thick vein that ran about the underside. He spread his legs to help him balance, and stroked around the edge of the crown while his other hand fingered the scrotum. As he dipped a finger over his urethra, his crotch filled with blood.

The hair on his neck bristled. He was being watched, but not by Gene or any newcomers. The engine was observing him. It was just a little curious.

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Devon closed his eyes and imagined a dingy sex club with leatherboy voyeurs scattered around the sides. A gorgeous nude boi, buzzed blond hair and full breasts, was rocking on the head of his cock, and guiding his hands up and down the rest. He recognized the hair from his last partner, the lips and neck from the partner before her, the breasts of the fling before her, and the legs of his first conquest. She made soft liquid sounds as her tongue tasted the rim, and kissed it passionately. He lay his head back and thrust his hips out. In her mouth, his packing became his manhood. He called it that and did not feel like a dork. Firm and tender, it held itself up as his hips plunged it into her mouth. The voyeurs smiled in reverence. The tender strokes became a rush of electricity and liquid gold filled his crotch. He came for longer than he could remember and almost fell over. The boi faded away but the voyeurs hovered, translucent, and nodded slowly, startling Devon. He snapped his eyes open.

The engine was dead again. His afterglow seemed to beat with the pulse of the forest. He tucked in his cock, zipped up, and turned around.

Gene was wide-eyed and kneeling, tossing more newspapers into the dying fire. His pants were buckled around his waist. "Did you feel it?" he said, muttering with excitement.

Devon crouched down to watch the flames ripple. "I think so," he said, "It's like, the engine..."

Gene pointed at the shapes around him. "All of them," he said, "It's like out of that movie with the trucks that take over the world, only they're cool with us."

Devon tilted his head up. The moon was back, peering through the canopy. "When I was doing it, I saw people, not trucks."

Gene laughed loudly and got to his feet, "I always see them, like back when they were new. Headlights and big smiles on their fronts."

Devon could not keep from chuckling. He joined Gene on his feet. "This is so messed up. Really, how did you find this place?"

The glow dropped off Gene's face. He stuck his hands in his pockets, and spat in the fire. "After another fight with my dad," he said, "Back when I lived with him. I wasn't raking the leaves good enough or some shit, so I went out driving to cool down. The man is so anal about his lawn. I was out on the highway there and then I had this urge to get off. I pulled over and the Boneyard led me to it. It was like, I couldn't stop walking until I got here. So, I did it here. Bam! I thought maybe I was smoking something but, hey, you've felt it," Gene shuffled away for a few seconds, and turned back to the fire, "So I went home and found out my uncle's got an opening in one of his condos, and I got it cheap. Moved right out the same day. Thanks to the Boneyard." He knocked on a nearby radiator.

The fire dimmed and died. Devon and Gene watched the paper's

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edges fade from orange to nothing. "Thanks, man," Devon said.

"No problem, brother," Gene said. He did not shake Devon's hand. "Come on, we gotta put the fire out. Just stomp it. There ain't much left to it."

Their wet footwear broke the ashes apart. The circle of rusted bones vanished. Without another word, Gene turned on his flashlight and headed off. Devon was on his tail.

Gene was not striding as confidently as before. Devon stayed close and eventually heard traffic, but the woods distorted the rush, making it hard to pinpoint the direction.

"How many folks have you brought to the Boneyard?" Devon said.

"Just you," Gene said, "I want to take a girl there someday. I bet the bones would like that. I don't know if any girl would get it, though. 'Course, if I told anybody about it, they'd say I was some kind of pervert." He slipped his foot under a stick and sent it flying into the brush. "It's nothing my dad would do, that's for sure. Tight-assed sonofabitch." Gene stopped and shined the flashlight on Devon. "You think I'm a tight ass?"

Devon froze in the light and tried to see Gene's expression behind the glare.

"You think I'm a fucker?" Gene said.

Devon held up his hands. "No," he said. "You're cool."

Gene stomped off while Devon hurried to his side. "I'm a fucker. Just like him. I know I am. I see my friends turning into old farts like the guys at the auto body shop. I just don't know how I can not be him and still keep my car running."

Devon shook his head, "I don't think the bones would call to your dad."

Gene stopped to see a plane's lights blink overhead. "He calls me more than they ever will," he said. "I gotta get going. You still coming to the liquor store?"

"Uh-huh," Devon said, and ducked under the tree branches which came at him. "If I could come back to Boston with you, too, I'd be really grateful."

"No problem, man."

"Hang on." Devon pulled out his Zippo and flicked it on. "This lit your fire," he said, and handed it to Gene, "It's yours now."

Gene's leathery hand slid over his open palm as he shut the top and picked up the lighter. He repeatedly flicked it with the twitches of his thumb. The edges of his lips curled up. "I love these things," he said, "You sure about this? For real?"

Devon bowed his head to him. "Least I can do," he said. "Brother."

Gene slipped the Zippo in his pocket and sized up Devon, head to toe. His footsteps quickened until they reached the highway. They

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followed the breakdown lane and soon found the Toyota. Gene smacked its rear bumper and rubbed it. He opened his door and leaned on the roof.

"Thanks for being there," he said, "The bones bring good luck, every time I go. Whatever you're going back to, it'll be okay. Luck of the Boneyard's with us."

Devon glanced back at the woods before he slid in the car again. The back seat had more space with the newspapers all gone. "Not a problem," he said as he buckled himself in, "Hey, can we listen to one of your tapes?"

"Sure, you pick," Gene said, and revved the engine. Devon found a Meat Loaf album and popped it in the stereo. He had not thought about Bit in an hour. Everything might work out.

As they sped away, Devon checked for road signs or landmarks, but he saw none for miles. He rubbed his temples and knew he would never be able to find that place by himself again.

Bit held onto her spot on the floor as the van bounced. Eventually it stopped, and the four seat belts surrounding her unsnapped. The back door rattled open and Bit was hoisted over a shoulder again. A gaggle of voices spoke up as she was taken outside.

"Can I get that for you?"

"Easy on the leg, okay?"

"You know, I can carry more than you."

"Just get inside, I need some shut-eye."

A magnetized lock buzzed, and they entered an air-conditioned chamber. The footfalls of the new people echoed across a vast space, the size of a warehouse. The suit pressed against Bit's bladder, and she clenched her muscles to keep it in. The helpers scattered across the room, and with a click, a bit of light filtered in under her blindfold. Bit was set down on a steel chair with a plastic back and seat, as if from a cafeteria. The Wolf kept a paw on her as it secured her to the chair with ropes.

Her mind went into overdrive, considering all the colors the room could be, all the torture implements that might fill it, and how far out of town it was. Without the ambient sounds from outside, the Wolf's boot did make a soft noise, like steam escaping from a vent, as it walked away.

"Bth-thuu!" she cried out around the sock pressing her tongue down, "Bth-thuu!" She shook her head to try to dislodge it.

It spun around but hesitated before returning. It bent down and hissed in her face. "*What did you call me?*"

Bit lowered her head. "Nth-see," she said, "Ih hath-see gi ti zh bth-thuu."

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Two claws forced her lips open and yanked out the sock. *"Say it,"* the Wolf said, *"You can scream in here, but we're the only ones who'll hear it."*

Bit took a couple of breaths and swallowed to clean her mouth out. *"I have to go to the bathroom, please,"* she said.

"Go in your pants." It grabbed her scalp and stuffed the sock back into her mouth.

A rustle of two legs and flat shoes raced toward her, and skidded to a stop. *"Is anything wrong?"* the woman's voice said.

"No," the Wolf said, *"He just insulted me."*

A thousand burning needles shot into Bit's arm and scalded her nerve-endings. She convulsed, while the sock held her tongue down. The pain stopped as quickly as it had started, but her arm remained very tender.

The woman sighed. *"She'll tell the cops about that,"* she said. *"And we're already on their shit list."*

The Wolf creaked, as if shaking its head. *"Bull,"* it said. *"They'll be too happy we resolved this case for them."*

Another set of whisper-steps joined them as well. *"Did you just shock her?"* a different electronic voice said. It must have been the Lion's.

"Yes."

"I thought you said it was dangerous if she had a heart condition," the Lion said. *"You should apologize to her."*

"Fine, take him to the bathroom," the Wolf said. *"I need to get out of this thing. My leg is cramping."*

The Wolf and the woman plodded off while the Lion unbound the ropes from her legs. Another pair of claws entered her mouth.

"If I take this out, do you promise to talk softly?" the Lion said. Bit nodded, and the Lion pulled the sock free. *"This must taste awful, huh?"* it said, with a sympathetic chuckle.

Bit swallowed and tasted the air. *"Yes. Thank you."* She shook her legs out and stretched to get her blood circulating.

The Lion took her arm and led her across the warehouse floor. It kept slow for her and gripped her when she stumbled. Eventually it stopped and pushed open a door. *"Toilet's straight ahead, four feet,"* it said, *"Just stand by it and I'll get your pants off."*

"Thanks," Bit said and took baby steps before she hit the porcelain, *"You should know, though, I haven't had surgery. I don't want you to get freaked out or anything."*

The Lion reached around her waist and undid her belt. *"I don't really care anymore,"* it said. *"A few months ago, I would have. But I've seen things you wouldn't believe. Last week, these kids were making a girl eat a cat that was still alive. Cutting off parts and feeding it to her."*

It pulled her jeans down and she turned around to sit. It made no

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comment, or moved while she relieved herself. The Lion helped her dress, when she was done. It escorted her back out to the warehouse.

"Do you believe in God?" it said, and kept walking.

Her wrists were itching from the cuffs. "Not really," she said. "It doesn't really make any sense to me."

The Lion gently guided her around the corner. *"I can't blame you,"* it said sincerely, *"It's getting harder for me, too. Catechism for eight years, and the worst we got to see was a soup kitchen."*

She blew a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry about...your friend with the Hawk suit," she said, "I swear I didn't kill him."

The Lion pushed her to the floor. She absorbed the impact by landing on her shoulder. The concrete floor scraped against her skin. *"What's done is done,"* it said. *"And sorry isn't going to change anything. Besides, we know you have his helmet."*

Bit bent her head up at him but did not rise. "I don't have any other part," she said. "Lots of people took his suit. I got it from a couple of kids."

It stepped on her hair, and Bit grimaced. *"Come on, like those kids would have pushed that lady in the street?"*

Bit remained quiet. It let her hair go and pulled her to her feet by her elbows.

"I know you didn't shoot Stephen," the Lion said. *"My brother and his girlfriend are crazy if they think that charge'll hold you. But the other charge will. I don't care if you have three arms and a horn, you're going to pay for that."*

Bit cast her head down like it wanted. "Yes, sir."

"Come along," it said, and guided her to her chair. She sat down and it allowed her to wrap her arms around the back of the seat. When her legs were secured so tight, as to become numb, it knelt in front of her.

"I can tell you want to do what's right," the Lion said. *"But wanting what's right isn't enough. The Lord came from people worse than all of us. He lived and died with people worse than us. So there's no excuse for you throwing people around. You'll have to find forgiveness on your own."* It reached behind her, jerked her cuffs to test them, and then stood up. *"And if you don't want to find it, I don't know why we're wasting our time on you."*

Bit tilted her head as the Lion left her there. Later, a rattle echoed from another corner, followed by footsteps and the creak of a door.

She laid her head on her side and tried to sleep. The room was silent except for the occasional hum of the air conditioner. A sliver of light in her blindfold kept annoying her and she could not rest. She leaned back as far as she could without tipping the chair over and peered through the slit to see where she was.

On either side of her were rows of shelves with silvery-black parts of the suits on them. Through the blur, she could make out arms, legs,

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torsos, and heads. If there were more rows like this, there must have been hundreds altogether.

Bit did not fall asleep until early that morning.

Chapter 6—Tuesday Morning

The first rays of the morning brushed Devon's face, and he reached out to grab the arm that was pulling his shoulders back and forth. Seconds earlier, he had been working as a galley slave on a Nordic vessel the same shape to his parents' dining room. It had been twisting down a giant luge pipe, which evolved into an arm. He batted it away twice and continued rowing the boat while taking breaks to serve martinis to the crew. When the arm returned, he grasped it so it could not sneak up on him again. Another arm grabbed his nose and the galley fell away.

"Hey, let go of me, Devon! You gotta see this! Shit! Devon, I'm going to kick you somewhere, and you're going to feel it until next week."

Devon opened his eyes and let his head wobble like a gyroscope losing speed. Galeno leaned back and released his nose. Devon let her arm go and sat up at the foot of the bed.

Galeno flipped through channels on her television with desperation. "Crap, you just missed it."

Devon wiped his eyes and yawned. "What time did I get in last night?"

She scanned the same seven channels with gritted teeth. "About three o'clock, and I had to pay that guy you were with for the Heineken you went through."

"Wow," he said and stroked his temples. He was woozy and everything spun when he closed his eyes. His belly gurgled and he lay back down. "Look, I'll pay you back. What are you doing?"

Galeno flicked off the television and turned to the radio stations. "You missed it. It's the biggest friggin' news story, and they only spent thirty seconds on it."

Devon blocked the sunlight from his eyes with his arm. "Why can't you just tell me what happened?"

Galeno reached the end of the FM spectrum and switched over to AM. "'Cause it sounds better when they do it. Got it!" She turned up the radio. An excited male voice broke out over the static hum and described the news in Spanish.

Devon opened one eye and turned it on her. "I took French in high school, and I nearly flunked it."

Galeno switched off the radio and hit speed dial on her phone. She paced around her workbench. "Hey, Jake. Yeah, I know it's early. You have cable, right? Did you hear about how they arrested the person who shot the Hawk? This morning! Yeah, I'm trying to get a clip of that."

Devon jerked upright.

Galeno held the phone against her cheek and started to punch her

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own palm. "No? Sorry, I'll hunt around some more. Thanks. Bye."

When she hung up, Devon swiped the covers away and stood. "They arrested Bit?"

She scurried by him and lifted her address book from the workbench. "Yes. No. Do you know if Markie has cable? No one else I know does." Galeno dialed another number.

"What do you mean by 'no'? Has she been arrested?"

Galeno stuffed the phone between her shoulder and ear. "Hey, Markie, I was wondering, do you have cable?"

Devon rushed at her to snatch the phone away. Galeno thrust out her palm to hold him back.

"Tell me what's going on."

A fax machine shrieked behind Markie on the receiver. "No, sorry," she said, "Are you okay? It sounds like you're struggling with someone."

Galeno knocked Devon back, and hurried away from him while he regained his balance. "I'm...fine thanks. Devon's just being a prick 'cause he got trashed last night after they nabbed Bit."

Even Devon heard the "What?" that erupted from the phone receiver.

Galeno stopped in place. "Oh, Devon didn't tell you?"

"No."

Devon dived at Galeno and wrestled the phone free. He bounced onto the broken bed and shouted into the phone, "What's going on around here?"

Galeno fingered the long white cord but did not disconnect it.

"It must have been Kim, that bitch," Markie said. "She ratted you guys out to the supers to hurt me."

Galeno headed to the kitchen while Devon dug his fingers into the phone. "What? Where did you get that from?"

Markie's voice grew distorted as if she was leaning into the phone. "That chick who was following you, she told Kim her name is Melanie. It's probably not, though, since she dropped it on everyone who knows anything yesterday. She caught up with Kim at the co-op and got the info from her."

Devon grabbed some paper and a marker, and slapped them down on the sheets. "Where does Kim live?"

Markie rustled in her desk. "I'll get to her right now. I'll take a personal day or something. Any word on how Bit's doing?"

Devon tossed the paper away. "Didn't you hear the news? There was an arrest this morning."

"I heard, some preppy boy from Hingham."

Galeno plopped her laptop on Devon's chest. "Check it when you get off the phone," she whispered.

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Devon nodded to her and returned to the phone. "Are you sure it wasn't Bit?"

"Not unless Bit is a sixteen year old high school jock," Markie said. "He was shooting his mouth off to all his friends about how he shot a superhero, and even showed off the gun. The news people said it's registered to that mugger guy in the hospital. A ton of witnesses fingered him. One chick was like, 'I'd never seen a gun before and I hate to think that we have people like that at our school.' They don't have pictures of him up 'cause he's a minor."

Devon snorted and rolled on his side to open the laptop. "I bet the Supabaggas are loving this," he said. "Fuck. But nothing on Bit?"

"Nope. What's this about Bit getting kidnapped?"

Devon lifted the camera from under the television and confirmed that the cassette was still inside. "The supers took her last night from the apartment. Bit was playing with the video at the time so we have some of it on tape. We haven't heard anything since."

"So, they'll have to release her now, right?"

Devon's pulse grew cold. "Unless they took care of her already."

"Don't even say that. Look, I'll get on Kim's ass, and let you know whatever I find."

"Thanks, and good luck." Devon rested the phone on the floor beside him and turned to Galeno. She was tying on her sneakers with her art bag by her side. "You could have just told me."

She stuck out her tongue. "You can just bite me. I have to run to class. Tell me if you find anything else."

Devon plugged the phone line into the laptop while Galeno packed her bag. He located the Associated Press articles on the arrested boy but did not learn much more. The police sent out the announcement immediately after he had been arrested that morning. The authorities had been waiting for him to come home from a party.

Devon closed the laptop and reconnected the phone as Galeno stood to go. A few moments later, it rang again. Galeno picked it up. "Hello?"

A raspy digitized voice on the other end said, "*Put Devon Manetta on the line.*"

Bit woke when the rank liquid hit her face. It smelled like coffee as it dripped down her chin. She tried to shake it off. A large bare foot connected with her shoulder, and knocked her chair back. She dreaded the impact with the floor so long, it was a relief when she finally hit. Her head connected with it and she grimaced until the ringing subsided. The chair's edge dug into the backs of her knees.

"I know it was you," a deep male voice said. She did not recognize it.

A scratching sound approached, made by a pair of slippers. "What

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are you doing?" the woman said.

"You know they're wrong. This is the bastard, right here."

Bit shuddered and squeezed her own bonds for comfort.

The woman stepped toward him. "Would you please calm down?"

"I'm not...," he said, but paused and tapped his bare foot. "Would you leave me alone?"

Her voice became softer. "No, you're going to hurt her...him."

The man rattled a piece of armor from a nearby shelf. "Well, fuck, what else can I do?"

The shaking stopped as if the woman had taken his hands. "The tapes," she said. "We can get them back and then...can we talk about this somewhere else?"

The man came over to Bit and lifted her chair upright. She squinted her eyes as she prepared for the next hit. He yanked the blindfold around her neck, and the morning's light from the rafters assaulted her eyes. She bristled and kept her eyelids shut.

The man's hot coffee breath blew into her nostrils as he knelt in front of her. "Open your eyes."

The woman rushed over to him. "You can't."

The man rested his fingers on Bit's chin and lifted her face toward his. "Look at me, and all the prototypes. Take a nice long stare." Then he called back to the woman, "Now, you tell me you want to let him go."

He spread her eyelids open with his index fingers and thumbs. Yellow light streamed into Bit's brain. She forced her pupils down as far as they would go, until her nose and cheeks were all she could see. The man was a blur of pink and gray.

The woman put her hand over Bit's face. The man threw up his arms and let Bit go. He pulled the woman away from her. Bit sealed off her vision and held her head down.

"Goddamn it," the woman said. "You're as bad as Stephen was."

The man paced away from her. "This is completely different. That was to show up Roland."

The woman shouted toward Bit. "And if you make a martyr of him...over there, what's to stop you or Justin from getting shot the next time you go out? Who knows how many of his friends know about us now?"

Their voices hushed. "I know you're scared for me," the man said gently. "But I've been doing this longer than anyone else. If we just make it through Saturday, it doesn't matter what we do this week."

After a minute of silence, the woman said, "I have an idea."

Bit heard the puckering of a soft kiss. "I love it when you say that," the man said.

The woman came over and tied the blindfold onto Bit's face. It dug into her ears. Bit yelped as the light and circulation were cut from her

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scalp. "Bit," the woman said, "You've been awfully quiet. Tell us about the night you saw Stephen die."

Bit swallowed. "No."

The man shuffled over to her. "You're going to talk."

Bit shook her head. "You've already made up your mind about what to do with me."

The woman rested her palm on Bit's shoulder. "We won't hurt you."

Bit jutted her chin in the man's direction. "Make him say it."

There was a pause. "We won't hurt you," the woman repeated.

Bit forced her cheeks apart to smile. Her palms sweated. "I know something you don't know," she sang in child-like tones.

The man's breath heated her forehead. "What?"

Bit looked up toward him and kept her lips tight to her teeth. "I DIDN'T KILL YOUR FUCKING BROTHER," Bit screamed at him. "And everyone else thinks so, too."

His thick hand grabbed her hair.

"Go ahead," she said. "Kill the tranny. Everybody's doing it."

The woman wrested his grip from Bit.

Bit sucked in air while she could. "Look at your boyfriend, hon. Aren't you proud of him?"

The man broke free from the woman. "That's enough," she said and whispered something to him.

Bit braced herself but no strikes came at her. The slippers left with the dull bare ones. She anticipated the door would slam, even before it did.

Bit listened to her breathing slow and waited for someone else to arrive. Minutes passed and no one did, so she tried to get back to sleep. She was miserably tired. The warehouse creaked every moment she thought she would fall into dreams, as the sun baked its exterior. Eventually, someone on tiptoes approached.

Bit called out to the visitor. "I can hear you. What do you want?"

The person stopped and walked naturally toward her. "I came to finish what we discussed last night, in the bathroom." Justin said and stopped in front of her. "My brother's been shooting his mouth off again, hasn't he?" He knelt beside her, unlaced his shoe and stuffed his own sock into her mouth. It was cleaner than the last one, but still tasted of fresh foot. As Bit adjusted to breathe through her nose again, Justin stood and wheeled a loading dolly behind her. He bent her chair forward and slipped the metal plate under it. The dolly lifted her back and Justin wheeled her away.

Bit rocked herself from side to side. Her internal balancing instinct jerked to a stop as soon as she had raised one chair leg off the dolly. She reminded herself of summer camp and trustfalls. She pictured a gang of

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friends reaching out for her as she swung herself off the dolly and hit the floor. Her stomach kept moving on, confused from the lack of momentum. Her bonds chafed her wrists and the arm she had landed on grew raw.

Justin pulled her back on the dolly. "I can wait," he said, "You can do this all the way to the car but we're going, now." He returned with a set of bungee cords and secured them across her chest. He yanked her around a corner. A loud handclap echoed from behind them.

The woman's voice followed quickly. "Hey! Where do you think you're going?"

Bit was pulled to a halt, and set upright.

"I'm taking her where she belongs," Justin said.

"And where is that?" the woman said. Her slippers tapped the concrete.

Justin remained still. "Where you wanted to send her, last time we talked."

The woman rested a hand on the dolly. "Plans have changed. Look, I don't need any more arguing right now."

Justin's voice had an edge of ice. "I see. I should have asked. I didn't mean any disrespect." He trudged out of the room.

A soft hand touched Bit's lips and took the sock from her mouth. "Bit," the woman was firm, like a teacher. "Please be co-operative. I don't want to have to do anything to you, understand?"

Bit did not doubt her, and nodded.

"We're going to set you free, in exchange for Stephen's helmet. You do know where it is?"

Bit nodded again. It was cooler beside the wall. Her forehead was on the verge of sweating but did not.

The woman undid one of the bungee cords cutting into Bit's chest. "We thought about turning you in, but Stephen's remains mean a lot to us. Tell me what phone number I can reach Devon at."

Bit recited Galeno's home phone. The woman opened her cell phone and placed the call. "Put Devon Manetta on the line."

In the quiet warehouse, Bit heard Galeno's voice on the other end. "Who is this?"

The woman leaned on a nearby shelf. "You know who this is. Just put him on, now."

Devon sounded higher pitched as the phone cut away the lower frequencies. "Uh, hello?"

"We're willing to make a trade. Bit for the Hawk's head. No head, no deal. Do you have it?"

Devon shuffled on his end of the phone. "I can get it in a few hours. Is Bit okay? Can I speak to her?"

The woman pressed a button and held the receiver to Bit's ear.

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"Devon," Bit said. "I'm alive. They haven't hurt me too much."

"Bit, hang on. We'll be there for you," Devon said.

The woman took the phone back. "Get a pen. At 451 Mavis Street behind the Arboretum, there's a red three-story house with a rose bush out front. It has a blue recycling can. At one o' clock, drop the head in there, in a black trash bag. We'll be watching the house. If we see anyone monitoring the street, the deal is off. When you're done, go to the pay phone at the Shell station across from the veterans hospital nearby, and we'll call you there with instructions."

"Wait a second," Devon said, "How do I know..."

The woman tossed her head back. "Don't be stupid, Devon, we know where you live."

He waited a moment. "Fine."

The woman hung up the phone and crossed in front of Bit. "They better come through. I can't promise to protect you from anyone if they don't. And if my 'boyfriend' shows up, you better be damned polite to him."

Bit nodded. The woman's fingertips grazed her forehead, stroking her bangs. She let Bit go and vanished like the others.

Markie blew off a phone call from her boss before she headed out of the office. The bitch was riding her for a PowerPoint presentation but only the great and ever-busy Assistant Director knew anything about it. It had to be done by this afternoon, so obviously someone else would do it if she skipped out.

The street was bustling with late commuters and pre-lunch traffic, so she held her pace back. She rode the subway to Central Square and reveled in her own seething. She imagined Kim drowning a bag of puppies, then Bit, and then back to the puppies. She planned to be furious by the time she reached Kim.

The ride was quick, and no one stood in her way as she tramped into the co-op. She balled her fists and wandered down the aisles, hunting for Kim. Her fingers twitched, ready to grab Kim by the ear and drag her out back. Another sweep of the store but she was still missing. A young man with a full-length apron waved to her as she passed. "Markie?"

She turned to him, puzzled. "Yes?"

He rested his palm on his head and grinned sheepishly. "Kim pointed you out once, when you were in here. She's in the stockroom if you're looking for her."

Markie nodded and hurried into the back room. "Thanks."

Kim was unpacking a shipment of canned vegetables stacked almost as tall as herself. She was in jean shorts, a T-shirt, and her clunky boots. The doors swung shut behind Markie and her mind went blank.

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"Kim," she said. "We've got to talk."

Kim glanced at her and hefted a box of cans onto a rolling cart. "Can it wait until lunch?" she said. The cans slammed on the metal tray.

Markie folded her arms to her chest. "Nope. Bit was kidnapped last night."

Kim loaded another box onto the first with a pause. "Oh."

Markie narrowed her eyes. "Will you listen to me? I know you got her into this so, come on. Let's get her out."

Kim shook her head and kept loading. "I didn't do anything. You sure she didn't run off?"

Markie sat down on the boxes on the cart. "We've got it on tape."

Kim almost dropped the cans she held on Markie to get her out of the way. "Look, is she hurt?"

Markie shrugged. Her head was at the level of Kim's waist and she noticed a rectangular leather case clipped to one of Kim's pockets. The leather was clean and unbruised, fresh from the factory. Markie pointed to it. "What's that?"

Kim returned her box to its original pile. She took a breather from its weight and glanced at her case. "This? Why do you care?"

"It's a PDA, right?" Markie said, "Since when did you have one?"

Kim took a seat on the pile, across from Markie. "Lots of stuff you don't know."

Markie put her arm out. "Can I see it?"

Kim inched back. "I think you should go before I call the manager."

"Did Melanie get you a real nice one?"

Kim waited a little too long to answer. "I got this myself."

Markie leapt to her feet. "If you're not going to help, give me the PDA."

Kim backed off and circled around her. "No way."

Markie fluttered her fingers, palm upwards, at Kim. "You think that I'm not coming for you because I won't? Just wait until you get off work."

Kim pouted and stuck her hands in her pockets, daring her to move first.

Markie turned toward the stockroom door. "Fine. I don't have time for this. I'm coming back, and when I do, Bit'll be with me. And then you can argue about who owes who."

Kim lifted her PDA from her side and felt its weight. Markie waited until she was sure Kim would not take it back before reaching out to take it

Kim released the case. "Okay. I'll take the rest of today off or something."

Markie nodded. "I'll be out front. I'll see you in five." She turned to go but Kim spoke up.

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"I don't know anything," Kim said. "Melanie only gave me an address from a free email site. We met at a café down the street."

Markie put her back to the door and swung it open. "I don't care right now. Just be there."

Devon leaned onto the workbench and stared at the paper with the instructions he had been given, while Galeno kicked the pile of her news magazines. "Motherfucker," Galeno said. "Goddamn sons of screwy-eyed chunky twat-fungus bitches. Too fucking brain-dead to apologize. I say we call all our friends and have two big ol' blanket parties for them. Give the head to the cops, and let them in on the action."

Devon stuck his fingers in his ears. "Can you keep it down?"

Galeno wandered to the kitchen and reached into her freezer. "This is my house and I'll get pissed whenever I want to." She pulled out the bag of Jamaican Blue coffee grounds she kept buried for special occasions. She dumped it in the coffee maker with water and paced as it brewed.

"They reach into that recycling bin, they're going to find me in there," she said, "I'll cruise down to Hingham and pick up seventeen carloads of Supabaggas eager to pop-a-cap in whichever end those suits breathe through."

Devon took the phone off the hook and dialed Ryan's work number. "Be quiet a second," he said as Ryan picked up, "Hey, it's Devon."

Ryan was spaced out, preoccupied as ever. "Hi," she said, "I got a few things to check before lunch so I can't talk long."

Devon got a whiff of the fine coffee in the pot, and whetted his lips. "Do you have the equipment to track that transponder thing?"

"I got two RFI boxes from work," Ryan said, "It wasn't easy sneaking them out. What's up?"

Devon drummed the phone's back. "Big trouble. Bit's been kidnapped. We got a call from the Wolf's people that they'll trade her for the head."

Ryan sucked a breath in. "Omigod."

Galeno took out a mug from the cabinet, and Devon nodded to get him one as well. "Borrow a car and get over here. I don't know if we'll get Bit back but we're sure as hell going to find out where they live."

The sun streamed through Markie's sunroof as she and Kim waited on the narrow suburban street a block away from the recycling bin on Mavis Street. They hung their arms out the open windows trying to avoid getting baked. A matted brown spaniel barked at them from behind a chain-link fence. Scattered trees waved as the slow breeze caught their green leaves. Markie had her cell phone plugged into the

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power outlet, ready for Galeno and Ryan to call from their car.

Kim held out her arm to keep the side of Markie's Corolla from burning her. "Can't we at least turn on the AC?" she said.

Markie shook her head. "It'll run down my battery."

"So, we have spares." Kim smirked, turning her head to the back seat. Two car batteries lay there, strung to the RFI meter at Kim's feet. It was a large box painted black with several LED displays, designed in the 1960s with little improvements over the years. A notice molded into its plastic top read that it was only to be used to ensure that electronic devices were not generating enough radio interference to be a nuisance. Its displays pulsed a string of numbers for every signal it received from the transponder in the recycling bin.

Markie glared at her. "Very funny. I'm not touching those little bombs back there."

The cell phone chirped and Markie swiped it. "Y'ello."

He heard heavy traffic on the other end of the line. "I'm waiting at the Shell station," Devon said. "Are you getting a reading on the head?"

Markie glanced at the rolling numbers. "Loud and clear," she said, "We'll let you know when they pick it."

"I already checked in with Galeno and Ryan," he said, "Ryan's psyched to start feeding you directions. She'll be figuring out the positions in her head as we go so don't give her the current readout more than every ten seconds, okay?"

Markie peeked at the map in Kim's lap. "Shouldn't be a problem. Kim's doing all the navigating. Maps are just lines to me."

"Get going," Devon said, and hung up.

Markie and Kim waited a few minutes when the digits on the box flickered. The long number on its faceplate started to decrease. The phone chirped again, and Markie let Kim answer.

"They've got it. What're you seeing?" Ryan said, and Kim read off her numbers. Ryan checked them over. "They have to be heading northwest. Drive toward the Arboretum rotary."

Markie heard the order and started the car. The air stripped the heat from their skin as Markie floored her Toyota.

Out on the main drag, Markie and Kim peered at every car ahead of them. The mandatory Suburban deathmobile cruised among the smaller Hondas and Volkswagens. A long Chevy slowed down in the high-speed lane to make an inexplicable left turn. Further down the street, short concrete plateaus divided the road in half, protecting the flashes of grass and cigarette packages within. The black box shook with every crack and pothole. Kim rattled off numbers to Ryan and directions to Markie as they flew.

"Relax," Markie said and smiled at Kim, "I haven't had an accident in four years."

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Kim shut her eyes and listened to Ryan's steady voice. As they circled a rotary, she heard a blaring horn, and a string of curses from Galeno over the phone. "Crap," Ryan said, "There's a jam ahead of us. We're not going anywhere. Good luck guys."

Kim put the phone aside and leaned over to read the numbers closely. "Don't worry," she said, tracing the map with her fingertip, "I'm getting the hang of this. Keep going east."

They pulled onto the highway and the number shot up rapidly. "This doesn't make sense," Kim said and glanced at the odometer. "They must be going around 160."

"No way," Markie said, "They'll get pulled over so fast."

The highway was free from gridlock in the middle of the day, but it did no good. The numbers kept climbing and then turned to all dashes. The signal was gone. Markie kept holding down the accelerator.

"Turn around," Kim said, "It's no use. They could be anywhere."

Markie pulled over at the next exit and headed back. "So, if we were reading them and they turned off the highway," Markie said, "What would happen?"

Kim took a second to think. "It would probably look like we were speeding away from them. Or vice versa. Oops."

Markie grinned and caressed her sturdy steering wheel. "That's what I thought. Hey, do you have any idea what part of town that Melanie chick is from? Anything you remember?"

Kim stared at the LED dashes and leaned against the rolled-up window. "I don't know. She had a tan business suit and corporate makeup like you wouldn't believe. She only ordered raspberry tea at the café. She kept brushing her hair behind her ears. My soda was sweating and she kept mopping up the water with every napkin she could grab. She said she would make sure Bit wasn't hurt. She only wanted to ask her questions. Damn." Kim put her hands over her eyes and rubbed them slowly.

Markie nodded. "It's okay. Bit's coming back. She better."

As they approached the Ted Williams Tunnel exit, the RFI device sputtered on and the signal returned. Kim sat up. "Yes! Get off here!"

Markie followed the winding road from the highway to Boston's waterfront industrial district. They passed through a maze of brick warehouses, converted for office space or abandoned. Kim directed them down one of the service roads.

Kim's head jerked from the readout to the road ahead and back. "Hot," she said, "Hotter...hotter...ice cold. No, I'm kidding, really hot. That one!"

Kim pointed to a gray-green storage facility with a brick administrative building attached like a lighthouse. It was a hundred feet tall, similar to the others around it, and surrounded by a chain link fence

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with an electronic gate and a card reader. Several cars, including two pea-green VW Beetles, were parked in front of the side building. There was a name and address on the gate. MinTorque Incorporated, 1156 Maycrowe Avenue.

Markie circled it to ensure it was the right one. Kim snapped the box off and wrote the information in the corner of her map. "Hot damn."

Markie pulled the car away before they lingered too long. "See? Right there. If Bit doesn't come back, we sic the cops on that place. Doesn't this beat work any day?"

Kim hit redial on the phone to tell Ryan the good news. "We found it. It's a company called MinTorque, with a *q*, near the harbor. We were right outside it."

Ryan was speechless for a few seconds. "Wow, I'm kinda worried though. I haven't heard back from Devon yet. He was supposed to call from the gas station."

"You want us to stop by to see if he's there?" Kim said and whispered Markie the news.

Markie turned back to the main road. "Big surprise. We've been on the phone the whole time, and I don't have call waiting."

"Don't bother," Ryan said, "We'll meet you back at Galeno's, and see if he shows."

Kim shrugged. "See you there."

Markie returned to the line of traffic waiting to be let on the highway. Her right foot was still itchy to break the sound barrier. "Do you really want to go back there?" Markie said. "I can swing by the co-op."

Kim peeked at the car's clock. "I guess I can squeeze in a few more hours, but if you guys are doing anything when I get off, let me know. I want to see Bit, if you find her."

Bit waited in her chair while the sunlight passed over her. She shifted her arms and neck to keep them from going numb. After a while, a group of young men came in from one of the outside doors. She recognized none of their voices. They paid her no attention and spoke curtly.

"Yes, this is it."

"What's taking them?"

Bit let them become background noise until a loud motor started to clank and the ambient light grew brighter. A truck backed into the warehouse.

Soft footsteps swooped in from behind her. A chunky leather glove with the whirr of gears worked her hands free and helped her stand. The suit was not exerting itself and easily overpowered her. It released her briefly to bind her hands behind her back. It escorted her into the back of the van, and set her in a seat instead of the floor. As it fastened the belt

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around her chest, Bit leaned forward to brush its face with her own. A muzzle would mean the Wolf, and scratchy teeth would mean the Lion. Her forehead touched rounded metal, as if there was nothing at all.

It buckled itself in beside her. The workstation across from them let out a high whine amidst its usual loud fan rush. "Let's roll," a man said, in the seat across from her.

The van loped out, eventually to the highway., and settled into the start and stop rhythm of city traffic. As Bit hunted for familiar sounds, a cell phone rang. The same man picked it up. "All correct," he said, "Uh-huh. The CBS one? Yeah, we'll search it when we're done here. No biggie if it stays lost. Thanks Mel."

He groped his way over to the driver. "We've got another stop after this. She only got two of them. CBS said they lost their copy."

The driver grunted, and the man went back to his seat. The van rumbled along until the phone rang a second time.

The man shut the phone down. "Thanks. Drop her off here." The van slowed and jerked Bit like the subway as it came to a halt. The smooth-faced suit released her from her bonds, and led her out the back into the steamy day. The dry dirt under her feet crunched with her weight. The suit slipped a hard plastic stick into her bound hand. It was the hilt of a sharp metal blade, edge pressed against the ropes.

"Cut yourself loose," the voice said. *"There's a package for you on the ground. Please show your respects."*

It retreated into the van, which started itself and departed.

Bit took a few tentative steps forward, and touched a brick wall. She leaned against it and sawed the ropes with her knife. They loosened slowly, and dropped off when she had cut through the last fiber. She yanked the blindfold off her head and stomped on it.

She blinked to adjust to the harsh light. She was in a small, empty dirt lot surrounded by orange construction mesh. A few portajohns and sticks with electrical tags lined the edges. The earth was flat, ready for a layer of tar. The brick building was three stories tall and had a sign with the phone number at which new businesses could rent space.

The van's dust hung in the air. A brown wrapped box lay on the ground near her. Bit shook her limbs to regain circulation. She had no idea where she was. She had no money or shoes for the bus. There were no public phones near her.

Bit sat down cross-legged and picked up the package. It was light and had no writing on it. She cut open one side with her knife and dumped the contents onto her lap. There was a black candle, a lighter, a long black ribbon, and a map with directions leading to a spot four blocks over. She returned all of them, with her knife, into the box.

She followed the dotted line on the map into a quiet city neighborhood, with three story houses packed together. She took care

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not to burn her feet on the sidewalk. The directions stopped at an intersection surrounded by homes with different fences; rusted leg-high wire with white paint flaking off, and wooden ones, painted with grass-roots slogans. A shopping cart was jammed against a wall across from her. It was quite calm in the daylight.

Days before, the mugger Roland had stood where she was. The creature, Stephen, had died a few feet away.

A telephone pole near her was decorated with a dried wreath and flowers tied on with colored ribbons. Candles in glass jars surrounded its base. In the center of the wreath was a washed-out picture of Stephen's corpse sticking out of the Hawk suit. It was the same published in the *Globe*. The other poles around the shrine were plain.

The ribbons and flowers fluttered in the breeze. One of the glass jars was broken, and she was careful not to step near it. The wreath was coming loose, unattended.

She bent down and lit the candle in her box. She placed it inside a jar with a pool of hard wax at the bottom. The candle stuck in and waved its flame.

"To Stephen," she said, and rested the jar against the pole. She tied her ribbon tightly under the wreath to secure it. A man had been shot to death.

She touched his picture. "I'm sorry, I don't know who you were. I don't know what to pay my respects to. I don't know what to grieve for. You're gone, and maybe I could have changed that. I don't know."

She slumped on the sidewalk and lost herself in the fluttering ribbons.

The soles of her feet had bits of tar stuck in sweat, so she wiped them off. Her stomach rumbled. The candle was still burning in the oppressive heat.

She waited under the shrine to decide where to go next. She was surprised when, several minutes later, Devon pulled up in Galeno's Honda. He parked at the curb and ran out. "They said you'd be here."

She jumped up and embraced him. His eyes burned like she was killing him. He pulled her close, and she breathed him in.

"You're okay?" he said, "Tell me you're okay."

She dug her fingers into his back as if, any minute now, she would get swept away. "Thank you," she said. They released each other and got in the car. He pulled away, and headed back toward the club.

"Can I get you something to eat?"

Bit stroked the box in her lap. "Yeah. And I really need a shower."

Devon grabbed her knee and squeezed it. "You care if lunch is fast food?"

She put her hand over his. "Not really. I want to go home. My apartment. I don't care what it looks like."

Chapter 7—Tuesday Evening

Bit yawned and sat up from her nap on the pile of her own clothes she had made two hours before in her own room. All her furniture was missing. The floor was spotless and her knickknacks, CDs, and her precious hard drive waited for her. The plastic over the window crackled, baking her like an airtight car. She changed into a tank top and jeans, and stumbled down the hall.

Markie opened her door even before Bit had a chance to knock. “Hey, you’re up,” Markie said, and let Bit into her smutridden domain. Bit followed her over to her computer and pulled up a chair.

“I can’t thank you enough for cleaning up,” Bit said.

Markie shrugged and began clicking through her newsgroups. “Don’t worry. Did that days ago.”

She pulled up a list of websites that mentioned MinTorque. Markie handed Bit a stack of twelve printouts of the pages. Bit flipped through them. “Anything juicy?”

Markie scanned each of the windows on her computer. “Not really, unless you consider that they went bankrupt in 2000. A guy named Troy Noonan started them in ‘97. He’s an electrical engineer from Tufts. It’s very vague on what he actually does. So, he leads this coup at Lockheed Martin and gets a slew of co-workers to follow him to this new venture, including, get this, his girlfriend Melissa Lahr.”

Bit’s eyes almost popped out. “Melissa... Melanie?” she said.

Markie pointed to a blurry graduation picture in the pile. “We’ll ask Devon if that’s her, but I’m pretty sure it is. Anyway, MinTorque officially makes ‘innovative cost-effective design solutions for industrial needs,’ though their only product was for the Armed Forces. It isn’t public but gets some high profile backers, no names. Files for bankruptcy in February 2000, lays off most of its staff. There isn’t any news later than that.”

“Troy,” Bit said, tasting the name. She flipped through the papers for a picture but found none. “Did you find anything on him?”

Markie nodded. “Got two brothers, Justin and Stephen. Their dad owns a chemical plant in New Jersey. Have a look. Most of this stuff comes from the local paper in his hometown, Hyannisport, Cape Cod. The paper’s got almost nothing on them, though. I called but they gave me the brush off.”

Half the printouts had the banner for the *Hyannisport Herald*. Markie had highlighted all the pertinent names.

Bit licked her lips and bent over to inspect them more closely. “Justin Noonan. That’s the guy who busted in here. The Lion.”

Markie tabbed through her websites and smiled. “Uh-huh. It says

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he's a lawyer for a pharmacy distributor."

Bit looked up at the bland corporate site Markie had pulled up to show her. "And Stephen?"

"No clue. There's too many Stephen Noonans online. Melissa was a technical writer at Honeywell in '93, moved to Lockheed in '94. None of them mention a Roland."

Bit flopped chest-down on Markie's bed to finish off the papers. Her eyes glazed over after a couple, and she set them aside. "I don't want to stick around here. You want to go to the arcade?"

Markie shrugged. "Sure you're up for that? If I were you, I wouldn't leave my room for a week."

Bit rolled on her side. "I don't have a working computer in my room. Let's call Devon, Galeno, and Ryan. We can make a night of it."

Markie stretched her fingers out and spun her swivel chair around. "Kim said she was free, too. If you want her there."

Bit put her palms on her temples. "No thanks. I want a drama-free night, please."

Markie flicked off the monitor and powered down the computer. "Suit yourself. Give me a few to change and call everyone."

Bit slid off the bed. "Ask Galeno to bring my pills," she said, and went out to wait in the kitchen.

It was dusk when Markie and Bit found a space in the massive parking lot, which also supported a mall and a movie theater that blocked out the setting sun. The arcade was in a building long enough to house batting cages, scores of pool tables, a laser tag course, and bumper cars. The gray walls and utilitarian shape made it obvious that it had once been a storage facility. Bit avoided eye contact with the police officer out front, who watched the lines of people entering.

Inside, Bit stared up at the skeletal ceiling with its air tubes and exposed wiring. The floor was stadium concrete, and the walls were corrugated steel. It smelled of Natural Light beer and flash-fried foods. The game machines flashed and blasted their techno soundtracks.

Markie spotted Devon and Galeno waiting at a booth near the pool tables. Bit raced over to hug both of them. "Surprised to find you here," she said, "Been here long?" A basket of onion rings sat between them and their hands kept darting in to snatch them. Bit and Markie sat across from them and helped themselves as well.

Devon shook his head. His leather vest glistened in the dull light. "Naw. Maybe fifteen minutes. You doing all right?"

Bit brushed her bangs back and nodded.

Galeno punched Devon playfully. "We would have come for you yesterday, except somebody didn't follow a certain van when it passed RIGHT by him last night."

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Devon nudged her back. "Knock it off."

Bit stuck her head up from the booth and twisted it around. "Where's Ryan?"

Devon shook his head. "She said she had things to do, which is Ryanspeak for 'I don't have too much bread this time of the month and I'm too proud to ask for some.'"

Markie pulled the folded printouts out of her back pocket. She passed them across the table. "Hey guys, got some dirt for you." Devon and Galeno traded each piece as they finished reading it.

Devon pointing to Melissa's scan. "That's her. So what's this? We're getting attacked by a dead company?"

Galeno huffed. "They're probably living better in bankruptcy than I did when I had a job."

A waiter took their order as they read, and pizza and warm pitchers full of cold soda arrived. After they had inhaled their dinner, Bit tucked the printouts away in her back pocket. They agreed to meet later and shot off toward the most interesting attractions.

Bit and Devon bought tokens and marched to the air hockey tables. She slid four tokens in and each claimed one side of the table.

"On guard," Devon said, and launched the plastic puck at her. They volleyed the puck in random directions, as if it could be controlled, and soon, Devon scored the first goal.

"Lucky," Bit said. She spun the puck on both sides to see which floated better. She plotted the angles at which it would have to travel to slip by his paddle, and cheered silently when it almost followed that route. They continued their battle until the score was tied 6-to-6, one point from match. As Bit began the final round, a teenage boy with straight blond hair, braces, and a classic Black Sabbath T-shirt dropped two tokens on the edge of their table to challenge the winner. With a sweeping arc, Bit sent the puck soaring into Devon's waiting paddle, which repelled it into his own goal. The table beeped and shut down with the puck inside. As their reward, it flashed the final score and shut itself off.

Devon gave Bit a high-five and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "You take this kid. Galeno owes me a pool match or two."

Bit nodded to the boy and slid her own two tokens into the slot with his. He stood at his end, slunked down over the goal. He glowered in a good impression of the angry young music celebrities on television and refused to meet her eyes. "Let's do this," he said. Without warning, he sent the puck across the table, where it slipped into her goal.

She retrieved the puck and let it sit. She plotted its course and shot it into a corner. The puck knocked itself off the back of his paddle and rebounded into his goal. The smirk faded off his face. "Come on," he said and whacked the puck back in a zigzag formation. She blocked it,

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sending it into his goal, fast. She surprised herself in that she did it again, and again, until the score ended at 7-1.

Bit dropped her paddle and stepped back in case he asked her to do it again. "Good game," she said, nodding.

The boy kept his head down and met her eyes with nothing to lose. He threw his paddle down and sauntered off like a card shark who knows he has been played.

Bit let him go and cruised by the newest video game machines. One had a sword-fighting game with beautifully sculpted warriors that was new to her, so she dropped her tokens in and picked the agile demon-slayeress. She had just beaten down a thuggish combatant wearing an executioner's mask, when a message appeared, "A New Challenger Comes!" The boy stood next to her, silent as ever. He chose a noblewoman with a sword that could unhinge into a whip, and proceeded to grind Bit's fighter into the ground.

When she had lost, Bit smiled at him. "Thanks for the game, you're pretty good." He followed her to the next game, and beat her again. Her grace grew thin, and she left in mid-game to hunt for Markie.

Bit checked the short plywood concourse that passed for a bar. Markie was elsewhere. As Bit headed to the ocean of pool tables, a young girl in a mesh T-shirt, shorts, and engineer boots approached her.

"Hi, Bit?" the girl said, "I... I'm really sorry, and I wasn't thinking and..."

Bit cocked her head and twirled her fingers in her hair. "Sorry, do I know you?"

The girl bit her lip. "Oh, sorry, I'm Kim. Markie told you about me?"

Bit glared at her and kept herself from walking away. Kim had a smile with a sheen of plastic. It worked on most people, but Bit had seen too many of them to fall for it.

Bit crossed her arms. "Why are you here?"

Kim looked away for something to talk about. "I don't know. Markie told me you guys were coming there."

"Look, this is kind of sudden."

Kim took a shaking step toward her. "I'm really sorry."

Bit held up a hand. "I said, it's too soon, okay? Just leave me alone."

Kim's cheeks flushed, and she backed away. "Fine. Sorry to have bothered you." She spun around on one heel and headed back toward the crowd.

Bit let her disappear and continued scouring the area for Markie. She found her leaning beside the batting cages, chatting up a young woman in a stretch halter top and biker shorts. They were very close together.

Markie interrupted her own conversation and waved to her. "Hey

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Bit, having a good time?"

The new girl smiled expectantly at Bit but kept Markie in the corner of her eye.

Bit shrugged. "Sure. I just wanted to let you know I'm catching a ride back with Galeno."

Markie gave her the thumbs up. "Excellent," she said, and winked at Bit, who left them to continue their talk.

Bit found the nearest token dispenser and loaded herself up with a few dollars' worth. She returned to the game machines and saw the Black Sabbath boy busy on a classic street-fighting simulator. At the end of a round, he glanced over at her, so she walked off to find some solitude. She hid out in the retro gaming section with Missile Command.

After several games, she was tired of avoiding people. She made a sweep of the arcade and located Kim by the Virtual On mech fighter. When Kim was finished, she almost jumped at seeing Bit leaning over her shoulder.

"Hey," Bit said, "How about a game of Hydro Thunder to patch things up?"

Kim looked around nervously but saw none of Bit's friends. "Sure," she said and carefully followed her across the room to the high-speed watercraft simulator. Bit stared back at her with a slight grin to entice her along, and made sure to pass the street-fighting machine.

Bit and Kim took their seats in the water-racing game and plunked in their tokens. As they were about the start, Bit heard a knock on the back of her chair. The Black Sabbath boy stood behind her with three friends, about his age but chunkier and with a little hair on their chins. Kim looked at the boys and rolled her eyes at them. "We end this," the boy said, "Right now."

Bit raised a finger. "Just a second." She leaned over to Kim and whispered, "Do me a favor? Just smile at them."

Kim narrowed her eyes as if Bit were insane, but said, "Okay." She got off her seat slowly, wetting her lips and putting on a seductive grin.

The boys shuffled impatiently. Bit glanced at them. "Are you all going to take me on?" she said, "There's only two seats here."

The Sabbath boy pointed at the screen. "We're gonna take you here, and then at the DDR."

There was a large crowd around the Dance Dance Revolution cabinets. The other boys were stomping to the beat of the dance machines with the ferocity of disco kings on speed.

Bit nodded to him. "Tell you what, I'll take your best player here, now. If he wins, I'll go against you on any machine, even the Street Fighters. If I win, fair and square, no shortcuts, you leave me alone. Deal?"

The boy consulted his posse and shook her hand roughly. "Deal."

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Bit felt a wad of saliva ooze in her palm. She casually wiped it on her pants leg and stood up. "Who's it going to be?"

A husky boy in a crew cut, red bandanna, and narrow sunglasses stepped forward. He waited until the high scores rolled on the screen, pointed to the initials "ONZ" in the second through ninth positions. "That's me, 'cause I owns everyone on the water."

The letters "ASH" claimed the number one spot. Bit tapped the letters. "Who's that?"

The husky boy shrugged. "He don't come around here any more," he said, "And he got that from a bug in the fifth track that let him skip half the course."

"Really? I didn't hear about that one," she said. "I know about the one where you get that rocket engine permanently when you race with the Titanic on some level."

The challenger nodded faster. "The New York one," he said, "I never got it to work, but one of my homes did. Let's go so I can bag you like a Supa."

Bit tried not to giggle. They sat down and pressed the start buttons. Kim stood next to the challenger's seat, cocked her head, and blinked her eyes at him.

"Pick the Aztec track," the challenger said. "My boy."

Bit pressed herself against the rumbling speakers embedded in the seat. "Cool," she said, "Just to be clear, the path under the waterfall doesn't count as a shortcut, right?"

"Damn straight," the challenger said without turning from the screen. "I don't know how you finish the course proper without it."

As the music started with the bass rumbling their seats, Bit leaned over to him. "Just to let you know," she said, "my friend there thinks you're really hot. She totally wants to make out with you. We're really good friends, though, so she might get bummed if I lose."

Kim winked at the challenger and rolled her index finger casually over her lips.

"I won't whup you too bad," he said.

They chose their speedboats and blasted down a river surrounded with trees, ziggurats, and flaming torches. Bit kept pace with him until he broke ahead near the final jump. He shot up the ramp, flipping in the air, and passed within inches of the last turbo boost. Bit pulled out under him as he fell, and his bow crashed into her stern. His boat collapsed, overturned, and slowed enough to let Bit get the edge into the finish line. He did not have to take that last jump.

Bit threw her hands in the air, stomped her feet, and Kim cheered her on. Bit stood up and went over to hug her. Kim accepted it reluctantly.

As she did, Bit leaned into her ear again. "Do me another favor?" Bit

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said, "Keep these guys away from me for a while, please? The guy I beat thinks you like him, so it shouldn't be too hard."

Kim's hands turned to claws. "What?" she whispered.

"If you can do it," Bit said, "Maybe we'll talk later."

Kim glared at Bit and let her go. She took a moment to compose herself and strapped a pleasant grin to her own face. She went over to the challenger and put her hand on his shoulder. "That was great," she said, "You almost had her."

The Sabbath boy kept his head down as he crossed in front of Bit, eyes darting toward her as he assembled his troops. Kim took the challenger's hand and encouraged the group outside. She glanced back at Bit, as if to say she did not welch.

Bit wiped her brow. Her palms were sweaty as well, so they did not help much. She composed herself and played a few more games in peace. After a relaxing half hour of polygons and laser beams, she marched over to the pool tables. Near the back of the hall, Devon and Galeno were hunched over a table's edge, leaning on their cues. They had two beers set down, almost empty.

Bit stood at one end until they noticed her. "How's it going?" she said.

Galeno strutted behind Devon as he lined up a shot. "I'm leading," she said, "Dorkus here's getting shaky without his cigarettes. He's sunk the cue ball, twice."

Devon knocked a striped ball into the corner pocket. "Eat me."

Bit clapped her hands. "Good shot."

Devon shook his head. "I'm solids. She's stripes."

Bit grinned and sat on an empty table nearby. She lifted her weary feet from the floor. "Well. I'm gamed out. Ready to go when you are."

Galeno bent over to set up her next shot. She glanced over at Bit from her hunkered position. "Aren't you going back with Markie?"

Bit pointed at the batting cages. "No, she's on some girl she met here, and she'll probably take her home."

Devon tapped his cue on the table to annoy Galeno. "There's always a girl with her. How does she do it?"

Bit glanced at all the women nearby. "She's a bio-girl. She can get straight to the nookie without explanations."

Devon pounded his cue onto the floor. "Fuckin' bios. There, I said it. Don't know how easy they have it."

Galeno clacked the balls behind them, sinking a stripe of her own. "You know I can hear you, right?"

Devon flashed a grin at her. "Well, you're enlightened, but you're still a fuckin' bio."

Galeno stuck her finger on her ass and made a sizzling sound. "Yeah, and I just won the game. You owe us a round of beers."

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Devon snatched her cue away to hang it up. "You'll get a round of something."

After cleaning up, Devon led them to another booth. They slumped down while the fans above them kept the air from getting stuffy. The beers settled their stomachs and soothed their throats. The electronic songs of the batting cages grated behind them.

Galeno blew over the top of her bottle and almost got it to hum. "Well, where do we go from here?"

Bit knocked her beer on the table. "When they were holding me at MinTorque, they mentioned something was happening Saturday. And I'm scared of it. I think we need to be ready for it."

Galeno and Devon nodded. Bit took out the printouts and showed off the Hyannisport Herald letterhead. "I think we need to go there tomorrow. We should find out everything we can about them."

Devon took a paper and stared at the address. "Sounds good. I'm coming with. I'm taking this week off as vacation anyway."

Bit folded the printouts before they soaked up any beer on the table. "You sure? The bus ride's pretty long."

Galeno finally blew a long note from her bottle, and slammed it on the table. "Fuck that, you can borrow my car, as long as you promise to be very careful and drive like my grandmother."

Bit shook her head. "Oh, I couldn't."

Galeno jingled the keys in her pocket. "I've offered."

Bit stared at her, floored. "Wow, thanks. If Devon and I are going to leave tomorrow, we should probably crash at your place too, if you think you can stand us again."

"Just one more night," Galeno said, "Anything we can check up here?"

Bit leaned her elbows on the table. "I don't think so," she said, "There was that package to CBS. They were going to pick it up after they dropped me off. But they have to have gotten it by now."

Devon stretched out his legs in the seat beside Bit. "Do you think that was the same as the ones you saw in the van? The ones they mailed after they picked you up?"

Bit shrugged. "I guess if they were videos of me, they wanted to hand me over to the police themselves. Melissa said they're on the cops' shit list."

Galeno leaned closer to Bit. "But if the station aired the tapes after the cops picked up that Hingham kid," she said, "That would have really ticked the cops off."

Bit shook her head. "I don't know. They said CBS lost it. And they've had all day to find it."

"Let me work on that," Galeno said, "I've worked in video before, you know."

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"You've interned in video before," Devon corrected her.

Galeno elbowed him. "It's where you learn all the tricks. So, are we set?"

Devon held up his glass. "Cheers," he said, and it echoed around the table. They gulped their beer down.

"Ahem." Kim stood at the entrance to their booth. Her hair was a little ruffled and her eyes were drooping from being tired.

Devon took his feet off the seat, and Bit pushed over so she could join her. "How'd it go?" Bit said.

Kim did not sit. "It wasn't too hard. They were leaving anyway, and I said I'd meet them at some hangout. It didn't hurt that the cop was staring at them, either."

Bit nodded to her. "Glad you're okay."

Kim pointed her thumb at the door. "I got to go. You want to talk later, let me know."

Bit bowed her head slightly to her. "Okay, we'll talk more soon."

"Sure." Kim slid into the crowd heading outside.

Devon put his feet back up. "What was that about?"

"I said that I wanted a drama-free night," Bit said. "And she just gave it to me."

Chapter 8—Wednesday Morning

The only memento Galeno kept from her internship at Rosemount Video was a blue package sent by a bachelor from nearby Norwood. He had developed a video proposal for a *Cops*-type show and mailed it to the production facility. Galeno had been a cable jockey without being allowed to even touch their editing console. She had split her time equally between the staff who worked the editing console and the mailroom. They had related to the documentaries she wanted to make better than the preppy crew and their dreams of directing thug movies.

After six months of grunt work and being called the “Shroom” behind her back, Galeno was handed the sealed package by one of the mailroom women. It did not specify to which department it should go, so the woman had asked Galeno to figure it out. Galeno had cut it open and read over the proposal. She had taken it to the director of content. He had looked inside and tossed it back at her.

“Why did you open this?” he had said, “This is unsolicited. We’re making a show like this, and if they find out, they can sue our asses off. Send it back. Then get off the property.”

Galeno had heard the whispers as she left. “The ‘shroom is outta here,” they had said.

The mailroom staff had known when she returned. The common reaction was, “I’m sorry honey. You have to watch out for that sort of thing.”

She was a boi, though, and she was tough. She kept that package in her closet. She knew exactly what happened to that shoddily wrapped package with no return address mailed to CBS. If they knew what was good for them, they would have handed it back to the postal carrier.

In the morning, Devon and Bit left around seven to join the traffic oozing toward Cape Cod. Galeno stuck a pillow over her head and woke a couple hours later. She had her coffee and looked up the number for the Mail Recovery Service in Atlanta. Her call sent her to an automated message, so she instinctively hit zero.

A perky human voice greeted her. “Good morning. How can I help you?”

Galeno thumped her chest and cleared her lungs. “I’m calling from Rosemount Video. I’m hunting for a package that the CBS affiliate in Boston was supposed to return to us. We mailed it to them on Monday night, but we forgot our return address. It is probably in your care now.”

The operator typed on her keyboard. “Please describe the package, and its contents.”

Galeno read the description that she had pried out of Bit. “Standard eight by eleven by...six inch. A cardboard box wrapped in brown paper,

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sealed with duct tape. The address is in magic marker," she read CBS' address from the phone book, "Postmark is from Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. Inside should be one videotape probably wrapped in newspapers."

"Just a second," the operator said and switched her over to Tom Petty's "Running Down a Dream." Galeno sang along until the operator returned. "Didn't someone from your organization call yesterday?"

Galeno bounced in place. "Yes, probably Melissa? Melissa Lahr?"

There was more keyboard clicking on the other end. "That's right," the operator said, "What was your organization's name again?"

Galeno crossed her fingers. "We're a side venture of MinTorque."

She heard a slap and the operator stopped typing. "Okay," the operator said, "We received your package this morning, and we're going to send it to the address you gave us in Boston."

Galeno grabbed a pen off the workbench. "I'm just calling to clarify a mix-up. Could you send it to our Jamaica Plain office instead? You can charge it to my credit card."

"Sure," the operator said and took the information down.

Galeno recorded her confirmation number. "Please send it priority mail. Tonight or tomorrow would be great."

The operator finished her transaction. "It's on its way. Thanks for calling, and have a great day."

"You're a lifesaver," Galeno said and hung up. She did a touchdown dance on her Twister mat. She was so excited that she did not need the coffee brewing in the pot.

Bit and Devon yawned as they left the apartment, clutching their possessions. They stumbled into Galeno's sturdy green Honda and sped away, free. Devon still wore his black leather ensemble from Saturday night.

"Do you mind if we swing by your place?" she said, "You might want to change into something less leatherboy."

He looked down at himself and saw the dust, spotting, and little stains growing on his vest and pants. "You're right. I've got better clothes."

He flipped on some talk radio and zoned out. Bit pulled up in front of his stone steps and put on her emergency blinkers. She closed her eyes and leaned back. "I'll wait here. Take your time."

Devon had been away so long that the familiar moldy carpet still smelled like a new building. One of the lights was fixed. Someone had left sneakers and an umbrella lying over a heating vent. An envelope was taped to his door, with his address in his landlord's writing.

He lifted it down and tore it open. Inside was a typewritten notice with his landlord's signature in blue ink. It said that his lease would be

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terminated at the end of the month with no option to renew. The room probably would be boarded up instead of repaired. He unlocked the door, took out a suitcase, and started to pack.

Bit sat up when she noticed Devon dragging a load of clothes down the stairs. She left the car to open the trunk for him. "How much stuff are you taking?"

Devon heaved the cases as tight as he could against the trunk's edges. "All of it," he said, "Come on, I have a few more loads."

Bit followed him back and froze in his doorway. The shattered dinnerware, splintered floor, collapsed shelves, and precious things were scattered everywhere. She stood guard at the door while he gathered his possessions and handed them to her to take outside. She loaded outfits, toiletries, sex toys, and caseless CDs into the trunk and back seat until the windows almost cracked from the pressure.

After several trips, she had to stop him. He was pulling out garbage bags from under his sink when she tapped him. "The car's full," she said, "Really full. We'll have to come back later."

He waved her concern away. "Just a few more things. I don't want to come back."

Bit drummed the wall and stepped back to let him through. "All right," she said, "You find a place for the rest of your stuff." She stood aside as he carried out bags of towels and cleaning supplies. She followed him out and caught him pushing the front seats forward in the car to squeeze everything in. As he headed off for another trip, she put out her arm to block the door. "Look, we've got a two hour drive, and some of us have long legs."

He held up his index finger. "One more load."

She held him in place. "No. I doubt I can even see out the back, and I don't want to get pulled over without our licenses."

He looked through the rear window at the clothing strata behind the glass. She released him. He picked up an empty soda can from the steps and hurled it into the street. The cars passing honked at him.

Bit followed him down and leaned against the car's side. "Just lock your place up. We have to go."

He did not move, but sat on the steps and watched the sun rise over the buildings down the street. Their shadows grew shorter by a fraction of an inch. "I'm getting really sick of this. You know that?"

Bit nodded. "I know. That's why I want out of town."

He relented and opened the car door to fetch some clothes. He wandered into his building and turned the key in his apartment to shut it for good. He did not go inside.

Bit wedged herself into the driver's seat and waited. Her shins cramped with the seat up so far.

Devon returned in a short-sleeved blue dress shirt and tan shorts.

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Bit nodded in approval when he slid in next to her. "Very professional. Two steps from being a Parrothead."

Devon tossed his old clothes under his feet. "I know. The outfit I wanted is in the pile behind you, I think." He buckled his seat belt and they took off for the highway. Bit put some upbeat music on the radio and blasted the air conditioner.

The highway was not as crowded as Bit had anticipated. On their first rest stop, they bought cheap sunglasses. Bit flashed her teeth to contrast with her shades. "Why are sunglasses so cool?" she said, "They don't stick your boobs and butt out like high heels. They don't smooth out your body like a good shirt. If you stick clear lenses in them, they look dorky, and not in the good way."

Devon adjusted his and chilled out in the morning sun. "I think it's a light thing, like when you're under a spotlight at a club, and you get a shadow covering your eyes. You look badass."

"You look like a panda—or an orca."

He folded his hands behind his head. "I can deal with being an orca." He forced his seat back an inch and tried to find the sleep he had lost the past few nights.

The further they drove from the city the more the world around them flattened. Hills that showed off the forests and towns for miles faded away. The buildings stopped growing after two stories. The foliage blossomed in shades of olive Bit had only seen in old Westerns. Elderly telephone poles streaked from decades of rain crisscrossed cables overhead. Exits were spaced over fifteen minutes apart, as there were fewer attractions for which to leave the highway. Even the radio stations had hosts who were more laid-back and conservative. The backup over the Sagamore bridge only lasted one commercial break.

Following the directions from Markie, Bit navigated the car into one of the little towns that had grown along the backbone of Cape Cod. Aside from the salt air, seagulls, and sand littering the ground, this was the same as any South Shore town. Condos and strip malls with the same Payless and Cumberland Farms stores lined the business districts. After many twists, she pulled into the parking lot of a converted Elk's lodge with a sign for the *Hyannisport Herald*.

Devon quit pretending to rest as the car came to a stop. He slid his sunglasses into his shirt pocket and blinked in the harsh light. Bit pushed her hair behind her ears and practiced smiling in the mirror. "How am I passing?"

He made a show of examining her. "You look fine."

The air outside was lighter than the city's, as fewer people were breathing it. Bit swung open the screen door that led into the paper's offices, and was annoyed when it did not swing shut on its own. She let Devon in and he gave it a yank which seemed to hold it. The office had

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blue-gray walls, and smelled vaguely like an old barn. It had one main room filled with desks with no dividing walls between them. A long table covered with pamphlets and forms separated Bit and Devon from the staff.

An older woman with silver hair and spectacles on a black cord sat nearby behind a desk. She eyed them cautiously and put the crossword puzzle she was finishing to the side. "Can I help you?"

Bit nodded to her. "Hi, I'm Jessica Bitters," she said, "And this is Devon Manetta."

Devon held his back straight like a nice young man. "Morning."

Bit folded her arms under her breasts. "We're doing a project on the life of Troy Noonan. He's a local guy who runs a big electronics firm up in Boston. Have you heard of him?"

The woman nodded slowly. "I know of their family. They don't spend much time around here."

"Oh, that's too bad. We were hoping we could arrange to check out your archives for our retrospective?"

The woman gestured to the street outside with her outstretched hand. "I'm afraid you can't do that here. You can go to the library if you'd like. Ever since we were bought out by the *Mid Cape Coddler*, we can't let the public back there anymore."

Bit cocked her head slightly. "The library has all your back issues, though?"

The receptionist grabbed a form and drew directions on the back with a neat script. "Most of them. But with the budget cuts and all, I doubt it. I hope you find what you're looking for." She offered a newspaper from a stack near her. "It's on the house."

Devon accepted it and stuck it under his armpit.

"Thank you," Bit said and escorted Devon outside as the woman returned to her crossword. "You know, maybe we should have called first."

Devon shrugged. When they squished themselves in the car, he unfolded Markie's printouts and checked the web addresses from which she had taken them. "Shit on a cream puff. These're from Google archives. *The Herald* must have started to catalogue their stuff and then purged it all."

"Oh, wonderful," Bit said, "Hope you like staring at microfilm as much as I do."

Main Street of Hyannis was a few miles away, but it took them half an hour to arrive. Devon stared out the window at the clumps of families. The men wore white shirts, dark shorts, Red Sox caps and sandals beside women in sundresses, and children in T-shirts over bathing suits. It was a sad, homogenized attempt to be cool. He was relieved when Bit

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pointed out the stone library that stood out from the bright real estate agencies, antique shops, and tourist venues selling quahogs with googly eyes.

Devon leaned on the glass and stared at the businesses and their expensive logos. "I bet these are all the shops that couldn't get in the mall."

"Good riddance," Bit said. She pulled into the library's lot and snagged a spot from another car vacating a parking space. She instinctively flipped on her directional signal to indicate first dibs. The other driver stared at her as he left, as if it was rude.

Devon stepped out of the car, stretched, and glanced at his pile of worldly possessions in the back. Bit patted him on the back. "They'll be okay. You can stay here if you want to."

Devon touched the window that held his belongings back. "I'm coming, but these people are crazy," he said. "I read about how a guy out in Sandwich was pounding a mailbox into the ground without calling the electric company to see if it was safe. He drove a power cable into the phone line and burned down half the houses in his neighborhood."

Bit smirked at him. "They're more afraid of you than you are of them."

"Oh, that makes me feel better."

Bit ran up ahead to the library entrance, and Devon followed. She read the message board in the cool foyer to check for anything of interest. It was covered with flyers for guitar lessons, missing cats, ads for the local productions of Gilbert and Sullivan, and reminders about the Fourth of July festivities, which had happened two weeks ago. She couldn't find any rooms for rent or local queer events.

"Hey, you want to catch the *Mikado* tonight?" Bit said.

Devon peeked around her to read them, too. He put his finger on another ad. "I don't know," he said, "Do you want a used mechanical tie rack? Works like new."

Bit pushed him playfully through the magnetic sensors into the library itself. The florescent lights overhead drowned out the sun scratching at the tiny windows, turning the room a bland yellow. The floor was a dark burgundy with the texture of felt. Two women in ruffled rose prints and June Cleaver hair sorted books behind a lacquered wooden counter with a late drop-off slot. A few children and their mothers wandered about the metal stacks.

A row of monitors glimmered through a bookshelf, and Bit went over to pounce on a free one. Devon hung over her as she clicked through the menus, and alt-tabbed through the running processes. A placard beside the monitor listed all the computer-related activities for which the library would not be responsible.

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Bit lowered her voice to a whisper. "Damn, I can check out the card catalog fine but everything else is locked behind this C.L.A.M.S. service. You need a password from your library card to get in there."

Devon squinted at the warning. "Is that where they have the microfilm scanned?"

"I don't see it anywhere else," she said, "We'll have to ask someone for help."

Bit and Devon returned to the counter. The librarians continued scanning in new books for minute until they realized the two were being polite. One of the women said, without looking up, "Is there something I can help you with?"

Bit brushed back her bangs, ready to be scrutinized. "Yes, thanks. We're doing a project on a local hero and we were wondering if we could look at the newspaper microfilm if you have it."

The librarian stopped typing and pointed back the way they had come. "You don't have to go through that bother. It's all on computer now. Everything after 1980."

Bit appeared glum. "I just checked. It says I need a password."

The librarian furrowed her brow. "Don't you have a library card?" Bit shook her head. The librarian handed them two applications. "Well, I'll just need to see your driver's license."

Bit and Devon sighed together. "Can we use our credit cards? We don't have our IDs on us."

The librarian shook her head and took the applications back. "You can go and get your licenses, but I'll need to see them before I let you on the computer."

Devon was about to launch into a sales pitch, but Bit took him by the shoulder. "Okay," she said to the librarian. "Thanks for your help."

She led Devon to the foyer, but he stopped her. "What was that about? You didn't even ask her about alternative ID. Kids get library cards, too."

Bit shook her head. "But they don't get the 'net access. I don't think we were going to get anywhere with her."

She continued out the front door. Devon joined her on the warm stone porch. Exhaust fumes blew through the perennials and shrubs around the steps.

Bit pulled her legs to her chest. "This is one of the things I wish I could ask Miss Manners, though she'd probably suggest writing some indignant letter and waiting three years for a reply."

Devon pulled out his cigarettes and a cheap convenience store lighter. Bit took his arm. "Are you crazy? This is a public building."

Devon looked around for other library visitors and tucked his pack away. "Oh, right." He was quiet for a moment, and then smiled at her. "You mad at me?"

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She shook her head. "No."

Devon winked at her. "That's how you do it. Nod and pretend you're scatterbrained. Government people eat that shit up."

Bit blinked at him. "Wow, I didn't know you were so sly."

He shrugged. "You think people donate to my job out of the goodness of their hearts?"

"All right. What do you suggest we do, Mohandas?"

Devon took out Markie's papers. The edges were becoming ragged from his pocket. "How about we ask one of those kids in there, who actually has 'net access?"

Bit flexed one of her arms. "We can't beat them up as they come out and steal their cards?"

Devon fanned himself. "No, it's too hot out."

They waited a few minutes, then marched inside to make a beeline for the computers. They looked over each user for any teens who might be sympathetic. Bit tapped Devon's shoulder and gestured to one down in the corner. He was a scrawny boy, hair buzzed unevenly with a little back length. He was dressed in black cotton shirt with jeans that did not quite match the hottest month of the year. He flipped from page to page quickly, while his head bounced as if wound up. His face was sunburned, but it could not hide a darkening five o'clock shadow.

Devon walked behind him and tapped the back of his chair. "Are you busy? My friend and I need your help."

The teen turned around, his pupils darting to each of them. He did not seem to register them, and he returned to the monitor. His legs stuck out straight under the table, shivering a bit. "I can't do anything for you," he said.

Devon bent over to his ear level and whispered. "You know those super-powered vigilantes in Boston? They're really these guys from up in Hyannisport. Troy Noonan and his brothers."

The teen kept reading the lengthy posts that poured down the screen, though his ears were locked on them.

Bit knelt beside Devon. "Please, we only need to run a quick query in C.L.A.M.S. and we'll be out of your hair. It's the only place with any news about Troy."

The teen pushed his seat closer to the computer.

Bit kept at him. "I'll tell you a secret. You've been following the news about those guys, haven't you?"

The teen's passive face broke slightly, and his mouth drew out in a line.

Bit put her hand on the table near him. "My name's Jessica Bitters. If you do a search for news about them last Sunday, you'll see my name and face. The police announced back then they wanted me for questioning."

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He opened a Google window on the screen and entered her name into the search criteria. A badly scanned drawing of her face appeared, surrounded by a crude recounting of her pursuit. The teen peered at her carefully.

Bit tapped the monitor. "Not much of a resemblance, huh?"

The teen's mouth cracked open. "Wow, you saw them up close?"

Bit nodded and patted the spot on her arm where the taser had hit her. "Yup, and they shocked me there."

The teen stared at the red burn mark. "No way."

Bit offered her hand. "My friends call me Bit. This is Devon."

Devon shook his palm as well and noticed the little rugburn over the teen's wrists. "How do you do. Can you do the search for us? We can't get a card."

The teen crouched close to the keyboard. "No problem. Oh, I'm Robert."

Bit focused her gaze on the screen, but she sensed a bound-up scream echoing off her belly from the teen. She could recognize it, as if it had been inside her once. "Thanks, Robert."

Robert pulled up the *Herald's* record and Bit spelled out Troy's name. Over twenty articles showed up and Robert printed them out. A sign beside him indicated that the printer was stashed behind the front desk. Pages were five cents each. Bit checked for the cash in her pocket.

Bit hogged the screen so Devon moved to Robert's other side to look for himself. "Oh, this is fantastic," he said, "Anything on Justin and Stephen would be fantastic, too."

Robert pulled up a few more articles and sent them off to the printer. "So, what do they look like?"

Bit squinted in thought. "In the suits? They're big chunky exoskeletons with plastic armor with bits of metal over them. Troy has a headpiece shaped like a Wolf. Justin's got a Lion face, and Stephen's was a Hawk. I think there's another one, but I haven't actually seen it."

Devon balanced on the armrest of Robert's chair "We think they developed it for the Army, but something went wrong. Maybe they're trying to get noticed to sell it again. We don't know."

Robert pulled up one of the articles he had found. "Hey, Troy knew Mrs. Kearsley! She's my English teacher. Says right here." He pointed at the screen.

"...The library's annual fund drive was a great success this year. 'I've always loved reading,' Noonan said as he passed his generous donation to Superintendent Richards, 'I used to spend lunches with Ellen Kearsley going over all the books we'd read out of class.'"

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Bit peered at the name to get the spelling. "Really? Do you know where she lives?"

Robert shook his head. "She works over at the Lost Pelican during the summer. That's down the street south about a half-mile. She won't wait on tables for her students, though."

Devon leaned over to Bit. "We gotta get there, now."

Bit nodded in agreement. She took out a ten from her pocket and handed it to Robert. "You are a lifesaver. Literally. If you could buy those printouts from the librarian, you can have the rest."

They stood back to make way for Robert, who jumped over his chair. "Thanks," he said, "Can I ask you something though?"

Bit smiled. "Whatever you'd like."

Robert scrunched his nose at her. "Did it hurt much?" he said, "You know, your operation?"

Bit's mouth grew cold. "What operation?"

Robert glanced at her crotch. "Like, down there."

Bit sized him up. It had not been so long ago when she had her own black shirt and jeans days. Robert was trying to be a boy and failing.

"I haven't had any operation," she said, "Maybe someday if I get enough money. Hormones are better to start with. You need a shrink to prescribe them but it's worth it." She almost spoke his name, but "Robert" didn't make sense. One like "Roberta" would do for now.

Roberta frowned. "You don't look like a girl," she said.

Bit smirked. "No, you're the one who doesn't. So don't take it out on me, okay?"

Roberta nodded quickly. "All right," she said, and turned to Devon. "You look like a guy though."

Devon took the compliment graciously. Roberta cast her eyes down at her flat chest and logged off the computer. She walked over to the front desk nervously to purchase the printouts.

Bit leaned against the bookshelf and watched her leave. "Oh sure," she said. "Compliment the one you don't empathize with."

Devon put his hand to his waist and whistled silently. "No shit, what gave him away?"

Bit blinked. "What gave *her* away. I don't know. Maybe she hates herself like I used to."

Roberta returned with the papers and handed them to Devon. Bit grabbed a pen and wrote down some phone numbers and web addresses. "These are some support groups in Boston. Get out of here, whenever you can."

Roberta took the list and put it beside the mousepad. "I will. Good luck finding out more about those Noonan guys. You'll tell everybody about them, right?"

Bit gave her the thumbs up. "Yes, and don't you do anything

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stupid, okay?"

Roberta's gaze wavered away from them. As she took her seat and stared into the white screen, her face returned to its silent form. Bit had to close her eyes and pull herself away. She followed Devon outside.

Devon patted his belly. "To the Lost Pelican. I'm starving."

Bit kicked down one of the flowers. Devon grabbed her. "Hey, not here."

She wriggled out of his grasp and hurried to the parking lot. She leaned against a car and stared at the tar below her. "Then where? You know the chances that kid has of making it past twenty."

Devon looked at the clouds overhead. "You ever watch a wounded bird die? You get sad and move on."

"Bullshit." Bit bristled as some of the nearby pedestrians looked over at her across the library's lawn.

Devon leaned next to her and pointed his thumb down Main Street, south. "Come on. Sounds like you could use a drink," he said, "Of course, it'll be harder to get without Galeno to flash her ID." He wandered away and she came after him, down the sidewalk. They kept to the far right to pass the clusters of vacationing families taking in the quaint atmosphere.

The Lost Pelican was decorated as a fishing shack, covered in long vertical planks sprayed gray, with anchors, buoys, and a wooden fish from a carousel that children could ride. Most of the patrons had steak and burgers. The hostess at the door wore a form-fitting rain slicker and an elegant matching cap. She informed Bit and Devon that it would be roughly twenty minutes to get a seat, as lunchtime was winding down.

Bit checked every waitress for one who could master their customers like at school. "Is Mrs. Kearsley working today?" she said, "We're old students, and we came down to surprise her."

The hostess checked her schedule behind the podium. "Ellen? Her break's at three. You can catch her then." They took a number and claimed a park bench across the street.

Devon passed over half of the new printouts for Bit to read. After a few minutes of scanning, he thrust a piece from a sports page at her. "Check this out," he said. "'Troy Noonan scored the winning goal today against the Rhode Island School for the Blind.' That has to be a misprint."

Bit handed back a sports section of her own. "Cute. It says here Justin was on the football team. 'Members this year include...Justin Noonan.' Nothing about any of his games, though."

Devon traded with her for a photograph of a lacrosse game. The caption read, "Jesse Koneru catches a pass at twenty yards. Stephen Noonan defends behind him." Bit could not discern any faces behind the

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chunky wire-meshed helmets.

They pored through every word of their papers, hunched over to keep the summer winds from stealing them away. Bit organized her pile by content. "How many articles does Stephen have?" she said, "I don't have anything with him."

Devon held up three. "There's his name on the list of graduates in 1990. You'll like this one; 'Campbell's Soup is honored to name Stephen Noonan as the recipient of their School Spirit award for collecting one thousand soup labels for Barnstable High.' Did you ever do the label thing?"

Bit nodded. "We tried it one year. I think our total was a thousand. We didn't bother again."

"Our school got some decent supplies," he said, "It says here that 'these labels will allow Barnstable High to receive copies of Word Perfect...' Eww."

Her fingers crept over the last of Stephen's articles. "And this one?"

Devon read it more thoroughly than his initial skim. "Have a look at this. It's a police log. Someone was picked up for 'vandalism on a neighbor's property and DWI.' It doesn't say how he got off."

Bit grew curious and pored over her pile of papers to see if any other police reports showed up. She discovered none, but she thought she saw a familiar name flip by. She studied the pages slowly until she found it.

"Justin honored for his charity work at the soup kitchen of St. Mark's."

"Justin awarded Eagle Scout rank for setting up a new recycling program in Dennis."

"Without Justin's help, the Thornton Burgess Society would not have received this grant," Mr. Parsons said."

"Among the graduates of this semester's Shotokan karate class were Justin Noonan... Master Roland Silvers presided over the ceremony."

She whipped out the page and showed him the picture of the mugger, several years younger, fitter, in ceremonial robes. "Guess who I found."

Devon peered at the paper with his mouth dropped open. "...Mr. Silvers served in the U. S. Marine Corps for a decade before leaving to start a consulting company and this academy," he read aloud, "There he is. We should have done a search for Melissa, too."

Bit glanced in the library's direction. "We can still go back."

Devon put his hand on her knee. "Uh-uh. You'll probably try to drag that kid back with us, and there's no room in the car."

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She pouted. "Fine. Do you think they still live around here?"

He ruffled through his pile. "We could check the phone book," he said. "Here's an address. No, wait, it's for a funeral home. 'Henry Noonan, 71, passed away at Barnstable Hospital due to complications with his heart...succeeded by his three sons and his former wife, Patricia.' Nothing."

Bit put his papers in her lap as she leaned over his shoulder. "Anything juicy on Troy? This is mostly Justin's awards. They even gave him one for getting into law school. It's like he went to the bathroom and got a prize for it."

Devon dropped his head and aimed his eyes at her, smug. "Okay, Miss Modest. Honor Society every year when you were in school?"

She shrugged. "Honor society doesn't mean crap. Do you remember National Geographic for Kids? They had that section, 'Kids Did It?' It was supposed to be one of these accomplishment things with the message, 'If they did it, so can you.' But it was such bull. It was always, 'Jane's parents climbed K-2 and dragged her along.' I think only, like, three or four of them had a science project that was big news, or something."

"So?"

"How many of these awards did Justin get, by his daddy having money? That's all I'm saying."

He took the pile off Bit's lap and skimmed through it. "Hang on. One...two...six science fairs. Troy placed in all of them, never got first though. This is cute." He showed her the description of a mousetrap shaped like a Venus flytrap that sensed bigger pets approaching and shut itself to prevent them from eating the poisoned bait.

Bit shook her head. "Must have been rough on Stephen, with his brothers always getting noticed, and he's got an arrest on his record."

Devon slapped the papers down. "And that's enough to beat up your brother's karate instructor?"

Bit glanced at a clock on the restaurant's porch, embedded in the wattle of a carved pelican head. "Let's ask Ellen," she said, "They should have a spot ready by now."

They folded up their printouts and met with the hostess again. There was no line and she sat them by a window that overlooked their bench.

The restaurant's interior had simple ship prints and photographs of different time periods on the Cape. Their place mats featured instructions for how to make a variety of knots, and how to use them. The radio played "Susie Q." The condiment holder had Sweet'N Low and white packets labeled "Sugar."

A server introduced herself and handed them the plastic wrapped menus. She did not pull out a pad to write on.

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Bit put her menu aside. "Hi, we're looking for Ellen Kearsley."

The server's face lit up. "Oh, you're the ones," she said, "She's kinda busy now, but she knows. Can I get you anything while you decide on your order?"

Devon skimmed the drink selections. "Tall Coke."

"Something clear and bubbly," Bit said.

"All right." The server buzzed off to the next table.

Devon picked out the sandwich he wanted in thirty seconds. He played with the ketchup bottle as Bit pored over the menu for several minutes, peeking up to check out the waitstaff. One was spry for her early fifties. She had strawberry hair, cut short, and bangs starting at the top of her head. She wore huge amber glasses from the counterculture movement.

Devon followed Bit's stare and noticed her as well. "She looks pretty cool."

Bit turned back to Devon before Ellen caught her. "Do you want to do her?"

Devon wavered his hand like a scale. "Eh, no. She looks too girlie."

Bit pretended to hit him over the head with her menu, and he raised his arms to protect himself. "Hey, you asked. Girls are starting to wig me out. I can't read them like I used to, I mean, before T."

Bit pointed at herself. "But you can read me, right?"

He nodded. "I've known you a while, though," he said, "But the past few days, I don't know. You were freaking me out at the library there."

Bit examined her place mat. "How about Saturday night? Us and Galeno. You sorry it happened?"

He reached over the table and put his hand on hers. "Maybe. It's just, you're a great friend, and I need you. But I don't fantasize about girls anymore. Just people with a real guy streak to them, whatever that means. Genderqueer, anybody."

Devon silenced himself as the server returned with two massive glasses of soda. She took their order, memorized it, and left.

Devon traced the knots on his place mat with his fingertips. Bit waited for him to continue but he did not.

Lunch was plentiful and delicious. The cheese on Bit's Tower o' Burger slid onto her plate as she took a chunk out of it. Devon scarfed down his Reuben and spent time dissecting his potato. The server reappeared with the check when their food was consumed, and she had a message. "Ellen has her lunch down the street at Jimmy's. She says she'll meet you there in half an hour."

Devon put the tab on his credit card, and they lay back to let their food digest. Bit leaned across the table.

"Wherever you go. You better keep in touch."

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He sighed. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm just having one of those strong silent guy crises."

"As opposed to one of my screaming, overprocessing crises? You know, I can have fifty of your strong silent crises in a second."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "That you can."

The sun had lowered enough for the surrounding buildings to block it, when they decided to head down to Jimmy's. It was a sit-down diner two blocks away with the sterility of a bank vault dressed up with framed newspaper clippings, such as "JFK Shot" and "Red Sox Screw Up '86 Series." A sign that read "Please seat yourself" stood in place of the hostess.

In a corner, Ellen sat in a cafeteria chair with a bowl of soup, still in her work clothes. She dumped crackers in it and had a magazine spread out beside her. Her stringy hair was stuck in clumps.

Bit waited until she noticed them. "Ellen?" she said, "Hello, I'm Bit and this is Devon. We were asking at the Pelican about you."

Ellen pushed her glasses up to get a better look at them. She squinted and stirred her soup. "Hello," she said, "Do I know you? I've never taught you. I remember all my kids."

Bit shifted her foot. "No, you're right. We wanted to talk about Troy Noonan, if you have the time. A boy from your class, Robert, wears a lot of black, said you knew Troy well?"

Ellen perked her head up. "Oh, how's Robert doing?"

Devon patted Bit's back and spoke before she could. "He's spending time at the library. He looks like he's having a good time."

Ellen took a spoonful of her soup and winced at its heat. "That's great. I worry about him. He's a bright boy, but he takes himself too seriously." She pointed with her spoon at the empty chairs across from her, and they joined her.

Devon took out Markie's printout of MinTorque's bankruptcy announcement. "This is Troy's company. Did you read about this?"

Ellen nodded. "I thought it was a great move for him. He always wanted to run his own company and build big machines. I lent him 'Starship Troopers' and he loved it so much, I never got it back."

Bit wiggled to get comfortable in the tiny chair. "That's the one about a boy and his suit, right?"

Ellen fanned herself with a napkin. "Uh-huh."

Devon kept still, even though the seat cut into his butt. "That's what MinTorque makes. Exoskeletons for the military."

Ellen stopped her spoon midway to her mouth. "Really? That sounds like him. That's really too bad it's not working out for him."

"You know those vigilantes they're talking about in Boston?" Bit said, "It's Troy, Justin, and Stephen."

Ellen's mouth spread open as if this was too much. "Now you're

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kidding.”

Bit shook her head. “I’ve been in their company. I’ve seen what they make.”

Devon leaned toward her with his hands in his lap. “We’re wondering if they’re in some kind of trouble to be pulling those stunts.”

Ellen regarded them for a moment and slurped her soup. “I don’t know anything about that. You said Stephen’s one?”

“Yes,” Bit said.

Ellen pushed her hair behind her ears. “That doesn’t sound right. Stephen wasn’t close to his brothers. They didn’t hang out together at school.”

Bit rested her arms on the table to get as close to her as Devon. “Like how?”

Ellen wiped her mouth. “Why are you asking so much about them?”

Bit looked down at the plastic table. “Stephen’s dead. He was in his exoskeleton, and we watched someone shoot him.”

Ellen put her spoon down and took in a slow breath. “You’re not telling me this.”

“It was all over the news Saturday,” Devon said, “About the vigilante dying. That was Stephen. We’re trying to understand who he was to figure out why it happened.”

Ellen was silent for a minute. “I’m not sure what I can tell you.”

Bit nodded to her. “Anything’s good.”

Ellen read over the printout and set it beside her. “I didn’t talk to him much. I know he worked down at the boat yard with Troy during the summer. Their father pushed Troy to get him the job. Troy was mad, and we talked about it a lot. He asked me why Stephen wasn’t grateful, and I asked him what Stephen was doing. Apparently janitorial work, scrubbing boats and lines. I know Troy didn’t start there himself, but he said, ‘Steve can work his way up.’ I got the feeling he was keeping him there, though. I’m sure there was a lot more to it.”

Devon carefully took the printout from her. “Couldn’t Stephen get a job himself?”

Ellen shook her head. “Not one his dad would have liked. Justin got a stipend because he was working with the Scouts full-time. But Stephen... I don’t think he really knew he was his own person. Troy used to talk about how Stephen would puppy-dog behind him, like when he started the violin. Stephen was only practicing the pieces he’d been told to, while Troy got into blues for a while. In an all-boy household, you know, things were pretty intense.”

Bit touched the burn mark on her arm. “Did Troy have much of a temper?”

Ellen took another sip. “Are you kidding? He lived for frustration.

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He would leave school and drive off if he got flustered. He even put his hand through one of the student's paintings once. He'd give up a project three times during the same conversation and still go back to it."

Devon leaned in. "He didn't get too frustrated with Justin, right? Just Stephen?"

"Oh, Justin had his own things going," Ellen said. "Troy didn't talk much about him since they didn't have much to squabble over. He was pretty solitary anyway. I think he took it hardest when his parents divorced, since he was the middle child. His dad wasn't big on talking, so the boys really had to take the initiative in their lives. I think Troy said Justin used to talk to the priest at St. Mark's. I know Justin wanted to go into the clergy for a while, and his dad hated that."

Bit searched the table for a pen to record everything Ellen said, but there was none. "Ever heard of Melissa Lahr? She's Troy's girlfriend."

Ellen thought for a moment. "No. I'm glad he's found someone, though. He had a hard time staying interested in girls. He used to complain that every girl he'd dated had only two good conversations in her. I think he wanted to date someone like himself, though. He wanted to be really challenged. Is any of this helping you out?"

Bit and Devon nodded together. "All this is great. Can we pick up your tab?"

Ellen waved the offer away. Then, she put her spoon down and peered at them. "Didn't you say you were in Troy's company? Do you work for him or something?"

Bit stopped her shifting. "Not really. We found out who he was over the Internet, but we kinda met him before that."

Ellen swallowed the rest of her soup. "Really? What does he look like?"

Bit glanced at Devon. "Well, he's tall."

"Doesn't he sort of look like a wolf?" Devon said.

Ellen stood up. "Maybe you guys can take the check after all." She handed it to them while a waitress watched over her shoulder.

Bit accepted it and gingerly waved to her. "Thanks for talking to us."

Ellen tossed her purse over her shoulder. "Uh-huh," she said, and excused herself out the door.

Devon sighed and drooped his head on the table. "That went well. At least we had her really going for a while."

They searched their pockets for random bills and gathered enough to cover the check. When the waitress scooped it up, they dragged themselves outside and walked back to Main Street. Devon rested his arms around his chest while Bit swung hers to work out the tension. "Do you actually want to do something fun?" she said, "I think this is all we're going to get today."

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Bit swayed her head side to side. "Why not? Something quick. Then we should head back to Boston tonight."

They stopped outside a souvenir store and glanced at the flyers stacked out front. "There's a lot of minigolf around here," Devon said, "See if we can find the funkiest course."

Bit tapped his arm with her fist. "You're on."

Their overstuffed Honda did not have any parking tickets when they found it. Devon tossed their papers on the floor and they slid inside. Bit fought her way onto Main Street and drove through the start-and-stop traffic to a nearby highway where the courses were built. Devon flipped through the complimentary *Herald* the secretary had given him. Bit called out the first thing she saw about each course as they passed. "Airplane sticking out of a hill," she said, "Giraffe on top of a castle. Ooo, pirate ship and waterfall!"

She pulled into the lot beside the Astroturf course. Devon grabbed her arm, and she almost collided with a parked car. She slammed the brake and let the adrenaline surge as the visitors glared at her. She scowled at him. "What?" she said.

Devon ripped off a corner of the Obituaries and handed it to her. It was in very small print.

"Friends and family of Stephen Noonan are cordially invited to attend a celebration of his life at his summer home at 346 Scragg's Terrace, Hyannisport, on Thursday, July 19, at 11:00 a.m."

Bit read it several times. She waved it around and hugged him. "We have to crash this."

"Oof," he said, "There are people watching."

The other minigolfers walked by, confused. Bit looked down at her simple shirt and jeans. "I can't go dressed like this. You know what? We have to go rent formal wear."

Devon's face froze as visions of tuxedos passed him by. "No, please. Don't throw me in that briar patch. What are you waiting for?"

Bit slapped him away. "There were signs to the mall on the highway. Screw minigolf. We're going shopping!"

The mall was spread out like an airport terminal spanning both sides of the highway. Its lot had plenty of spaces, and Bit managed to find some close to the movie theater. She was careful not to slam the door and joined Devon in his leisurely walk inside. A Lord's and Lady's sprayed out perfume near the entrance. Bit whistled to Devon.

"Stay here," she said, and ran into the salon to make an

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appointment.

He tried to say "But..." to stop her. However, he was unsuccessful. The tux rental shop was calling to him with its praises of square shoulders, flowing slacks, and glorious starched collars. He was compelled down the great hallway littered with carts selling Beanie Babies and cell phone covers.

Bit set herself up for a cut-and-dye. He was already halfway down the hall when she came out.

"I said, 'Wait for me,'" she said when she reached him.

"But..." he said, pretending to stammer, "But...mine eyes have seen the glory..." He gestured to the glass pane next to him. An elegant casual tux with slim shoulders and a round neck sat in the window.

Bit tapped the glass. "Hey, this is nice." She followed him into the tan shop, which complemented the somber black and brilliant white outfits within. She glanced at the tag on the outfit in the window and flashed it in Devon's face. "And that's the rental price."

Devon blinked at her. "What talk you of price?"

A clerk came up behind them. "You like that one?" he said. He took a tape measure from his shirt pocket and made a quick estimate of Devon's body. "I don't think I have one exactly in your size." Devon pleaded at him with a sad pout. "But I'm sure I have something else nontraditional for you," the clerk said, and hustled to the racks.

"Traditional is fine," Devon said, after him. He turned back to Bit and smiled. "I'm going to wear a real fine suit."

Bit raised her eyebrows. "You know you don't have an apartment anymore."

"So, I'll have more money to rent my suit." He skipped off to shadow the clerk.

Bit left him in his euphoria and went to one of the pricier dress shops. She browsed through the Petite Large sizes and found a black sleeveless dress with a Chinese collar and buttons up the front. She took several random outfits to reassure herself that the first dress was best and her taste was not lessening with age.

A saleswoman approached her as she took down her last trial outfit. "Excuse me, I don't think you are a petite."

"Uh-huh," Bit said, and left the saleswoman without a glance. The Chinese-styled dress did look best. It was worth eating macaroni and cheese for a year.

Bit put down her plastic to pay for it at the lingerie sales desk, so the dress clerk would not get the commission on it. She checked the time, then hurried to the salon for her appointment. She chose a strawberry-blond dye, and had her hair straightened, with the tips curled up. It took over an hour.

When she left, she hunted for shoes. Parade was the only decent

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store that carried a size 11, and they did not have anything in that size which went well with the new outfit. She managed to find some nice open-toed sandals in a box mislabeled "9" and ran off to the nail parlor to have her toes and fingers done, to match her hair. She let her credit card take the balance and stuffed the receipts in her pocket without looking.

Devon was still trying on suits when she returned. The clerk's enthusiasm had waned but Devon had decided on a style and was exploring which size fit. Bit remained by the door with her bags and flipped through a cell phone brochure she found on the floor. With her waiting, Devon announced that he had made his choice. He put down a hefty deposit on it. With the suit in a great plastic bag over his shoulder, he escorted Bit back to the car.

"First I tried this one in the corner," he said as they walked, "But the sleeves had buttons and they couldn't find ones without them so I asked about this really spiffy one with all these satin lines but they only had the floor model and I said nobody except a gay guy would wear this anyway and even he wouldn't rent it because they didn't have a match for his boyfriend and..."

Bit put out a hand to slow him down. "Okay, but you got what you wanted."

"No, that's the thing," he said. Bit tuned him out as they strapped themselves in the car with their purchases stuffed around them.

The sun was near the horizon, which made traffic even worse than before. The shopping had sucked Bit dry, so she pulled into the first motel that charged under sixty dollars a night. They rented a single room near the rear of the building. They dumped their belongings on the dresser and flopped down on the bed.

The LED display on the clock said it was past eight. It should have been later. "Set the alarm for seven," she said. "We'll need some extra time to get ready."

Devon stared at the ceiling. "We're really doing this. You know what I've been thinking?"

Bit sent an arm over to change the alarm time. "What?"

Devon turned to her. "It's not so bad to be us. Sometimes it's pretty damn cool."

Chapter 9—Thursday Morning

The alarm came too soon for them. Bit threw herself into the shower and woke Devon with her thrashing. She sprayed down every curl that would not behave. She went over every rough patch that had formed on her fingernails overnight with a fine Emory board. She painted each eye with a steady hand and redid them every time she noticed a lack in symmetry. Devon brushed past her to use more of the hot water. She tapped on the curtain as he was rinsing his hair.

"Jewelry," she said, "You didn't bring any, did you?"

He shouted above the water spray. "There might be some in one of the cases I packed, but I don't remember which."

Bit went through all her belongings in her overnight bag, scattered around the sink. "Crap, we don't have time to check every one. We need to stop somewhere and get some."

Devon stuck his hand out the curtain. "We'll only be there a few hours. Nobody will notice."

Bit knocked the wall in frustration. "Everybody will notice. I've seen these kinds of soirees on TV. They'll expect everyone to be as spoiled as they were."

Devon stuck his tongue out at her. "You think you have it tough? This is last year's tuxedo. The guys are going to tear it apart like a wishbone."

Bit took her dress from its hanger and stepped into it. "Damn, this thing doesn't have any pockets. You can take the keys and money, right?"

Devon shut the water off. "Uh-huh. We should take a taxi in, so they don't tow Galeno's car or anything."

Bit wiped off the bathroom mirror and smiled as wide as she could watching the idiot grinning back at her. "Good point. What the hell are we doing? We could drive home right now and just say we went."

Devon stepped out and toweled himself off. "Oh, grow up. I'll be in the bedroom. You stay, and we'll try to minimize the pre-party fight."

"I'm not fighting," she said, "You are."

He slipped out the bathroom door behind her. "That's it. See you later."

Devon took care to recreate the elegant figure he had seen in the mirror at the tuxedo store. After squeezing his chest down and catching his breath, he slipped into the suit piece by piece. He slicked his hair back with a part down the side, and slathered in enough gel to hold it. He performed a quick shoeshine with the hotel towels, before strapping the boots on his feet. He took a short rest with his eyes closed before looking at himself again.

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His reflection was dashing and cultured. "Good Lord," he said and pretended to dangle a pocket watch on a gold chain from his vest.

Bit took her time, so he phoned the cab. "Taxi's coming in ten minutes," he said to her through the door.

"I'll just need five."

He flipped through the commercials on the television hoping to find a program. Soon, he heard the car pull up outside. Bit was still in the bathroom, and he knocked to get her attention. "It's here. We have to go."

Bit stepped out. Her hair shone, and curls gently rounded her head. Her face was smoothed out naturally and her lips pouted like a fifties centerfold. Her dress revealed well-proportioned hips she usually hid behind jeans. Her dark, blended eyes grabbed his gaze.

"You're gorgeous," he said.

Bit gave him a quick glance and slipped her sandals on. "You look pretty good too. C'mon, we need to hustle."

The cab was white and had crumbs in the back seat. Devon gave the driver the address. "We won't be staying long," he said, "If you could pick us up by one, that'd be great."

The driver nodded and started the meter. He took them away from the traffic until the streets became smoother with fresh laid tar. The family homes had a buffer of pebbles surrounding their front gardens. They pulled up to a gray guard shack with a black and white striped bar across the entrance.

A young woman in a blue uniform leaned out of the shack. "Good morning. What's your purpose for visiting today?"

Bit stuck her head out the window, avoiding the edges to keep from mussing her hair. "We're going to the wake at the Noonan's."

The guard took out a pen and notepad. "I see. And you are?"

Bit took a second to remember her own name. "Jessica Bornstein."

The guard pointed her pen at Devon. "And you?"

"Patrick..." Devon said, "Uh, Bornstein."

"Great," the guard jotted down their names and pressed a button to move the bar up. "Just head straight, take your second right and they'll be on your left. Have a pleasant day."

As they passed the shack, the driver turned back to them. "Bornstein, huh? I thought my dispatcher said your name was Manetta or something."

Devon adjusted his collar. "It is, but you wouldn't believe how often those lists get leaked to the paparazzi."

The driver shook his head. He turned onto Scragg's Terrace and counted up the house numbers. Bit and Devon gazed at the massive residences, tall as the trees around them. Some were round like amphitheaters, colonial-style with lush gardens and pillars, or salt-box

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rustic with several restaurants' worth of buoys and other seashore decorations.

The driver stopped across from a traditional English mansion with a driveway crammed with SUVs. It was not the highest building but its lawn stretched out hundreds of feet on either side. The house was painted a Williamsburg yellow with a dark red roof, and had vines clinging to the trellises on its sides.

"Twenty-five, even," the driver said.

Devon handed him a ten and a twenty. "Keep the change."

"Thanks. See you in two hours."

The cab drove away. They almost jumped when a rustle came from behind them. A foot-tall bird with brown feathers, a long tail, and a blue and gold belly was strutting along the roadside, pulsing its head with each step.

Bit knelt down to examine it. "That's a pheasant. You think they shoot them around here?"

Devon approached the bird, making coo-coo noises, but it hopped away from him. "I could probably catch that thing. It doesn't look too bright."

Bit stood up and brushed herself off. "It would poop on you, though. Let's go."

The earth under them seemed to vibrate as they walked onto the driveway, past the massive vehicles boxing each other in. "So, are we married or what?" Devon said.

Bit held out her hand. "No rings. We're cousins."

"And how do we know Stephen?"

Bit shrugged. "He was only three years older than us, right? We probably went to high school with him."

Devon cast his hand toward the house, in a manner befitting his Italian heritage. "The place should be full of people who went to school with him."

Bit touched one of the vehicles with mud on it, and recoiled. "Maybe we transferred in for a year, and he was getting us alcohol or something."

Devon stared at the chrome bumpers around them. "This is great, we are so going to get busted."

The main door had a set of marble steps leading up to it. A woman in her forties sat near the bottom, smoking a cigarette. Her hair was pulled in a tight bun, and she wore a black turtleneck and skirt. She tapped the ash over the side of the steps, into a bush. Devon looked around the woman for the rest of the pack. Bit straightened her back to seem more presentable. The woman waved to them. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Bornstein?"

Devon shook his head. "We're cousins. How do you do?"

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The woman took another drag. "I'm sorry. The guard called ahead to announce you. I'm Reverend Adams. Do you mind waiting until I finish this?"

Devon took a step toward her. "Do you have another?"

"Not on me," she said.

Bit kept upwind of them to avoid cravings. "Excuse me, you're a Reverend? I thought the Noonans were Catholics."

The Reverend looked back at the house. "I'm Congregationalist. Angela asked me to come. Mrs. Noonan. She's Miss Staton, now."

Devon put his hands in his pockets and paced around Bit. "So, there isn't a priest?"

The Reverend took a last breath of her cigarette. "Father Brennert's here from St. Mark's, too, at the boys' request. He's off somewhere in the house. So, how did you know Stephen?"

Devon nodded and stared at the clouds. "From Barnstable High," he said, "We were starting out as freshman when he was a senior."

The Reverend blinked, and crushed her ember under her shoe. "Really? You read the notice in the paper? Angela didn't think anyone would find that. I don't think anyone local's shown up. Come on in, Angela will be happy to meet you."

Cool air lapped at them as they followed the Reverend into the austere hallway. Paintings of pastoral scenes hung on the white walls. She brought them into the living room, which could have been the hangout for the seventies party scene, with track lighting, machine plastered walls and a large fish tank. Over fifteen people mingled about the room, men and women in their late twenties, all in exquisite black, with professionally styled hair. Each guest held a drink. A wet bar was set up in a corner. Several leather couches and wooden chairs were aimed toward the far wall, on which hung a blown-up photograph of a young man. He was gaunt, with a tall rectangular head, a curved nose and pointed chin. His mouth was pulled shut as if he expected this to be his death mask.

While the Reverend escorted Bit to a far corner, Devon straightened his coat and headed to the bar. He admired the outfits on the trendier bodies of the other men, none of whom wore anything close to a tuxedo. He paused beside each conversation to decide whether he should join.

"...she's been in hospital for weeks, and I can't take any more time off to visit," one woman was saying.

"...planning to knock me up in September and hope he gets a job by spring," another woman said.

"...been after her again and the judge couldn't do more than a restraining order," a man said. Devon sped up and reached for a champagne glass. He brushed against a woman leaning against the bar.

"I'm sorry," he said, as Melissa turned to see who he was. She

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nearly splashed her drink on her dress, and clutched the arm of the man beside her. He had fuller cheeks, blond hair cut short, and a face fleshier than Stephen's picture, but the resemblance was close.

Devon composed himself and extended his hand. "Delighted to meet you, Troy. Mrs. Kearsley says hi too. She says you still have her 'Starship Troopers.'"

Troy did not accept it and checked around for any other crashers. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Devon bowed to the woman. "The invitation was in the paper. And Melissa, it's good to see you again." Her glass was near empty, so he offered her another.

She accepted it in disbelief, but set it down. "You can't stay here," she said in a low voice, "I'll take you outside."

Devon leaned onto the bar. "No, I think I'm going to stay for the service. Besides, I'd love to explain to everyone here why Stephen doesn't have a head, on my way out. And how is Master Silvers doing?"

Troy's eyes widened, and he sucked his teeth. He reached out for Devon, but Melissa took his arm and hauled him to the other end of the room. Devon remained still. He took another glass and had a long sip. It was white wine, very sweet.

The Reverend guided Bit to the elderly women at the end of the room. A sophisticate with graying locks, and a frumpy woman in a drab governess dress stopped talking as they approached.

The Reverend nodded to the sophisticate. "Angela, this is Jessica. She saw your announcement in the paper."

Angela nodded to Bit and clucked her tongue. "I'm glad somebody did. I'm happy you could make it." She gestured to the woman beside her. "This is Mrs. Charger. We go a long way back."

Bit kept slightly out of their circle in case she had to bolt. "Thank you for having us here. I'm really sorry for your loss. Stephen was a good guy."

Angela took a moment of silence. "Thank you. He was a wonderful son. How did you know Stephen?"

Bit pushed her bangs back from falling into her face. "I was starting Barnstable High when he was a senior. Actually, he hit on me a few times."

Angela raised an eyebrow. "Did he now? I trust you set him right."

Bit shrugged. "I only got the news from your announcement. Wasn't he in some kind of accident?"

The three women looked to their drinks. Bit gulped, but Mrs. Charger caught her eye. "It's really all right," she said in an old Boston accent. "Not many of the guests know even that much."

Bit stood tentatively. "I'm afraid I don't recognize anybody here."

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Are they Stephen's friends from college?"

Angela swayed to the side, to scan the guests behind Bit. "I have no idea. They're mostly with Troy and Melissa. I haven't been welcome in this home for years."

While the chairs and sofas were wiped clean, dust lay on the wall's trimmings. Crumbs crunched under Bit's feet in the shag carpet, dry from before this gathering. Bit could see the edge of a wide screen television behind Stephen's giant picture. "Who lives here?" she said.

Angela exchanged a glance with Mrs. Charger. "No one regularly. I expect it'll be sold soon. Stephen was working on buying the other boys' share of the house, but now they'll probably need the money more."

Mrs. Charger scowled. "Let them. This house deserves better than a bachelor pad."

The Reverend folded her arms at the thought. "I just hope they don't find any more pheasant carcasses on the lawn when they bring people over. I've heard several residents complain about them in church."

Bit moved into their ring. "I saw one on the way here. Does someone keep them for hunting?"

"Worse," Mrs. Charger said, "They are kept for ambiance. My next-door neighbor bullied the board into letting him release the things year 'round. They are stupid and rarely last a few months before some dog eats them or they build a nest too close to the roadside."

"I remember they started showing up before Henry and I parted," Angela said, "I've never liked them."

Mrs. Charger cleared her throat. "Speaking of which, Troy looks rather upset with Melissa."

Bit snapped her head in the direction Mrs. Charger indicated and saw them huddled together, exchanging desperate words. Troy was hefty outside his suit. Melissa was pretty enough. She turned back to Angela. "Are they always like that?"

Angela waved the notion away. "Oh no, this only started after Troy had some trouble with his company. It's been, what is it, seven years now for them? Melissa needs someone to care for her, and Troy's enough of a rock."

Bit bent toward her. "Care for her?"

Mrs. Charger eyed Bit cautiously. "You'll keep this to yourself. She's one of those people who has to check the stove five times to be sure it's off."

Angela shot her a look. "Now, that's not quite true, just because we have to shoo her from the kitchen at Christmas or she'll take over."

"They need to get properly married," Mrs. Charger said, "That idiotic promise has got to go."

The Reverend lowered her voice. "Which one?"

Angela rolled her eyes, "Whatever project they're working on, they

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are to be married the day it's finished."

A familiar feminine voice spoke up behind Bit. "Ah, you are talking about us. My ears were burning."

Bit twirled around and came within inches of bumping into Melissa. Up close, she had baby-blue eyes and abnormally white teeth. Troy remained behind her, scowling.

Angela rested her fingers on Melissa's arm. "We worry about you. Troy, Melissa, this is Jessica. She was a friend of Stephen's at Barnstable High."

Troy wrinkled his brow. "Was she. She wouldn't happen to know what the school mascot was, then?"

Bit shook her head. "I was in drama. We didn't have time to follow anything else."

Angela strode in front of him. "Troy, she is a guest in your home, here to pay her respects."

"Fine," Melissa said, "Stay. Get drunk on my boyfriend's tab for all I care. Mom, we should get the ceremony started. We're running late."

Melissa offered her arm to Angela, who slipped hers around it. "Certainly," Angela said and beckoned to Bit, "Lovely meeting you, Jessica."

Troy guarded his mother, but stayed behind her so she would not see him seethe. He followed her to a line of chairs under the giant photograph. Bit excused herself past the mourners in search of Devon, while Troy set up a microphone. She found him propped up against the bar, dazed. The crowd passed them to take their seats. Bit whispered into Devon's ear. "Did you see them?"

Devon cupped her ear in return. "Oh yeah. And this is my sixth glass. You're driving home."

Bit jumped when another hand grabbed her shoulder. A tall man stood beside them who shared Troy's face, except more lean. He was in better shape than his brother and had a prominent Adam's apple. Around his neck was a silver cross on a chain. "Would you mind waiting outside?" Justin said, "This is a family gathering."

Bit glanced at the front of the room. "Are you sure? Your mom doesn't seem to know any of the other guests."

Justin placed his hand on the small of her back and pushed her toward the door. "And she doesn't know you either. Let's go, now."

"Hey, Lion boy," Devon said, and tossed his drink on Justin's face. Justin sputtered and released Bit to wipe off his eyes. "I can make more of a scene if you'd like."

Justin mouthed a word at him and grabbed some napkins from the bar. After soaking up the liquid, he left the room momentarily. He returned dry. At his side, he escorted a husky priest in a simple suit and collar with a trimmed beard.

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Bit and Devon retreated to the bar stools as Justin and Father Brenner proceeded up the aisle toward Stephen's picture. Angela and Reverend Adams sat on its right, with their eyes cast down, so Justin and the priest took the empty seats opposite them, next to Troy. When the crowd had settled, Troy rose and took the microphone off its stand.

"Good morning," he said, "Or afternoon by the time I'm done saying this." He smiled and a low chuckle drifted like a wave through the guests. He gave a quick look toward the bar where Bit sat. "Well, it's pretty obvious why we're here today. My baby brother isn't with us anymore. I always hoped he would be the one to bury me, but I guess that's life. He taught me a lot of things. He taught me how much of a pain in the neck someone can be, and you'll still love them. He taught me how to rig the vending machines down at the docks to get free ice cream sandwiches."

Troy paced in front of the gathering. "Sure, he used to drive me nuts. That's what brothers are for, I guess. I remember one Christmas, Dad brought me a mint Dinobot from Japan. I put it down for a moment and Stephen took it out of the box. He broke the head off. You know, Justin and I never let that go. We should have. He was a good man. He went to work on time and paid his debts. You can't ask for any more than that."

Troy put the microphone to his chest and waited in thought. When the air lifted, he passed the microphone to his mother. She stood up in front of the picture and listened to the room's expectant hush.

"When I first heard about Stephen, I hung up the phone," Angela said, "because I needed time to know. I understood that some thief had taken my son's life for not giving away his money. But I didn't know it. To me, he was no more gone than any other time of the year when he was not visiting me." She shook her head slowly and stepped toward the aisle. "So I went for a walk downtown to a café I frequent, and I was thinking, how is it different that his passing had a cause? It must have been a simple choice by the robber. I don't like simple choices. Most of you know I left his father several years ago. I knew the boys would have a difficult time. But Stephen came to me that final night when I was packing. He said he would sing in the children's choir when I was gone. He said he never liked it, but he did it to make me happy. I thanked him. That was all."

Her fingers stroked the microphone's side with her thumb, and she took a breath. "He had a lot to give, a lot more than he knew. He has left behind no wife, no child, and few friends. But as I grow older, I don't think the worth of a life can be judged from its memory. I've forgotten so much. Some days I wake up and expect Henry to be lying next to me. No," she shook the microphone's cable from her path, "I think the worth's in the choices we make. Every year on my birthday, after he

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graduated, Stephen bought me tickets to the symphony, so I could hear the *Messiah*. They cost a small fortune, and I didn't go to all the performances. But I accepted them, knowing that by doing so, I would make him happy. And so, when I got to the café, I chose for him to be gone. He wouldn't be behind any doors, or showing up late at holiday gatherings, already working on the brandy. And I had to choose this for two days before I knew it. Stephen was always my baby boy. I wish he had chosen better. I don't think I'll be going to any more symphonies."

She put her fingers to her lips, and lay them on the photograph. She turned from it and took her seat.

The Reverend picked up the microphone and offered it to Justin. He leaned forward in his chair and did not rise. "The Lord says a lot about death. The Lord says a lot about pain. And He only says so much of it in the Bible, because it is too big for words. I loved my brother." He sat up and let the wrist which held the microphone relax. "When we were boys, he came to me after Troy had told him a really dirty joke. He said he had laughed, but he didn't understand it. He admitted he didn't know what sex was, exactly. I believe I said something rude, and made fun of him. How could he be so clueless? And it hurt; not that day, but down the road when my brother never came to me again."

He sighed and waited for its echo to dissipate. "But that was that. I turned to the Lord soon after that, after I saw what a jerk I could be. I learned to pray for strength. And I owed that to him. I loved him, and it hurt every day to see him walk without guidance." Justin glanced at his mother but she was still wiping her eyes. "He was good to the friends he had. I remember once he drove his girlfriend to the hospital after she had passed out, so her neighbors would not have to see the ambulance. He was drunk, as well, when he did this. For another friend, he drove him to dirt bike races across the state, because his friend could not afford a car. I wondered if we were his true family. But it doesn't matter now. He belongs to God. There's nothing more I can say to him." He scratched his head and collected his thoughts. "And it hurts. I can pass judgment on his life, but it says more of me than him. Knowing that he's not here reminds us that we will not be here long. And in the end will come pain, and death. What matters is that we are good in our hearts. It's hard to be good. It's so hard sometimes. I think Stephen felt that pain, most of all. I pray that he is free of it now, but I don't know. I just don't know."

Justin dropped the microphone in his lap and put a hand over his face. Father Brennert reached over and lifted it for himself. He rose with a solemn bow and swept his hand before the crowd. "I'm glad to see so many of you here. Some new faces, some old. There is such unity in loss, which we need to recognize. Stephen would be proud that you came. I am sure he would be honored to hear your words of grief, and

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celebration. If anyone would like to come forth and add to what the family has said, would you stand up now."

Bit pinched herself for luck and slid off the barstool. Devon shook his head, but did not reach for her.

"Yes, you in the back, please come," Father Brennert said, waving her forward. Bit let the guests stare as she strode through them. Father Brennert placed the microphone in her care and sat down.

"Make it quick," Troy whispered behind her.

Bit cleared her throat and took the cable in her other hand.

"There's a shrine on the telephone pole near the spot where Stephen left us," she said. "I don't know who keeps putting flowers there but someone does. And that person doesn't know Stephen. He or she lives in the neighborhood. This happened on their doorstep. They'll come home a little more scared for it. And all the same, they'll honor Stephen as a victim of their fear, like a brother. I know this because I heard him die."

She waited as the room rumbled with whispers, and she gripped the cable tight. "I was going home from clubbing, and I heard the shot. There wasn't much left of him. A lot of us came running. We were sickened by what we saw, and none of us forgot anything. That night, Stephen made more friends than I will ever have." She looked back to Devon, and faintly saw the nod of his head.

She squeeze the microphone tighter. "There must have been more to his death than just a robbery," she said. "He was a fighter. He wasn't stupid. People don't lash out unless they've been lashed down in their lives. Stephen knew the risk and decided that it was better to fight than let one more person walk over him. Why?" She shrugged. "Who knows? I don't think anyone here does. Maybe even he didn't know. You probably know how little he accomplished in school. But today, I've heard him change so much in others, I can't help but think how selective our memories are. We make mistakes and do awful things because, at the time, we're trying to do what's right, for us. Stephen spent his life trying to do right."

She shook the cable from wrapping around her dress, and stared at them all. "I mourn his death, but even more, I mourn his powerlessness. How often have you had to give your life away to a thief? What if, after time and time again, you said, no more? What could we say about you? All I can do is put flowers on his shrine and remember that, in spite of his final stupid moments, he had strength. Whether or not he used it, he had it."

Bit returned the microphone to the priest. Angela nodded to her and wrapped Bit's hand in her own. "I wish you had told me sooner."

Bit let her go and returned to her seat past the ocean of gapers. Devon noticed her shaking. He took her arm and warmed it between his

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palms. "Goddamn," he said.

"Is there anyone else who wishes to speak?" the priest said. A few others took center stage and described their sadness. Bit did not hear them. When the speeches were over, the Reverend and the priest led them through the Lord's Prayer. The group did not keep time together. Half the crowd said, "debts" and the other said, "trespasses." Bit mouthed the words as she would have the Pledge of Allegiance. When finished, they proceeded to the entrance to the living room, and called out the blessing, "Go in peace, and good tidings to you for coming."

Devon jumped off his stool and wobbled when he hit the floor. "Well, we're out of here. No more glasses for me."

"Okay," Bit said as she steadied him, "Our ride should be here soon anyhow."

As they passed through the entryway with the crowd, the Reverend stopped them. "My sympathies to you as well, for witnessing what you did. I can see why you came. Have you given a statement to the police?"

Bit shook her head. "I haven't been comfortable talking about it, but I think I am now. I promise I will." She bowed to the Reverend and shuffled Devon out the door into the hot afternoon. The SUVs blew steam out the back and waited for the vehicles blocking them to move.

Bit kept to the steps while the driveway thinned out. The taxi had not arrived yet. Troy and Melissa pushed by them to escort Angela to a silver Lexus. Troy handed Angela over to Melissa and let her take his mother to the car. He towered over Bit and gritted his teeth. "We said we didn't want to see you ever again. If you wanted to insult us, there are better ways."

Bit withered but held her ground. "At least your mom liked me."

Troy gestured to the street. "I want you off the property, now, unless you want to stay, because security is great about keeping things quiet in this neighborhood."

Bit shook her head. "Troy," she said, "What do I have to do to convince you that you are the one hurting us? I have a hole in my wall and no job. Devon has a crap income and nowhere to live now."

Devon shook a finger at Troy. "And my security deposit is down the drain."

"Just go," Troy said.

"But I didn't even touch your brother, and you know exactly who did. Forget it," Bit said, throwing up her hands as Troy's face grew red. Devon followed her as she tromped away, braving the remnants of the traffic jam in the driveway.

She stopped to call back to Troy. "No apologies. We just drop this here, now, and things don't get any worse." She did not wait for his response. She went out to the street and headed toward the main gate.

Devon took her arm, and wobbled slightly. "What's the use," he

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said, "He'll never understand. Look how big his house is."

Bit ran her finger up his vest. "By the way, you looked really handsome in there."

Devon patted his jacket. "I still look good. I'll be sorry to see her go though."

A block away, they spotted their taxi, which honked and slowed beside them. "Back to the hotel?" the driver said.

Bit looked back to confirm no one was following them. "Take the scenic route," she said, and kept watch as the driver returned them to the gate.

Devon spotted a shiny blue reflection on the roadside. He pointed out the dead pheasant to Bit. Its neck was twisted back. Its wing was extended as if it had tried to fly away.

Bit looked out her own window at the rhododendron wall. "You know what that means," she said, "The end is near."

Compared to the morning's preparations, it took them a fraction of the time to disrobe at the motel. They dozed past the checkout time, so the motel charged them for an additional day. They accepted it without protest but were glad to get back Devon's deposit when he returned the tuxedo.

The highways were clear of jams on the journey home. Bit gave Devon control of the radio, but he found little to keep him interested.

"We should have taken pictures," she said, "At least get us in our outfits."

Devon patted her garment bag at his feet. "You can still put the dress on."

She shook her head. "It's not the same. Since when am I getting invited to something like that again?"

He rested his head against the glass while his buzz wore down.

"Do you know where you want to move to?" Bit said. "Galeno's done too much for us already."

Devon shut his eyes and slipped his sunglasses on. "I could stay with Galeno until the day she dies, and she wouldn't say a word. Like she is with that girl she's got out in California. I don't know where I'm gonna go." He shifted himself and let the car shake him to sleep.

Bit kept the number of rest stops for her cramped legs to a minimum on the way to Jamaica Plain. Devon woke from the jolt when they pulled in front of Galeno's apartment. He had not realized how much cleaner the air was in Troy's neck of the woods.

Bit led the woozy Devon out of the car and up to Galeno's doorbell. After one ring, she scampered down the stairwell to let them in. She was out of breath and grinning ear to ear. "It's here," she said, "It came a little while ago."

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Bit hustled after her, with Devon on her tail. "What did?"

Galeno led them to her loft. A tape was rewinding in the VCR. The shades were drawn, and the lights turned off.

Devon sat on the Twister board and unlaced his boots. "Hey Galeno," he said, "My landlord kicked me out and I need somewhere to..."

Galeno turned to him with her finger over her lips as the tape hit the beginning. "Shh! Wait until you see this."

The television screen went black, but the speakers echoed with cruising of cars and flapping newspapers. Slowly, a series of cone-shaped lights faded into sharpness, as if on a hand-held camera. The scene panned to the left and the image turned a fuzzy green. Two shapes came walking under the lights. The left one was tall and thin, wearing jeans and a light top. The right one was shorter, and heavier. Houses with chain-link fences lined the streets around them. The camera zoomed in on the couple; close enough to reveal the word "Goddess" on the light shirt and a leather vest on the other person.

Bit knelt in front of the television. "Where did you get this?"

Galeno moved onto her bed to give Bit some space. "I asked nicely. Now, shh!"

The faces on the video became clearer as the streetlight went out over their heads. A hulking man in a thick shirt approached them, extended his hand, and exchanged words with them. The man's sweatshirt hung off him flat and angular, as if it was too large and he had something stuffed under it.

Galeno pointed at the screen. "See that? Check out his butt."

Bit watched herself hand over her money and identification. She touched the screen, but the events recorded did not change. Galeno was right, though. Each cheek of Roland's butt was square.

"I was checking military hardware sites when you guys showed up," Galeno said, "I think it's some sort of protection, like Kevlar or something. It would make sense how he lived through the beating."

The camera panned back to frame the armored figure leaping down from another rooftop. His head was flashing green, slowly. Roland remained still in front of the two of them, and waited for Stephen to make the first move.

Devon kicked his boots off and took a spot on the floor behind Bit.

"This has to be what they see in the van," Bit said. "That flashing's the transponder."

The camera raced in to capture Bit's shock before Stephen knocked Roland on top of her. It panned out as Bit stumbled up and ran in the wrong direction. As Devon turned around to pursue her, Stephen slammed a foot into Roland. The camera followed Devon as he raced after Bit.

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"There!" Galeno said, and paused the tape. The camera had caught Stephen in the same shot as Bit running. Galeno advanced the frames one by one. Bit and Devon were moving, but Stephen was not, nor was his head flashing. "It's only for a few seconds, but see?"

Devon grabbed the remote out of Galeno's hands and rewound the scene to confirm it in real time. "I thought I'd imagined that. They turned him off."

As the scene played in normal speed, Roland howled from the ground.

"So why'd they turn him on again?" Bit said.

They watched as Bit ran up the street and met up with the group of club boys. The boys talked with Devon briefly, then started running out of the shot, toward Stephen. The camera panned over, and Stephen was attacking Roland again. His head had resumed flashing.

Then, the tape cut to several minutes later. The street was swarming with people. Stephen sailed up into the air from the center of the crowd, caught the edge of the roof above him, and plummeted down to the ground.

Bit tapped Galeno's nearby foot. "Did you cut that?"

Galeno shook her head. "Uh-uh. This is everything."

Stephen and his blinking head were enveloped by the mob. They were moving too fast for the camera to pick up their faces. Then, the gunshot went off from within the mass.

As the people scattered away, the blinking green light flowed with them. The camera zoomed in very close. As the crowd parted, the light flashed over a "Goddess" T-shirt, and Bit's bandaged face stared directly at the screen for an instant. The camera followed her until she was a speck down the street.

The video stopped. The screen was filled with a still shot of Bit's license—her number, date of birth, gender, and photograph. The image stayed on for a minute before blacking out. The rest of the tape was empty.

Galeno ejected the tape and tossed them the brown package. "This is what it came in."

Bit scanned over the CBS affiliate's address written in magic marker. It was stuffed with pages from the Metro newspaper, and covered with postal center stickers and new addresses. She squinted her eyes to try to recognize it from the van.

Devon yanked the shade up so they could read the package. One of the stickers on its top bore MinTorque's address. Bit held it to them. "Why is this there?"

Galeno squinted at the label. "That's where it was going before I got the Dead Letter Office to send it to me," she said.

Bit flicked at the label. "But the Office was returning it to

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MinTorque when you called?" she said, "You know what'll happen when Troy doesn't get this? He's going to call up the office and ask where the hell his package is. This has a rush delivery sticker on it. How did you pay?"

Galeno handed the black tape to Devon so he could inspect it. "I gave them my credit card, and you owe me fifty bucks for it."

Bit waved the box in her face. "What? They're going to get your address. They might come here. Screw that, after what we did today, they're coming here."

Galeno scowled at them. "Why? What did you do?"

Devon tossed the tape on the bed. "We ticked them off at their family house. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

Bit paced over to the phone, as she clutched the box. "We should call Markie. And Ryan, and fuck it, Kim, too. Hey, Galeno?"

"Yes?" she said.

"Do you know any good restaurants around here?" Bit said, "We need to have a meeting."

Chapter 10—Thursday Evening

Markie took a piece of the paper-thin bread their waiter had brought them and cracked it into a bite-sized piece. She scooped up the hot sauce with it and tried not to watch Kim and Galeno trade small talk at the other end of the table. Markie only half-listened to Bit and did not feel like being as subtle as Ryan, who seemed to hang on most of the words as if it was the polite thing to do. Devon nudged her when she began to stare at the families at the other tables.

Bit finally caught up with the week's news, and Ryan threw her head back. "You guys are insane," she said, "I knew there was a reason I hung out with you."

Galeno tapped her on the shoulder. "Yeah, wait until they move into your place."

Devon leaned over to play-punch Galeno, but he could not reach. "We weren't that bad, and besides, no one's going to break into your loft. We're going to make sure of that."

Galeno scanned everyone at the table. "Yeah. Well, let's hear some ideas. What are we waiting for?"

Bit put her bread down and cleared her throat. "It's their van. We have to shut it down so their suits turn off. Once they calm down, we can try to convince them to leave us alone. We can show them the package Galeno has, and the other videos."

Devon nodded. "They don't even know we've found their headquarters. It shouldn't be hard to tail them from there, if they do come for us tonight."

"Right," Bit said, "Anyway, we need to get the suits far enough away from the van that they can't stop us. So, that'll be my job."

Ryan tapped her side. "By yourself? No way."

Bit shook her head. "They're only going to shake me down. I can last a while."

Devon stuck his thumb out at her. "And while Bit's off being an idiot, we'll raid their van."

The others stared at Bit, doe-eyed.

Bit reached under the table. "Don't worry. I brought protection." She opened her backpack on her lap and pulled out a pair of rollerblades.

The listeners shuffled in their seats. Devon turned to each one of them. "Does anybody want out?" No one raised their hands. They remained quiet until Galeno spoke up.

"Well, guys," Galeno said, "I got to thank you now for trying to save my place."

Markie pulled her chair back. "Could you excuse me a second?" she

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said. She left them behind to head over to the restroom sign by the restaurant's entrance.

Kim listened to the first suggestions, but she kept an eye toward the restroom. She could not stand it after a few minutes and hurried after her. Kim found the door that had a sign featuring a stick figure wearing a dress. She swung it open and waited outside Markie's stall. Markie took her time, and Kim snagged a copy of *Reader's Digest* from a table in the corner. When Markie came out, she did not glance at Kim as she washed her hands.

Kim put the *Digest* down. "You know, if anyone's going to bail, it should be me," she said, "But I'm not."

Markie peered at her from the mirror. "What makes you think I am? You're the one who ditches when it gets too hairy for you."

Kim looked away. "At least I didn't quit class. I thought I should be flattered you left over me."

Markie flicked droplets of water at her. "Fuck you."

Kim took a paper towel and wiped her face off. "You want to take this out back?"

"Sure," Markie said, "You go outside, and I'll see you in a few." She turned off the water and reached by Kim for paper to dry herself.

Kim folded her arms under her breasts and hit her head against the wall. "Would you stop playing around? I'm sick of it. You didn't even tell Bit I was coming to the arcade the other night."

Markie balled up her towels and tossed them in the trash. "You needed to see her, not me. She invited you here. Something must have worked."

Kim nodded. "Yeah, are you glad?"

Markie rested against the stall across from her. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't see that girl from the arcade with you."

Markie flipped her the bird. "That was a bust," she said, "I thought you were over me anyway."

Kim stared at the tile grid under Markie's sneakers. "Maybe. You weren't trying to be seen with her, were you?"

"I don't care who you see me with," Markie said, and hung a finger off her necklace, "Come on, let's get out of here. Our food's probably ready." She pushed herself off the stall, toward the bathroom door. She passed close to Kim, who put her hand on Markie's thigh. Markie stopped.

"I'm sorry," Kim said, "If you don't want to..."

Markie admired Kim's girlie lips. She waited for someone to say stop, but no one did. "You know. I don't really care anymore." She fell forward and tasted them. She wrapped her arm around Kim's waist and drew her close. They rocked slowly and took each other in.

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Kim was the first to let go. "Thanks. You don't have to do any more if you don't want to."

Markie nodded. "I know. This doesn't get out, okay?"

Kim stepped back and straightened her hair out in the mirror. "Yes. I'll stay at my end if you stay at yours." She smiled a little and left.

Markie counted to thirty before she followed after her.

When the plates were cleared and the check was settled, the group took their cars to Galeno's building to wait. As the sun set, Devon and Markie dragged up a cinderblock behind the complex, while Galeno, Bit, Ryan, and Kim went shopping. They returned soon and unloaded several bags of supplies from the local hardware store, including a sack of crowbars which the others helped them to lug back.

Galeno broke up some sticks to see who would go with her on spy duty, and Ryan choose the shortest. She held back a grin at getting to visit MinTorque. "Just my luck," she said. "We'll call when they leave the warehouse." Galeno packed her car and sped off, leaving the rest to travel in Markie's car when the time came.

They waved goodbye to Galeno and Ryan and rested their luggage against the apartment complex. They hefted the crowbars to get a feel for their weight and tried tossing them in hopes of controlling where they landed. Bit drew a crude face on a nearby cinderblock with magic marker and each took turns hurling the crowbars through its holes. When their aim was passable, Bit tied ropes to the crowbars and let them continue their practice. Most of their shots resulted in a hard thump on the sand. The successful ones made a gut-wrenching clang, shaking each of them.

Eventually, Markie hit the block three times in a row and announced, "This is dumb. There have to be better ways to break into a van." She lay against the complex until Kim matched her record. Then she had to resume practice for pride.

Devon sneaked in a last cigarette on his break. Bit leaned against the fence next to him and stared up at Galeno's window. "There's not much space up there, with all your stuff on the floor."

Devon took a puff, and winced as Kim hit the block with her bar. "I don't think I can take another night up there," he said. "I'm not asking to crash at your place, but I have to be out tomorrow."

He offered her the last smoke, and she accepted it. "You could do another night in a motel," she said. "And thanks."

Devon snorted at the thought. After a few hurls, Markie's cell phone rang. She popped the phone open, and they gathered around to hear. "Y'ello," she said, "Uh-huh. The van's called 'Adam's Vending' now? Right. We'll be on the prowl."

Bit buried the cigarette in the sand and helped the others load up

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Markie's trunk. The car sagged noticeably lower, even before the four of them piled in.

Markie circled the center of Jamaica Plain while they waited for further instructions. Bit strapped the rollerblades to her feet and made fists to build up her energy. Devon stayed on his side of the car and stared at the passing stores.

The sky was black when Galeno called them again. Kim took down the directions, and they headed toward an old business district over the subway tracks. Devon twisted a rope around his hand. Bit rubbed the remnants of her fingernails against her jeans. The road was cracked from neglect, but nobody wore seat belts, in case they had to bolt.

Galeno directed Markie to an old paint retailer behind which, she told them, the van had parked. "I'm on the main street," she said, "Ryan's gone off to keep tabs on them."

Markie cursed every driver and stop sign on the way. They pulled up in front of the paint store in the last available spot beside a fire hydrant. Bit leapt out the door and landed on her rollerblades. "Two minutes," she said.

Galeno got out from her car, parked a short distance away, and waved to Bit. Her dashboard light turned on, and Bit pointed it out to Kim, who called Galeno. "We can see you," Kim said on the phone, "Could you keep your door closed until they clear the area?"

"Oops," Galeno said, and locked her door.

Markie and Devon slipped out near Bit and crouched down near the car. Their hands took their weapons from the back seat and held them tight.

Bit circled to the store's rear parking lot, at the top of a steep hill. A "Dead End" sign stood at the top, and she sighed. The road beside the store sloped down. She feared having to push up it to escape.

The lot had a chain-link fence surrounding it that once protected it, but the bolt had been cut and the gate swung open. The tar was worn away and dissolved into a line of trees. The oversized van was parked in the center. Light glimmered from the crack of the rear door. Bit's belly twitched. She rumbled over the rocky earth and kept her legs steady so she would not fall. She lifted her hand and let it hit the back of the van. "You left your parking lights on, asshole," she said, and pushed herself backward.

The van shook with several figures heading in opposite directions. The door peeked open and a burning red eye looked out. Bit flashed it a toothy grin and gave it the thumbs up. When the second eye appeared beside the first, she spun around and took off to the main street.

Across the street, Ryan watched her escape from behind a car. She lifted her phone and whispered, "They've seen her." The van's back doors swung open and three black shapes, outlined in the van's lights,

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hopped to the ground. One had a mane and glowing eyes. The other two had smooth oval heads without faces. Two shapes without suits were hunched over the computer console inside. A third Faceless suit reached out after them and closed the doors. The Lion and the first two Faceless suits crouched and leapt to the top of the store.

"Um, there's a problem," Ryan said in the phone, "Three of the suits are after Bit but there's another in the van, with two operators. The Wolf isn't with them."

"Hang on," Galeno said and hung up. She crept across the street and knocked on Markie's car. The three faces inside perked up to her, and Kim rolled her window down.

Galeno caught her breath. "There's still a suit and two guys in the van, and Bit's got three suits on her ass."

Devon knelt by Kim's open window. "Fuck," he said. "Do you think it's too late to help Bit?"

Markie popped her trunk open, and Kim went out to unload it. "There are four of us out here, and three of them in the van," Markie said, "I like those odds better."

Devon drummed his fingers on top of the car. "Okay," he said. "So we hope Bit can handle hers on her own. Is Ryan small enough to sneak under the van?"

Markie took her keys and followed the rest of them out. "Whatcha thinking? Light the gas tank on fire?"

Devon shook his head. "If we can get one of them to open the door, she can cram one of the crowbars in there so they can't shut it."

Galeno circled the car to get off the street. "How does that help us?"

Devon looked up and down the road. A car passed but paid them no attention. "I'll take the suit on. I'll lead it far enough away."

Markie almost laughed. "How're you going to outrun it?"

He shrugged. "Are there any bikes chained around here?"

They hit the pavement and scanned the sidewalks. The few bikes which were out lacked at least one tire. Kim pointed out an old Mazda with its windows open and its radio ripped out. Devon pondered it, but Galeno put her arm out in front of him. "Are you trying to get us arrested?" she said.

Devon handed Kim his crowbar. "Give this to Ryan, and tell her about the plan. Be ready to hit the van as soon as I roll away."

Kim waved the bar to him and crept down the side road to Ryan's hiding spot.

Galeno helped Devon and Markie push the Mazda out of its space without turning the steering wheel far enough to lock it. Devon slipped inside and let it roll down the hill. He pushed the brakes before it could be seen from the parking lot.

Markie sneaked beside the Mazda's door before Devon stepped out,

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and patted the car's side. "Promise you won't smash it," she said.

"Only if it doesn't smash me," he said, "I'll wait until you say it's okay."

Galeno and Markie took a bag of supplies and hurried to the lot. Devon left the Mazda's door open and crawled over to Ryan's hiding place. Kim lay against the wall. Ryan was gone, but Kim pointed at the van. "She made it under them."

Devon shook Kim's palm. "Wish me luck," he said.

Kim hefted her crowbar. "Luck."

Devon took a breath so deep it cut his waist against his jeans. He hunched over and hurried along the lot's edge to the van. Galeno was on her knees near the passenger's side. He spotted Markie skittering around the front to the driver's door.

Devon stood up and bit his index finger to get his blood pumping. He spun around and shouted back at the van. "I'm dialing 9-1-1 on your asses! Nine! One! One!" He took off and jumped into the Mazda. The van banged open as he released the emergency brake. He stuck a boot out and launched the car down the hill. He held the steering wheel tight so it would not veer.

The Faceless figure sprinted after the Mazda. Kim ran out when it had passed her. A shadow reached out to close the rear doors before she could get in. The hand pulled the left door shut but the right one hit a metal bar, thrust up from under the van by two small hands.

"What the hell?" a man's voice said. He bent over to check it out.

The driver's side window smashed inwards as Markie hurled a rock through it. Galeno grabbed the edge of the door from the man's fingers and yanked it wide. The man and woman inside were startled, and almost were hit by the crowbar on a rope which flew in the rear door. The bar snagged the computer's cables and headphones, ripping them out.

Markie forced out a battle cry and charged at them from the driver's door, while Kim came from the rear, taking Ryan's crowbar on the way.

Melissa and a bushy-faced man crouched wide-eyed against the wall. Markie and Kim pushed their weapons into them and prayed they would not have to do anything more. The man reached out to seize them, so Markie and Kim jammed the crowbars under their victim's noses and, lifted their heads against the wall.

"Get your hands up and keep your legs down!" Markie said. Melissa and the man panted, and raised their arms slowly.

Kim kept her body rock hard and her face desperate. "Don't fucking move!"

Galeno crawled inside with caution and unplugged the remaining wires from the computer. Ryan lifted the bag of supplies after her, and

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unloaded rope and duct tape. She and Galeno reached around the prisoners to tie their limbs while Markie and Kim held them still. They tied the bindings as quickly as they could, piling on extra tape in case their knots were too sloppy.

When the prisoners were secure, Ryan reached back to slam the door shut. As soon as she touched the handle, a flash of black metal hit the ground behind the van.

Ryan threw herself backward to slam the door. The others spun their heads to see. Galeno threw the door's locks shut, while Markie and Kim climbed over each other to get into the front seats. They secured the doors beside them. The van shook as a fist-sized indentation burst in, inches away from Ryan.

Ryan jumped and beat the metal with her crowbar to hold it back.

Markie brushed the glass fragments off the front seat, and twisted the keys in the ignition. Galeno screamed as the fist split the metal wall of the van and reached inside. It tried to withdraw but the door's sharp edges around it trapped its wrist. It heaved back and forth to free itself. Markie gunned the accelerator and threw the van's occupants against the wall as she swerved the van around. The fist in the door tried to jerk itself out. Markie slammed the brakes and shifted into reverse, sending the van against the store's concrete wall to crush the intruder. After a second of shock, the van creaked forward. The door bent inward as the suit pushed against it. Galeno and Ryan stepped over the bound bodies in case it broke.

Markie put the pedal down as far as it would go and shot the van out to the main road. Kim held onto the passenger's seat belt for dear life, while Galeno and Ryan gripped the handles on the wall. Markie zigzagged on the main street to keep the van off-balance. She shouted back as loud as she could, over the rush of air through the broken windows. "Hey Galeno! Ask nutso and futso back there why the supers aren't shutting down."

Ryan wedged herself behind the driver's seat while Galeno flopped on top of Melissa and ripped off her mouth tape. She held Melissa's head against the floor. "We're going to be driving like this until your guys' suits shut down. The workstation's off. Why aren't they?"

Melissa coughed and her eyes wobbled as unpredictably as the van. "We disabled that feature. It's only to keep the customers safe, anyway."

Galeno leaned down to ensure she had heard her right. "Customers?" She looked up to see what caused a loud creak over her. The arm in the door had worked itself in past the elbow and was reaching for the lock. Galeno took Melissa by the hair and aimed her head at the black arm.

"How do we turn them off?"

Melissa grimaced as her roots were yanked. "You don't. Maybe

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they'll run out of juice in a few hours."

Markie made another fast turn and they slid into the opposite wall. Galeno rubbed her own head, then reached down and massaged Melissa's.

Melissa tried to shake Galeno off her but it was no use. "Okay," she said, "It's in the workstation. There's an override under 'Emergency.'"

Galeno grabbed the computer and plugged it back into the outlet. "Stop turning like that," Galeno said as loud as she could, "I gotta use the 'puter!"

Markie hunched over the steering wheel. "Make it quick," she said, "I'm probably going to hit something soon." She came to a complete stop and spun them around one hundred eighty degrees.

Galeno propped her knees against the computer as the Linux Gnome selector appeared on the screen, and asked for a username. She turned to Melissa. "Name and password," she said.

Melissa listed her head up. "Untie me. I'll type it in."

Ryan released her wall and stepped over Melissa. "Oh, bullshit," she said. With a shout, she hoisted Melissa's torso up and tossed her into the black hand, face first. Melissa screamed as she slid over its metal palm and leather joints. Its fingers grabbed her hair and went wild, flinging her against the door. Ryan's face turned white as the hand threw Melissa about. Ryan snatched a pair of scissors from the bag and thrust them out over Melissa's head to cut her hair free. Each clump fell away and blew about the van's interior. When she had split the last piece, she caught Melissa as she fell away. The hand flapped in place, shaking away the last pieces of hair.

Ryan gritted her teeth at the dazed Melissa. "Name and password."

The van rocked as the shape of two feet pushed into the roof, separate from the hand in the back. Melissa blinked at it, and turned to Ryan. "Name is superheroez," she said, coughing, "With a 'z,' not an 's.' Password is oh seven, two oh, nine three."

Galeno typed it in and watched the control panel appear on the monitor. She located the button labeled "Emergency" and clicked it with the mouse. Clawed fingers broke through the roof, followed by another set. Both grabbed the metal between them to tear a hole.

A menu appeared on the monitor. Galeno clicked the button which read "Shutdown." A blast of air whipped their faces as the suit on top of the van ripped the roof open. Flustered, Markie slammed the brakes. The suit on top plunged its Faceless head into the van. It reached in and took Galeno by the throat. Ryan sat up and thrust her crowbar's tip between its fingers, leaning her entire weight on it. The hand snapped and Galeno slipped free. The Faceless suit howled as it pulled up its twisted fingers and froze still. Its electronic yowl faded into a man's muffled sob.

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The monitor informed Galeno that all four exoskeletons were in emergency status. The hand in the back door was stiff, splayed open. Markie parked the van off the street and waited for their hearts to slow. Everyone shook, taking shallow breaths.

The paralyzed Faceless suit hollered at them, but their voices were muffled behind their masks. Galeno stepped with care over the captive's bodies and leaned over the driver's seat. "We should check on Bit and Devon," she said.

Markie put out her hand, and Galeno slapped it. She offered it to Kim and Ryan as well. "Sure," Markie said, "I think we did it." Kim led them in a cheer as Markie took the van back to the paint store.

Devon gripped the steering wheel as the Mazda gathered speed down the hill. Gravity fought wind resistance, and gathered energy around him. The car's door was not shut completely and cut milliseconds off his acceleration. He glanced in the rear view mirror at the dark spot chasing him. The steering wheel shook and threatened to lock up. As the speedometer crossed twenty, and he pressed the brakes. The car lurched but skidded forward as the wheels locked.

The Faceless suit's body reflected the brake lights as it leapt toward him and grasped the rear bumper. The speedometer dropped as the suit pulled him to a complete stop in front of the whitewashed house at the road's end. Devon put on the parking brake and jumped out the door before the figure had time to rip him out. He held up his hands and backed up.

The figure released the bumper and accosted him in a synthetic whisper. "*What the hell did you think you were doing?*"

Devon looked around for an answer. "Running away from you? I don't have a car."

It wagged a finger at him. "*You could have gotten yourself killed and wrecked that house, too.*"

Devon turned around to survey the unlit houses around him. "Oh. That would have really sucked."

The Faceless suit put its hands on either side of Devon and patted him down. It found nothing of interest. "*Where's your cell phone?*"

Devon shook his head. "I don't have one."

It squeezed his boots and looked up at him. "*You're kidding me. Don't move.*"

The area was quiet, and Devon made out its speech inside the helmet. "*Mel? The situation's under control, he didn't alert anybody.*" It knocked on the side of its helmet and turned to go. "*Mel? Mel? Fine, don't talk to me.*"

Devon dropped his arms, and put his hand on the car's door. "See you," he said.

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It looked back at him and he let the door go. It gestured for him to put his hands back up. *"I don't think so,"* it said, and returned to its spot in front of him, *"How many of you are there?"*

Devon complied and held steady. "Me and the girl. We didn't think there'd be so many of you."

It cocked its head at him, and lifted the rear tires of the car off the ground, then dropped them slowly. *"You sure it's just you two?"* it said. *"What did you think you could do to us?"*

Devon pointed back up the hill. "We were going to smash a bunch of cars into you, like a demolition derby."

It threw out its arms and towered over him. *"Come on, you said you don't have a car. Besides, how do you follow us? We noticed the fresh battery in Stephen's mask."*

Devon kept shaking his head, exasperated. "I don't know. Can you hold off with all the questions? I'm just along for the ride with most of this."

It put a hot finger under his chin to hold his head still. *"Uh-huh. Then who's Galeno?"*

Devon stared at the metal-accented arm. "Why are you just asking me? Shouldn't you be beating me up or something?"

It let him go and poked his chest. *"Is that what you think of me? That I'm some thug?"*

Devon sighed. "Well you guys did wreck my place."

It put its hands on its waist. *"Hey, just because our CEO and his family reunion have been getting carried away doesn't mean the rest of us have it in for you."*

Devon's arms quivered. "I'm not judging. Look, my arms are really hurting. Can I put them down?"

It gestured toward the ground, and Devon dropped them with relief. *"Sure,"* it said. *"Look, don't get all holier-than-thou on me. I've been on seven-day work weeks since 1997. My boyfriend left me, and I've had no time to date, and we have to sleep in the office sometimes and it stinks in there. We're trying to help people with this project. We'll barely recoup costs at the launch. So cut us some slack, okay?"*

Devon massaged his elbows to regain their feeling. "Sorry. I just expect broken windows whenever I hear that you guys are coming."

It nodded to him. *"I can see how that might get to you. Troy's under a lot of pressure, though, and sometimes the window is the easiest way in."*

Devon did not smile. "That's not funny."

It paused. *"No, it isn't,"* it said. *"I guess we all have our gallows humor."*

Devon kept his arm in front of himself, but leaned against the car to take the weight off his feet. "So, is the name 'MinTorque' a joke?"

It shifted its upper body to the side, and the suit balanced itself.

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"Kind of. Miniature torque. Melissa's idea, but it stuck."

Devon narrowed his eyes. "What does Melissa do at your company anyway?"

It lowered itself down. *"She's the tech writer. Pretty good, too. You want to have a seat? Standing up takes energy."*

"Got it." Devon joined it behind the rear bumper of the car. It stuck its legs straight out while Devon crossed his. Devon inspected the smooth helmet. "I bet you can crush a beer can real easy against your...mask."

It chuckled and put out a glove to shake. *"Gets the suit all sticky, though. Seriously, no hard feelings here. Tell you what; let's trade info, tit for tat."*

Devon accepted the hand, which remained limp so as not to crush him. "Sure, I feel kind of silly, though. I don't know your name."

"Keith," he said, *"So, what's yours, really?"*

Devon thumped his chest. "Devon."

"No, I mean, really," Keith said.

Devon nodded his head. "I swear that's it."

Keith scratched his metal fingertip into the pavement. *"It fits you. Did you pick it yourself?"*

"I wish," Devon said, *"I thought I'd picked it myself, but my mom told me I had this great-uncle Devon who's supposedly infamous."*

Keith nodded. *"Yeah, there are a lot of Keiths, too. So, it's my turn. How'd you find us here?"*

Devon noticed Keith had dug a little hole in the street by prodding it with his finger. "Can you do another," Devon said, "You're all huge and cyborgy while I got winded coasting down a hill. I need some leverage here."

"Cyborgy, huh?" Keith said, *"I'll have to remember that one. Hang on."* Keith reached up to his neck and carefully undid a series of snap locks. He pulled the mask back and dropped it in his lap. He had a handsome, clean-cut face with blond dreadlocks. He was in his mid-thirties with piercing eyes and soft cheeks. He was sweating and he reached up to itch his scalp.

Devon kept staring at him. "Damn," he said.

Keith blushed and looked away. He squeezed the sweat from his dreads. "Thanks," he said, "I haven't gotten that look in a while."

Devon rested his cheek in his palm and gazed over Keith's freckles. "Did I see you at the wake? I don't remember you."

Keith shook his head, spraying the air like a wet dog. "No, I stayed behind to guard the office. I'd had enough of Stephen for one lifetime. I mean, we all knew some shit was going to go down between him and Roland, but Troy wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt."

Devon sat up and stretched a leg out. "Why was that? All we have

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are some press clippings with Troy's name on them, and when we talked with his high school teacher."

"That's it?" Keith said, "What about the tape?"

Devon looked up the street, where he had left Galeno and the others. "You mean the one we have of your boss kidnapping Bit from the apartment?"

Keith bristled. "How'd you get that?"

Devon shrunk back. "Bit had the camera on when they showed up."

Keith tapped his knee and turned away. "Damn. We were waiting until you left so there wouldn't be any witnesses."

"Hey, don't look at me," Devon said, "It was her idea. I don't do the camera thing if I can help it."

Keith eyed him over. "So, what do you do?"

Devon held up two fingers. "Cigarettes and coffee."

Keith's eyes lightened. "Amen. You cook too?"

Devon smirked. "On occasion. Tuesday, I made a hell of a pancake stack."

Keith patted his armored belly. "I love pancakes, but I can't stand chocolate chips in them."

Devon made a face. "That's just gross. That's like putting them in bagels."

"You're telling me. But pancakes aren't cookies."

"Ever put syrup on one of those big cookie cakes they sell at the mall?"

Keith's eyes widened. "Now that sounds good," he said, "But I'm trying to lose weight."

Devon spread a sly grin across his cheeks. "I bet you wear boxers."

Keith's mouth flew open. "You really are a guy, aren't you?" he said, "Sorry, I've heard all kinds of crap about FTMs. I just can't believe you're one."

Devon rolled his eyes. "Gee, thanks. Should I ask what you do hear?"

Keith lay his head against the bumper. "You're not going to like this."

Devon braced himself. "What" he said. "It's like fucking a teenager who won't take his clothes off?"

Keith chuckled. "That's one of the nicer ones. Look, I'm not holding it against you. I just don't get out much anymore."

Devon inched closer to him. "Super-stressed?"

Keith nodded. "Yeah in these suits, we all are. Well, Stephen wasn't. You know, the suit actually mellowed him out."

Devon caressed the smooth arm piece. "Well, it is pretty sweet."

"One time," Keith said, "I swear I saw him dive off the warehouse rafters, do a complete somersault, and hit the floor perfectly. He

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couldn't do shit when he was training, but when he got in it, he was someone else."

"Like a second skin?" Devon said.

"Basically," Keith said. "Roland didn't want to let him in the suit at first, since Stephen was a prick and all. But you know Troy, when he gets his mind made up. He was talking about how this family reconciliation was more important. I can see that, I mean, they weren't really nice to each other until now. We all thought they'd buried the hatchet with Roland, too. We weren't expecting Stephen to go all psycho on him when we weren't around."

Devon looked down at himself. "I get that," he said and folded his arms in his lap.

"So tell me about you," Keith said, stroking his shoulder.

Devon took a deep breath without turning from Keith's eyes. "I like Stevie Wonder," he said. "And I'm into leather, and my mom buys me briefs every Christmas and I wear them. Scared yet?"

Keith smiled. He twisted on his side to face Devon. "No. Do you mind?"

"No."

Keith leaned over and kissed him soft on the mouth. He tested for resistance, but Devon pushed his lips into him. Devon let the warmth pour in, with Keith's salty tongue enveloping him and the sweaty dreads against his forehead. Keith's mechanical arm draped behind Devon's back and drew him close. The tiny pneumatic engines in every joint were silent but beat faintly as if blood flowed through them. Keith's cheeks were hot and Devon released their mouths so he could blow softly on him. He put a hand on his chest but touched no flesh, like he was seducing a statue. He returned to Keith's mouth for safety.

A moment later, Keith's suit shook and became still. Keith shuddered inside the suit and his lips went cold. "Shit," he said, "I can't move."

Devon sensed the arm behind him lock in place. "Are you sure?"

Keith tried to pull himself up but failed. "My system's shut down," he said, "I'm caught. Damn, I am so going to give it to Melissa when I get back."

Devon grabbed the shoulder of the arm that encircled him and tried to bend it. It was stiff, even though Keith writhed under it. Devon patted Keith to calm him. "Is there something I can do?"

Keith shook his head. "If this doesn't come back on in the next few minutes, I'd appreciate it if you could help me take this off."

"Sure," Devon said, "But we have time."

Devon gave him a thick kiss, guiding Keith's head like a charmed cobra. Keith whimpered and Devon swallowed the sound. After torturing his victim enough, Devon reached for the strap around Keith's

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shoulder, under the plate.

Headlights and engine clamor broke their attention, as the van sped down the hill at them, pulling to a stop several feet away. Devon saw Markie jump out of the driver's side door from the corner of his eye, and did not undo the strap.

Devon looked away. "I'm sorry," he said, "Remember when you asked about how we tracked you here?"

Markie glanced down at the entwined boys. "Oh...my...Goddess," she said.

Devon sighed at her. "Keith, Markie. Markie, Keith."

Keith snapped his head to each of them. Devon ducked out from the embrace and stood up as Keith's eyes burned at him. "You knew the whole time. You fucking two-faced asshole," Keith said, and spat at him. He screamed at the nearby houses, "Hey! Fire!"

Devon grabbed the helmet and slid it over Keith's head. Keith's voice was muffled, and he struggled to knock it off.

Devon touched the space where Keith's eyes were. "I'm sorry," Devon said, "I didn't mean to do this."

Galeno, Ryan and Kim piled out of the van. They ran over to Devon and searched him over for injuries. A light in a nearby house flicked on, so they hefted Keith into the back of the van. The quivering suit, which stuck from the rear door, shouted at them as well. Keith exhausted himself and quieted down as they lay him beside Melissa.

Devon slid in the passenger's seat in the front. Kim tried to take the passenger's seat back, but Devon glared at her. He buckled his seat belt and stared at the old Mazda where he had lain with Keith.

Markie strapped herself in and nudged Devon. "Looks like you were having a good time."

Devon turned to her and summoned the most hateful expression he could. He caught it halfway to his face. Bit was still not with them, and he would have time to bitch Markie out later.

Bit had not been on rollerblades in many years, but the motions were coming back to her. She held her legs steady and glided while rattling over every pebble in the road. She skidded on and off the sidewalk to avoid each oncoming pedestrian. She counted down seconds in her head to give her friends the time she promised them.

Her pursuers had not touched her, but she made sure always to keep a witness in sight. After a full two minutes, she darted down the first side road. She turned too fast and spun to the ground. Grit dug into her elbow as everything stopped. She pulled herself upright and brushed off. The rush of wind fell behind her. A glove clasped her mouth shut and another took one of her arms. A second shape landed and gripped her wrist. She was lifted off the earth and landed on the

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closest creaky rooftop. Bit told her body not to shake. They would not harm her, but her body did not believe her. She stared over the edge, and the ground was a house-length below.

Justin waited for her in his Lion outfit. Bit's captors held her out. His eyes glowed red as he inspected her, and signaled toward a place further from the main street. *"I found a good one a couple blocks over. Let's get going."*

Her captors followed Justin as he began to jump over the neighborhood roofs. Each leap sent her guts heaving as the deep gaps between the residences passing under her. They stopped on a house with a fresh coat of tar and a lush fenced-in backyard. Light spilled out from a window beneath them, as did the sound of running water.

Justin's eyes left trails as he turned his head to stare at her. *"How did you follow us here?"* he said. The leather fingers holding her lips shut parted.

Bit moved her lips around to regain circulation. *"We found you,"* she said, *"By magic."*

Justin did not react. *"I don't like magic. Some of the folks at Troy's company are joking that's what you are. Hang her over the edge."*

The two captors spun her around and each clutched one of her armpits. They hefted her over the side of the house and lowered her in front of the lit window. Bit held her legs from flailing in the air. The rough leather dug into her shoulders. The window led to a bathroom, and a spray fell from the shower where the plastic curtain was cracked. Someone was washing out their long hair.

Justin leaned down, between the two Faceless suits. *"There's a woman a little older than you in there,"* he said, *"If you like spying on us so much, it won't bother you too much to check her out. If you don't answer our questions, we're tossing you at the window. You can decide whether or not you want to hang on and hope she pulls you in. Or you can drop. Either way, she calls the police and they arrest you for being a Peeping Tom. Understand?"*

Bit nodded. The curtains rustled and the woman's voice inside was humming a pop song, off-key.

Justin did a final sweep for passing witnesses, but found none. *"How did you find us here, so fast?"*

Bit tried to feel brave. *"We know where you live by the waterfront, and we followed you."*

The Faceless suits looked at each other, but Justin did not break away. *"How did you find that?"*

"The signal from Stephen's helmet," she said, *"We followed it when you picked it up. We're still checking every channel it broadcasts."*

A breeze ran up her dangling pants legs. The red eyes pulled back as Justin rested on the roof. *"I don't believe you. Are you sure someone isn't helping you?"*

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The woman inside stopped singing. Bit sputtered, to quicken the interrogation. "Who would? There's nobody but us."

Justin shook his head. "No anonymous emails or secret meetings?"

Bit did not give him a second to think. "No. Who are you afraid of?"

Justin tapped the top of his mask. "People who know about MinTorque. We might let you back up here if you tell us who they are."

"But there's no one," Bit said. The shower turned off and a hand's shadow reached out from the shower to grab a towel. "Okay, we got an email on Monday. The address was like 'n quilla thirty-six at yahoo dot com.' It told us how to get to your headquarters and where to go on the Cape to learn about you guys."

"I want a copy. Do you still have it?"

The silhouette of a big woman stepped out of the shower and began drying herself off. "Please, she's coming out," Bit said.

"We'll wreck your friend Galeno's place to find it if we have to."

The woman stopped cold and approached the window.

Bit squirmed in their grasp. "She's seen me. We have the email printed in a folder with the rest of the information we have on you."

The woman pulled open the curtains and screamed. Bit averted her eyes and buried her face in her shoulder. With a grunt from Justin, the Faceless suits heaved her and her rollerblades up to the roof. The scream died away, but other lights nearby started to come on. Justin retreated to an apartment complex several buildings over, and they pursued him. The Faceless suits dropped Bit on her thighs in front of him. She spread herself out on the flat roof without fear of falling. She clutched her arms to her sides and shook the ringing in her ears away.

Justin put his hands on either side of his helmet. "Something's wrong. I heard shouting on the radio and now it's dead."

One of the Faceless suits spoke inside its helmet, and then shook its head. "No word from K. His radio is off."

Justin nodded to them. "Go check the van. I'll watch her here." The Faceless suits spun around and leapt away. Justin tapped his foot beside her. "Where is this folder with the email?"

Bit took a deep breath to cool the nausea in her gut. "In Galeno's Honda. near the van. But I could be lying."

Justin paced around her. "I don't care. I can go check myself."

Bit twisted her waist to face him. She did not trust herself to stand with the blades on. "Then bye," she said, "See you in a few."

Justin crouched to jump but did not. He stood up and cautiously regarded her. "We're going back together." He lifted her to her feet and put her on his back. She watched the trees and the night sky rush away from her as he took her away. He would survive a fall but she would not.

She shouted loudly, but not enough to alert nearby people. "Why aren't you married?"

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"If you're trying to get me to drop you, it won't work," he said, over the wind. He did stop at the next roof, and put her down to rest his arms. Bit could hear his radio twitter. *"Damn,"* he said, *"The guys need backup. Don't go anywhere, I'll find you."*

Bit looked across the street and saw the painter's store was across from them. She did not hear a struggle, but she was not that close. She had to hold him back. She lifted herself up and wrapped her arms around his clunky neck and her legs around one of his. As she was attached to his chest, he grabbed her right shoulder and shoved her back. Her arms slipped, but she stayed on.

He shook the leg she straddled. *"Get off me. I don't want to hurt you."*

She locked her ankles against him. *"You haven't been this close to a woman in a while, have you?"*

He grabbed both her shoulders and threw her on her back. *"For your information,"* he said and his voice died out. His suit seized up and froze. His pose sent him off-balance, and he fell toward her. Bit rolled aside as he landed face-first and let out a muffled shout. His eyes were dark.

Bit pushed herself up and knocked on his mask. *"That wasn't a curse word, was it? 'Cause that's so unlike you."*

Justin trembled inside the suit. *"Shut up,"* he said.

Bit gave him a minute to fight and flipped him on his back. She sat down on his chest and rested her hands on his molded plastic pectorals. *"Now that I have your attention. I have a proposition for you. Tell me you're listening."*

Justin stopped struggling. *"I hear you,"* he said.

Bit ran her fingers over the curves and indentations of his warm armor. *"You know, we have the video you tried to frame me with, but we also have footage of you guys kidnapping me from Galeno's. I was playing with the camera when you came in. So how's this. You stay away from us, or we release the tapes."*

"That sounds a lot like the deal we tried to make with you," he said.

Bit slid off him. *"Fine. When I see you again, you can take your chances."* She left him paralyzed on the rooftop and surveyed the nearby trees for an accessible branch. She unstrapped her rollerblades and laid them on his chest for someone to find. She hoped the woman from the bathroom window would remember the blades.

With a run and a prayer, she leapt onto a branch and held on until it stopped shaking. She worked her way down the main trunk, and walked in her socks behind the paint store to the lot. The van was not there. She rested against the store and tossed rocks at the wire gate.

After a few minutes, the van rushed past her down the hill. She ran after it as fast as she could without hurting her feet. At the hill's base, she jumped as it performed a U-turn and drove at her. She waved and Markie poked her head out the driver's side.

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"Hey!" Markie said, "You made it. Guys, Bit made it back."

The rear door opened, and Ryan jumped out to hustle her into the crowded van. Galeno hugged her, and Kim gave her a high-five.

Devon gave her the thumbs up, but his heart was not in it. She gave him the "what's wrong" stare, and he gave her the "tell you later" eye roll.

Melissa kept her mouth shut but stared coldly at Bit from the floor. Markie parked back in the paint store's lot, while Bit leaned down to Melissa. "Do you think some company is helping us rip you off?"

Melissa flopped her head back and forth. "That's what Justin thinks," she said. "We'll tell him off if you let us go."

Ryan looked at Bit quizzically.

"Justin thinks we're getting help from some rival corporation," Bit said to her. "I don't think they're going to listen to us."

Ryan knelt at her side and rubbed Bit's shoulder. "What's on your mind?"

Bit put her hand on Ryan's and scanned the pile of immobilized people on the floor. "This has been bugging me. They're going crazy because they're not sure we can expose them. It's going to take more than a couple video tapes to scare them off our backs."

Markie got out the driver's side and bent over beside them. "How do you mean?"

Bit sighed, "I think we should raid MinTorque. We can get some spare parts and whatever else they have lying around. If we got some hard drives, we could upload it on Slashdot or any file-sharing network."

Ryan lifted her head up. "And my newsgroup. I have friends in Eastern Europe who would eat this up."

Melissa and the engineer kicked out at them, trying to roll away.

Markie stared at the suit sticking through the roof. "I don't know."

Bit poked its arm, to the dismay of the man shaking inside. "Nothing we've done has helped us. I don't know what else can keep them away"

Devon leaned around his seat. "I don't like it. There's got to be more of them in there."

Bit took a quick tally of the prisoners. "Well, we've got six of them down, and I don't think they've had time to tell home base what's happened yet. We're never going to have an advantage like this again,"

Galeno rapped the workstation with satisfaction. "And we've got their passwords. They'll change those tomorrow unless we go in now."

Devon reached up and noticed a small box attached to the vanity mirror over him. "There's a garage door opener up here," he said, "It might get us in but there have to be more workers inside."

Ryan reached into Melissa's pockets and pulled out a security

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access card. "You know, this is almost an open invitation."

One by one, they nodded to each other; Devon and Markie last, as a concession to their votes. In the distance, they heard sirens. Galeno loaded the workstation in her car as the others worked the suits stuck in the van free and carried them into the nearby wooded area. Devon carried one Faceless suit more carefully than the others, but Bit did not ask why.

Bit took the van's wheel as she followed Galeno back to the apartment, while Markie brought up the rear. Galeno kept them to the back roads to avoid the police. They rushed upstairs to the loft, stepping over the pile of Devon's clothes to raid the kitchen for caffeine. Galeno dropped the workstation on her bench, and Devon called dibs on it.

Bit was about to protest when he held up his hand to her face. "Sorry, I really need a new one. Besides you're better at suffering." She turned up her nose at him and snatched the last granola bar from the box, leaving the sugared cereal for him.

Outside, they loaded all the empty backpacks and bags they could carry into the van, along with the concrete block they had used for target practice. Devon and Markie took Galeno's leather gloves and folded down the roof metal that the Faceless suit had torn up. The armhole in the door was uneven and could not be closed completely. The van's sides were dented inwards and it vibrated as if the shocks were gone. Bit stroked the busted taillights. "I guess if anyone asks we'll say we're taking it in for repairs."

Galeno tossed her keys to Ryan. "Take my car. I'll pilot the sucker. At least I have a license."

Ryan snapped them up and shoved them in her pocket. "I should warn you," she said, "I'm a really crappy driver."

Bit patted her on the back. "Then you can lead."

Once the vehicles were packed, they drove off in a caravan. Ryan led the pack with Markie in the rear, while the van kept its blinkers on. They stopped by a drug store to purchase enough pantyhose for all their heads before proceeding to the waterfront.

Devon and Bit took the fold-down seat in the back of the van while Galeno drove, tapping on the steering wheel to the eighties station. Devon held onto his seat while the van shook and leaned into Bit's ear.

"Look," he said, "I'm not going with you guys into the warehouse."

Bit brushed her hair straight with her fingertips. She hit a snarl and tried to work it out. "Okay. Are you not feeling well?"

Devon pulled out a cigarette and carefully lit it. The smoke was sucked out of the roof's hole in between inhalations. "Not really. I hit it off with one of Troy's guys."

Bit lowered her eyebrows. "Really. What's he like?"

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Devon took a long drag. "Real sweet and I'm sure he hates my guts right now. I don't want to give him any more reason, okay?"

She wrapped an arm around his shoulder, and he leaned into her. She released her hair and drew swirls on his hand with her fingertip.

The vehicles pulled over a block away from the headquarters. The old buildings glimmered in the halogen lights as the summer fog rolled in. Bit gathered the troops and handed out the eggs of pantyhose. They scratched their faces as the sticky textile settled down, and tied the flopping legs in bows. They took off their license plates and threw them in their trunks. Markie and Kim hit each other on the arm for luck.

Devon and Galeno popped the van's hood and cut a small hole in the fuel line. Bit and Ryan pulled the cinder block under the driver's seat of the van so that Bit could straddle it. Bit removed the door opener from the visor, and clipped it to her wristwatch. She started the engine and waved to the rest of them. She and Ryan took off for MinTorque's main gate. The seat was too large for Ryan and she held the door handle.

After two blocks, Bit saw the glow of MinTorque's facility for the first time. A spotlight illuminated eight cars lined up outside the brick half, while a series of rectangular lights ran along the edge of the green warehouse in the back. A concrete shelf, with small bushes, circled the entire building. Neither the warehouse nor brick entrances faced the gate. Bit crossed her fingers and pushed the button on the opener. The gate hummed to life and rolled open. The guard shack inside was empty, as they directed the van into the compound. Its engine hiccupped as if it knew this would be its last ride. Ryan guided Bit with her index finger to a spot a hundred feet from the front door where Bit parked with the motor running. All the lights were on inside the brick structure.

"This is good enough," Ryan said. She opened the side door and put her hands on the cinderblock. Bit swung her legs outside the van and gripped the steering wheel.

Bit nodded to her and took slow deep breaths. Ryan was as nervous as always. "Ready?" Bit said.

"Don't ask. Go now."

Ryan toppled the block onto the acceleration pedal and pushed herself backward as the van lurched forward. Bit twisted the steering wheel and let go. They jumped onto the pavement as the van flew past them and smashed into the main lobby of MinTorque. The van's engine caught fire, which poured out to the desks and chairs inside.

Bit ran to the gate, and slammed the door opener on her wrist. The gate unlocked and their own cars veered in. Bit and Ryan ran after them as they drove to the warehouse entrance. Markie, Kim, and Galeno stopped by the loading dock and unloaded the burlap bags they would need for grabbing their loot. Bit led them up the concrete steps to a steel

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door. Markie slid the card through the reader, shut her eyes and waited for the beep. The door clicked open, and Markie held it for the rest of them to enter.

Bit did not recognize the layout of the warehouse's cavernous green belly, even though she had been here. The rows of black arms, legs, and heads were familiar. The dusty smell brought the taste of dirty socks into her mouth. No other sounds but theirs echoed in the chamber.

Galeno snatched up one of the Faceless masks. "I should have rented a truck for this!"

Markie and Kim raised their heads, taking in the whole room. Bit ran alongside all the rows of shelves hunting for the prize trophies, with Ryan on her tail. Further down, Bit spied a cleared space surrounded by benches and testing equipment. A stereo with speakers as tall as Ryan was sat against one wall.

"Here," Bit said and waved her arm at them. Scuff marks brushed the floor of the test area with even flowing strokes as if a couple had been dancing here.

Ryan tugged on her arm, and pointed to a Dance Dance Revolution arcade game in a corner. It was linked up to a line of servers under the workbench. "Omigod. Is this how they test movement?" she said, "This must be the coolest job, ever!"

One of the servers had a series of red wires wrapped together, which lead to a cabinet that Bit pried open. She reached inside and touched the helmet, left arm, and backside of the Wolf's suit hung up. The rest of it was missing.

Bit jerked at the red wires but they were held tight. She pointed them out to Galeno and Ryan. "Can you take this down?" she said.

Ryan whipped out her multitool and snipped them one by one. Markie and Kim lifted up the computer to which they were connected, and yanked out all the cables. They stuffed a few circuit boards in their satchels and ran with everything for the exit.

Bit and Galeno tried to pull the Wolf's suit down, but it was as stuck as thistles in a wool sweater. They peered close and noticed snap buttons on cloth straps holding it in place. Ryan cut the straps down, and they lifted the suit out. The helmet and arm were light but Galeno strained to hold the back's armor. She and Ryan balanced it between themselves while Bit piled the head and arm on top. Galeno took off without warning and almost dragged the suit from Ryan's hands.

Ryan tripped and caught herself every third step. "Slow down," she said.

Galeno kept quiet and hurried without looking back. They passed Markie and Kim returning for their second trip.

Bit heard the metal impact coming from the wrong direction. She jerked her head over toward the door that connected to the burning half

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of the building. She tossed a handful of tiny motors in her backpack and peered through the shelves.

Troy lumbered in, out of breath and haggard. He spotted Ryan and Galeno heading for the exit and shouted at them. "God fucking dammit, bring that back!"

Bit kept low and remained in the test area. Even with the pantyhose hood, he would recognize her.

Galeno tried to speed up but Ryan shook her head, desperately. Troy charged at the fleeing pair. Bit climbed to the top of the shelf, and hurled one of the Faceless masks at Troy. It hit his jaw and clattered on the floor. He cried out and turned to her. Markie and Kim dropped their bags and peppered Troy with the shins, fingers, and butts from the nearby shelves while Bit hurried back several aisles. Troy slowed to hold up his hands against the projectiles raining on him.

Bit stopped to hurl more parts at him while Markie and Kim took their sacks and dashed for the exit. Troy easily knocked her pieces away. Bit dashed back and waved to get his attention. She glanced down each aisle until she saw a dull metal surface. It was the dolly that had wheeled her away three days ago. Bit spun it around and drove it straight into Troy as he passed. He cried out as the metal edge hit his calves, and bent over to grip them. Bit darted around him and raced out the exit to the waiting cars.

When she got out, Devon was already driving away with Markie and Kim. Galeno and Ryan were pushing the Wolf suit into the back seat of the Honda. Bit slammed the warehouse door tight and propped herself against it. "We gotta go now!" she said.

Galeno left Ryan to jam the suit inside and hurried to the front seat. Bit leapt down to the pavement, as Troy burst out. Galeno shot off to the locked gate as Bit and Ryan straddled the side doors. Devon circled around and honked at them. Bit aimed her wrist at the metal mesh that held them in, activated the door opener. With a motorized grind, they were free.

The two cars stopped to let Bit and Ryan whisk themselves inside. Bit ripped off the pantyhose mask scratching her face and lay back to catch her breath as Galeno sped them away. Ryan began hammering away at the inside of the Wolf's mask with a crowbar. Bit wedged herself back, lest she be hit by accident. "What are you doing?" she said.

Ryan held the bar to her chest and used her body to pile drive it into the helmet. It made a loud snap and bits of plastic exploded. She snaked her fingers inside the shattered opening and pulled out the transponder. "We don't want them following us."

Bit slapped her hand. "Got it. You rock."

Ryan popped out the battery and stuck it in her pocket. "Sorry I panicked in there. I'm not as fast as you guys."

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Bit leaned over and wrapped her arms around Ryan. She gave her a good squeeze and rested her chin on Ryan's shoulder. Ryan stuck her arms behind Bit and pressed her wrists into Bit's back, as if she was miming a hug. It was unfamiliar, but welcome.

Bit let Ryan go, and wiped the plastic shards off the seat. "You did well. We all did." Ryan turned to check for any lights following them. Galeno took a roundabout route to the highway and Ryan could not see back more than a few hundred feet. When they saw signs to the highway, Devon pulled over ahead of them with his blinkers on. Galeno followed him to the roadside and parked beside him. They rolled their windows down.

Devon leaned out shivering. "Everybody in there okay?"

Galeno and Bit gave him the thumbs up. "We should split up here. We'll meet you at the Fenway Star Market?"

"Sounds like a plan," Devon said, and drove Markie's car away. Galeno made a U-turn and took off in the opposite direction.

Ryan folded the rear seat down to pull out sacks from the trunk. Bit sorted through one, playing with the elbows and knees, circuit boards with masses of wire, and sealed instruments. She and Ryan pointed out strange pieces to each other as they were chauffeured off to the Fenway area.

The supermarket was open but only a few cars were left in the lot. Devon and the others were waiting there, stretching their legs. Bit tackled Devon and whooped. "We missed you in there. I socked Troy a good one, and you didn't see it."

Devon patted her arm, and pointed to Markie and Kim. "I got the play by play from these guys."

Kim bucked and waved like she was in a fight. "I wish we had taken the stereo. That thing was badass."

Markie held up her keys. "You can still go back. We'll wait for you."

Bit and Ryan dragged out two sacks' worth of technology. "So what did you guys get?" Bit said.

Markie leaned inside her car and popped open the trunk. "A little bit of everything. The server weighs a ton."

Galeno put her hands over the sacks and encouraged Bit and Devon to put them out of sight. "Devon, these goods are too hot for us to keep. Any chance we could stick them in your old room?"

Devon closed an imaginary zipper over his mouth. "Not only are they not going there, we're never speaking about that apartment again. Ever."

Bit stuffed her sack in the trunk. "What she meant is we need to find someone with space who will take our presents here, no questions asked."

Devon addressed Ryan when she finished putting her sack away.

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"What's wrong with your place?"

"No privacy," Ryan said, "You've seen it."

Bit folded her arms and stared at the ground. "Everyone we know is near broke. Nobody has a spare room or anything."

Galeno turned her eyes away. "I know someone who has one."

Markie shot her a glance. "Who?"

Galeno gestured with her chin away from the city. "Samantha over at the other side of the Plain. There's a free room on the third floor."

Devon turned to Bit, worried. "The house where they had the Chanukah party last winter."

Bit slapped her head. "Oh, right. Isn't Sam still dating that chick you were with?"

Devon shook his head. "I don't know if she's still," he said, and looked at Galeno, "How did you know about it?"

Galeno threw up her hands. "Don't ask me how, but the room's there. Her roommates use it to smoke in."

Bit checked their car's trunks to make sure they were shut properly. "Let's get going."

Markie held up her index finger. "Hang on, isn't it a little late to go barging into people's homes?"

Devon stepped back and let Markie take the driver's seat. "Uh-huh. So we'll have to be real nice."

Bit kept her eyes pressed against the window, hunting for any familiar vans or dark shadows on top of houses. Every car that sped past them made her wince, lest they stop short. Every person walking on the roadside gave her a shiver as if they were lions watching her at the zoo.

The cars wedged themselves into the driveway beside Samantha's home. The vinyl siding was pushed inward in some places and several overgrown bushes claimed the front yard. A few of the rooms inside were lit, and at least one had the shimmer of a television. Devon led the six of them to the front door and rang the bell. He smoothed down his hair and reminded Bit to do the same to hers. They each had bags under eyes, slumping shoulders, and a wobble in their step, as if they had survived a marathon.

Samantha opened the door in sweatpants and a white T-shirt with dyed brown arms. She had cut her curly hair short against her scalp. She was drowsy but blinked when she saw them all, as if she expected them to say "Trick or Treat!"

Devon put up his hand. "Hi, Sam."

Samantha's eyes darted left and right, and peeked behind them to see if there were more people. "Hello? Are you looking for someone here?"

Devon pointed to their cars. "No. I really hate to bother you, but we

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have a massive favor to ask. We have some stuff we're moving around and none of us has any space. We were wondering if we could keep it here for a few days."

Galeno piped up behind him. "In Chloe's room."

Devon twisted to face Galeno. He held his mouth shut.

Samantha sighed and looked up at the other housemates. "Can you guys come back later? Some of my housemates are asleep."

Devon clasped his hands together. "We'll be so quiet. Galeno and I will be the only ones to go in."

Galeno poked her head around his side. "I can guarantee that Chloe won't have a problem with this."

Samantha leaned against the doorframe and tapped her fingers against her elbows. "Okay. Two trips up, no more."

Devon shook her hand. "Thank you so much. We won't keep our stuff here long, either." He and Galeno held a backpack on each arm and carried the server up first. Bit and the others wrapped the Wolf's suit with the remaining bags before Samantha had a chance to see them.

Chloe's room was as wide as Devon's old apartment, though it seemed larger without a stove. One of the room's windows overlooked the parking lot in which he had first smoked with Bit. A fancy four-post bed, an old desk, and several upholstered chairs were arranged about the room under sheets of plastic. A rolled up carpet and several lamps sat on the floor. He and Galeno deposited their bags in an empty corner. He was careful not to catch Galeno's eye or touch any of the items in the room. It was a shame. This would be a nice place to live.

When he returned outside for the next trip, he was surprised how much the suit weighed. Devon and Galeno carried it slowly, using the beat of an old blues melody in his head for tempo. He was winded when he reached the top a second time, and had to work to keep quiet.

Samantha waited for them on the front porch when the trip was over. Devon wiped his forehead and smiled to her. "I just want to say, you rock. If we can do anything for you, just ask."

Samantha shook her head. "If Chloe's cool, this isn't a big deal, and I'm glad you came back. You're looking good."

Devon stroked his chin fuzz. "I'm feeling it too. Speaking of coming back, would you mind if we stopped by tomorrow to check out the stuff? Not all of us."

"No problem," Samantha said, "It's my day off. I'll probably be here." She waved goodbye to them.

Bit took the hint and backed off to the car. "Great to see you again, too," she said as Samantha closed the front door and turned the porch light off.

They gathered around the cars, but Bit took Galeno aside. "No offense but I want my own room tonight. I'm going back with Markie."

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Galeno gave her a goodbye hug, which Bit returned with enthusiasm. "Don't sweat it."

Bit slinked over to Devon and tapped him on the shoulder. "Can we talk a second?"

"Sure," Devon said and followed her to the side of the house.

Bit whispered to him. "So who's Chloe?"

Devon rolled his eyes. "Galeno's girlfriend. The one in L.A., and you keep quiet about it around her."

Bit furrowed her brow. "Her stuff's still here?"

Devon clapped her forearm. "I know. Anyway, I'll see you tomorrow?"

Bit left a peck on his cheek. "Definitely. Call me in the morning. We can bring the van's computer over then."

Galeno took Devon back to her apartment, and Markie became a taxi service for Ryan and Kim before she took Bit home. Bit watched them doze in the car during the trip. They had followed her into the Wolf's den. She wondered if she would ever get an opportunity to lead like this again.

Chapter 11—Friday Morning

When Bit rose from her bedroom floor, she winced at the cramp in her right shoulder. She remained nervous despite her sleep, and it was satisfying to push against the cramp to drain her excess energy. She did not like that it kept her from turning her head to the right. A masseuse would cost sixty bucks that Bit needed for rent, food, phone, contractor's bill to patch her room, and a down payment on a used futon.

Her naked room was unchanged since the previous day. Troy had had all night to come after them, and had not.

She slipped on some clothes and went to the bathroom. The hallway was silent, and remained that way even after she showered. Markie's room was empty, and she figured Markie must have decided to actually show up at work. The answering machine had no messages. No one had been attacked last night.

To celebrate, she went to the kitchen and poured herself a bowl of Raisin Bran. She spread out a magazine and put her feet on the chair beside her as she ate. She did not have to keep out of anybody's way. She could sit in anywhere she wanted, turn the television on and off, and rearrange the furniture to her heart's content. She could waste the whole day lying on the floor, and looked forward to it.

The phone rang. Bit gave it three jingles before she picked it up. "Please be selling something," she said into the receiver.

"Not today," Devon said. "Galeno's got class at noon so we have to get going."

Bit sighed. "Great, ring the buzzer when you get here."

"We're picking up Ryan first. She took the day off to help us. See you in a few."

"Right."

Bit hung up and kissed her brand new day goodbye. She tuned the television to a bad talk show that Galeno would never have watched, and waited for the impending arrival.

The buzzer sounded half an hour later but she let them wait. If she was giving up her day for them, they could give her a few minutes. She found a notepad and pen for the inventory, and did a thorough job tying her sneakers.

"Be right down," she said sweetly in the intercom, and headed downstairs.

Galeno, in shorts and a tank top, was sunning herself against the driver's door. Devon twirled an unlit cigarette in the front seat. Ryan hid from the light in the back seat and Bit strapped herself in beside her. Ryan gripped the van's computer in her lap, as it did not have a seat belt. Her feet rested on a backpack with cables hanging out the sides.

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Bit let her eyes adjust to the sun. "How'd everybody sleep?"

Devon yawned and extended an arm out the window. "Pretty good. I was enjoying the extra space."

"What's this sleep thing you keep talking about?" Ryan said.

Bit pointed to the power button on the computer. "There's a menu for it on your desktop."

"Oh, yeah," Ryan said, "I don't use it much. It's very inefficient."

Galeno settled herself in the driver's seat and took them to roads brimming with Friday traffic. They opened their windows and let the fresh air settle around them. The sidewalks were lined with people in colorful shorts and tank tops.

Samantha's house shrank to half size in the daylight. Galeno let them out in the driveway by the patches of grass that made up the lawn. Bit and Devon heaved the van's computer out while Ryan carried her laptop and a backpack full of computer accessories to Samantha's door.

Galeno checked her notebook in her school bag, and then started her car. "Call me on the cell when you're ready to go back," she said, "I'll have it on after two." She received their waves with regal dignity as she drove away.

Devon got a hand free from the computer and knocked. Samantha came out, still in her sweats, and blinked at the pile of equipment. "Hi. Didn't you already have a computer up there?"

Bit held up a USB cable from the backpack. "Yeah, but we're just copying some files over."

Samantha remained in the doorway, and raised an eyebrow toward them. "Where is all this stuff coming from?"

None of them responded, fearing they might contradict each other. Samantha blocked the entrance, so Devon scratched his head and offered up his puppy-dog eyes. "I don't know if you heard. I got kicked out of my apartment. My landlord didn't give me any warning either. I just got the letter two days ago."

Samantha reached out to take one of the cables slipping from Ryan's pile. "I didn't hear that. That's awful. Do you know what was going on?"

Devon glanced at the nearby houses. "You know how rents in Somerville are skyrocketing. Everybody in my building is getting their leases cut early so my landlord can renovate the place and make a killing with new tenants. Galeno's got most of my stuff but her place is only so big, you know?"

Samantha held up her arm to shade her face. "Ouch. Do you need any help finding an affordable place? I've got a cousin in real estate."

They shook their heads. "We got it," Devon said.

Samantha backed up to give them space to haul the equipment upstairs. She kept behind them and opened the curtains in Chloe's room

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when they arrived. The sun glinted off the plastic sheets over the elegant furniture, giving it a mod/spy charm. The yellow walls were mottled and drab, and the white ceiling hovered too high to touch.

Bit and Devon dropped the computer in the corner with the other stolen goods, and took a breather. Ryan laid a laptop from the pack beside it and began connecting cables.

Samantha turned to leave as she saw them settle in. "You guys want any water?"

Bit and Ryan shook their heads. "I could use some," Devon said, and followed Samantha out.

Sam touched his hand gently as they descended the staircase. "That sucks about your room," she said. "Does your landlord know where you are?"

Devon tripped briefly as he tried to stay on the tiny carpet squares on each step. "He probably doesn't care. I didn't know Chloe's pad was here. How long has it been since she came by?"

Samantha hopped down the last two stairs. "I don't know. About two years, I think?"

Devon's face blanched. "Do you hear from her often? Galeno says she's really hustling out there, getting some good spots."

Samantha led him into the kitchen. In spite of six months and a lack of beer, it was messier than he remembered it. The sink was stacked with dishes, measuring cups and utensils were piled on the cutting board, and the table was buried in junk mail. Samantha took two cups from the cabinet and set them on the only clear spots on the table. "She sends a note occasionally," she said, "Nothing detailed. So, how have you been doing? Since the party."

He shrugged. "Pretty good. I'm still fundraising and doing the Icarus thing."

Samantha lifted a pitcher of water from the refrigerator. He waited for her to set it down. "Will Jill be over later? I should probably go before then."

Samantha poured both of them a glass and offered one to him. It was cleaner than the pond water his apartment had served up. "No, she won't. We haven't seen each other since, what is it, March? Doesn't feel like it."

Devon finished his water in a single swig. "How many people are living here?"

Samantha did a quick count on her fingers. "Four others besides me," she said. "I'll throw a party every few months, though, so it feels like more than that sometimes."

Devon nodded. "Are you keeping it at that number?"

She put her hand on a stack of bills. "I'm not sure I can. Two of them don't have jobs but I promised I'd give them a couple more months."

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Chloe's sending a little money every month."

Devon put his glass in the sink and leaned over a chair. "Have you considered renting it? Some of us have jobs and we're really quiet."

She shrugged. "You'll have to take it up with Chloe. I'd have to do a finance check on you, but if Galeno says you're okay, I'm cool with that."

Devon smiled. Out the back door, he spotted two chipmunks chasing each other over the fence. The windows did not shudder with the racket of cars passing. "Thanks. This is a nice place," he said. "You really lucked out here."

Samatha chuckled. "I know. Hey, call me the Super, like everyone else does. The owner gives me a little off the rent if I keep this place in line. Glasses go in the dishwasher." She pointed to the sink.

Devon took the glass from the sink and wedged it in with the other spotted dishes. "Sorry. You only have to tell me once."

She giggled and cracked her knuckles over the table. "I'm really not that bad. You can go back upstairs. I'm going to be cleaning the living room. My turn this week."

Devon surveyed the mess around him. "You want any help? The girls can handle the work upstairs on their own."

Samantha pointed to the vacuum cleaner beside the back door. "I wouldn't mind if you did the rugs."

He picked up the handle and slid it across the floor. "I'm on it," he said, and hiccupped, "Ugh. Would you mind if I had another drink?"

"Be my guest."

Bit sat beside Ryan and leaned her head into the draft forming between the room's two open windows. Ryan tapped on the soft keys of her laptop and checked the contents of the van's workstation. Bit popped open the server from the warehouse and unscrewed its hard drive. When it was free, she glanced over Ryan's shoulder to see if she was ready for it. Ryan had set the text font on her screen too small for Bit to read the individual file names. She was cruising through the folders with transcendent bliss. Devon had been gone for an hour, and she heard the vacuum cleaner running downstairs. She kept quiet lest Ryan miss a devastating piece of information.

She placed the second hard drive in the edge of Ryan's sight and carefully closed the case of the computer she had claimed. If Devon wanted the van's computer, this one was hers. She would name it Monolith Betty, Chernobyl 2, or the HMG—High Maintenance Girlfriend.

Ryan poked Bit with her sneaker to get her attention. Bit flopped beside her, and Ryan pointed to a series of web pages saved in a folder. She revealed a page that read in round metallic letters, "Welcome to

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Superheroez, The Web Site." A selection of animal-head-shaped masks along the top allowed them to check out the other pages. It contained the history of MinTorque, the basic features of the suits and custom-ordered pieces, such as the head features and exterior color. The site was littered with broken links to forms for requesting more information.

"Neat," Bit said.

Since she was done with Bit, Ryan waved her away. "I'll let you know if I find anything else."

Bit heaved the Wolf's arm onto her lap to entertain herself. She played with its joints and reached in to touch all the ridges inside. For fun, she took the cap from Ryan's pen and slid the cap into the empty maw at the arm's shoulder. She lifted the stiff armor and listened to the rattle as the cap fell deeper. She jiggled the arm in hopes of shaking the cap into the glove at the bottom. After a few shakes, the rattle stopped. Bit reached into the arm and touched the cap, wedged into a hard spongy material inside the elbow, meant to protect the flexible joint.

Bit swayed the pen cap for several minutes to work it free, but only pushed it deeper into its rut. Soon, she saw its tip exposed out the elbow. She used the pen to push the cap up until it was free, and then knocked it out of the arm. A smile lit up on her face and she put the arm aside.

Bit lifted the plastic drape over the bed and checked for any sacred indentations in the sheets. As she saw none, she lay down on it to take a nap. It was very comfortable, but she had to rest on her back to keep her face from being lost in the pillow.

Ryan pushed her laptop back and spread her fingers in the air to massage them. Bit saw her opportunity and sat up. "Hey," she said, with her voice muffled by the plastic, "been invited to any good sex parties lately?"

Ryan cracked her knuckles and looked up. "That's a no. I can really say, been there, done that, and mean it."

Bit poked her head out from the sheet. "I'm glad you chewed me out about it, though, the other day. I'm sorry I was rude."

Ryan shook her head. "You looked like you needed chewing."

Bit fluttered her eyes at Ryan. "I haven't heard from you since then. Am I bothering you somehow?"

Ryan fell backward and feigned making a snow angel. "No, you're fine. I'm kinda in quiet awe, actually."

Bit smirked and stuck her head out further. "Hey, we're actually talking. Does that mean you've stopped exploring the hard drive?"

Ryan shrugged and pulled herself up. "Yeah. Aside from the website and a few arcade games, this stuff is ancient Fortran to me. I could be looking at the meaning of life, and I wouldn't know it. I'll back up the next drive when its done."

The vacuum cleaner under them shut off. Bit looked over at the

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door. "Want to check on Devon? He's probably through having fun."

"Sure." Ryan got to her feet slowly, as the blood flowed back into them.

Bit swung her legs off the bed and accepted Ryan's hand to help her up. "You are full of surprises."

Ryan crimped a smile on one side of her mouth.

They hurried downstairs as Devon was returning the vacuum cleaner to the kitchen. Bit snapped her fingers at it. "Ah ha! So you can't go into a house without cleaning it."

Devon did not turn to her. "Spare me. Are you guys done yet?"

She and Ryan shook their heads. "Not hardly," Ryan said. "We have one last backup which will take a few hours. Do you want to go uptown and grab some lunch?"

Samantha was unloading the dishwasher, and Devon began helping her to catch her attention. "Will you be here later this afternoon?"

She tapped a plate against the others yet to be put away. "Looks that way," she said, "You guys go have fun."

Devon nodded to her. He opened the back door and escorted Bit and Ryan outside.

"What's going on with you and Sam?" Bit said.

"I am sucking up to her," Devon said. "I am going to get that room. Galeno's issues be damned."

The sub shop up the street made a decent cheesesteak, so they split a couple. Devon chowed through his share quick and excused himself from the others. He located a pay phone in the back of the store by the bathrooms. He put the call on his emergency pre-paid card, and dialed Galeno's cell number.

Galeno took a while to pick up, wondering who would call her from an unlisted number. "Hello?"

Devon leaned into the speaker to keep his voice down. "Hi. We're not coming back yet, but I've got something important to ask you. Do you still have Chloe's number?"

Galeno rustled on her end as she checked her address book. "I think so. Here's her cell number. Why?"

Devon huddled by the phone's side. "Samantha says she might let me have Chloe's room, if Chloe's okay with it."

Galeno snorted instinctively. "But Chloe's things are in there."

Devon eyed the hall for potential listeners. "She's paying some rent for them. I'm sure she can move them in storage and save herself some money."

Galeno was speechless for a few long seconds. "But where will she stay if she comes back to town?"

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"You've got room."

"She'll want her own space."

"We can keep her things in there, and I'll just move out then."

Galeno snapped at him. "You're not touching her things. Storing a few knickknacks is one thing, but you're not sleeping in her bed."

Devon tried to keep his voice calm. "I meant, I'd keep them in there and sleep on a futon or something. Look, Boston's so fucked up, we have all these unemployed people and no free apartments. I can pay, and this one is sitting here."

Galeno put her phone down but did not hang up. Devon read the obscene messages carved in the wall until she spoke again. "I have done so much for you," she said, "I have let you in my home, use my car, get my fucking lock busted, and you want to take my girlfriend's home from me?"

Devon closed his eyes to focus on her. "Galeno, I am your friend and have been your friend longer than I have been on T. I have watched you suffer in silence because of this woman. She has taken lovers and hasn't had the courtesy to fly you out to see her in years. She's keeping you like that stupid room."

Galeno struggled on her end of the phone, and Devon heard the jingle of her keys. "I'm coming over to get you," she said, "Your stuff's coming out of my loft now."

Devon sighed. "Galeno, I love you. And I'm not the only one who loves you and thinks you deserve better."

"Don't tell me what I deserve."

"You deserve someone who will be honest with you."

"Well, maybe I don't want someone like that," Galeno said, and snapped off the phone.

Devon listened to the dial tone. He put the receiver down and almost picked it up again, then walked to the booth where Bit and Ryan were devouring the rest of their sandwiches. He slid across from them.

He elbowed Bit. "Galeno's kicking me out. Do you mind if I store my things in your room for a while? I can't ask Samantha for any more than she's done."

Bit turned to Ryan, hoping for a second opinion. Ryan shrugged and watched the grease ooze from her sandwich. "Maybe for a few days," Bit said. "But I really need my space back."

Devon knocked on the table for luck. "I'll do anything. I owe you so much."

Bit tore off a piece of her sandwich and swallowed it. "Don't thank me yet. You've seen what I look like in the morning."

Galeno sat in her parked car and stared at her phone. She had the windows down for relief, but she rolled them up for privacy. At the

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other end of the phone number on the screen was the most wonderful femme she would ever know, above her in class, rank, appearance and influence. Chloe had a face so beautiful, it was sitting in women's magazines over a body wearing next to nothing. Galeno had been all over that body. She had made the goddess orgasm over and over again. She had held her when Chloe's grandmother had died. When Chloe smiled, the universe smiled with her. Other girls starved themselves to death to be as gorgeous as Chloe was naturally.

It had been the most amazing six months.

A good friend had called to her once, "You never let that one go." To save money to see Chloe again was worth the months of tedious classes at the art school, and a diet of pasta and fast food burritos. Once Chloe lost work for weeks, after falling during a run and scraping her leg. She had called Galeno first while she had cried. Galeno was irreplaceable as her confidant.

Galeno pushed number one on her speed dial.

The bubbly voice at the other end picked up after two rings. It was always two, like her and Galeno.

"Hello?" Chloe said, "Oh, it's you! I was thinking about you."

"I'm going to have a smoke," a deep voice murmured in the background behind Chloe.

Galeno flipped the shade down and lay back in her seat. "You're always on my mind too, babe," she said, "It's synchronicity. How are you doing?"

"Omigod," she said, "My agent's setting me up for a shoot in the Bahamas for this new catalog that does exotic swimsuits. You've never heard of it, and neither had I. It's only for people who can afford them."

Galeno reached in her portfolio bag and unfolded one of Chloe's spreads in her lap. "That's too fantastic," she said, "I have a question for you. What would you say if someone wanted to rent your room at Samantha's?"

The photo narrowed its perfect eyes. "Wow," Chloe said, "I don't know. I'd need a few days to think about it."

A chill rippled down Galeno's chest.

Chloe continued. "I like how things are now. A couple hundred bucks a month is worth not having to lug around that big heavy furniture, you know?"

Galeno wiped her brow, baking in the car without the fan on. "Uh-huh. I'll let them know. I wanted to check with you."

The photo returned to its decadent joy. "I so miss you," Chloe said.

Galeno blushed. "Me, too. You know, I'm graduating next year. My parents will be giving me a little money as a present. I was thinking I could come and see you."

Chloe drew in a quick breath. "Here? Yeah, sure. Let's talk about it

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then."

Galeno shut the magazine. "No. Let's talk about it now. I'm dying to see you."

Chloe rustled, as if shifting her body. "Things are really busy here. Maybe I could meet you at a hotel nearby. Wouldn't that be so sexy? You could do anything to me there."

Galeno licked her lips so Chloe would hear her. "I'd love to see your apartment for real, especially that heart-shaped bed you're lying on right now."

"Oh, tiger. I love the way you think."

Galeno sighed. "Chloe, can you be serious for a second? Why don't you want me to see your place?"

"I do!" Chloe said, in a burst, "You can totally come over when you've graduated. But you can't blow off something as important as school to see me."

Galeno stared at her case in the next seat. It would still be there. She had left school before. "What if I want to?"

Chloe's voice deepened. "Then it's my job as your best friend to tell you it's more important to have a degree."

Galeno adjusted her body in the tight seat. "Do you show my pictures to your friends?"

"Of course. You know that."

Galeno shook her head. "I mean really."

Chloe was exasperated. "Yes, really."

Galeno sucked in her lips and braced herself. "Then why does something in my gut say that I'm only good enough for you over the phone?"

Chloe lay silent for a few seconds. "Look, I need to shower and get my tail down to the grocery store. Hang in there, okay?"

"Okay," Galeno said, and heard the phone click off. She tossed her phone in the case with the magazine. She twisted her keys in the ignition, and blasted the radio as loud as she could take it. She had to get him out of her room.

Devon was waiting on the curb of Samantha's driveway, as Galeno's Honda pulled up. He stood and kept his eyes averted. She opened the side door and he crept beside her. His eyes had flecks of red and his nose was stuffed. A tissue poked out of his pocket, crinkled at the ends.

Galeno kept her radio off on her way home. They remained on their own sides of the car. Halfway there, she pulled over to the side.

"Devon," she said. He turned to her, and his lip twitched. Galeno gripped the steering wheel and stared at the road ahead. "She says you can have the room. You can use the furniture inside."

Devon nodded, and turned away.

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Galeno pulled back into the road and held back her tears.

In the late afternoon, Ryan's backups were almost complete. The laptop was full so Ryan offloaded what she could onto a spare drive. After Samantha's third offer to get them water, Bit made an excursion to a local convenience store and returned with half a case, so she could say "No, we're fine."

As Bit broke out the first bottle, Ryan tapped the old twist lock on the door. "I wish we could close this. It's not like we'll be here much longer."

Bit folded the plastic over the canopy and sat on the bed's side. "Meh, Sam can handle anything at this point. Even if we made out for a while."

Ryan blushed.

"Interested?" Bit said. "Gender-free and purely intellectual?"

Ryan knelt down in the corner to check the laptop's progress. It was on schedule, so she stood up and shrugged.

"Sure. I think we have another half hour left."

They flopped on the bed and lay side by side. Ryan snuggled close and gave her a soft kiss. She pressed her lips on Bit's and warmed with each. Ryan communicated best without words. They held each other close and waited for the urge to do more.

After several minutes, they heard the Honda pull up outside. They detached smoothly, like docked spacecraft leaving a station on the call of duty. They smiled at each other, then looked away in case they promised too much.

"I suppose we should get ready for the Bad Karma pair, in the car," Bit said.

Ryan brushed her hair behind her ears. "Don't worry, I have my emotional shields up, at maximum."

Galeno's Honda was packed with as many of Devon's belongings as it could take. Galeno left the unloading to Devon, and went inside to locate Samantha.

Samantha had straightened up the kitchen and was enjoying an organic macaroni dinner. Galeno took a seat across from her. "Hi."

Samantha wiped her mouth. "Hey, you're back. Did you get a hold of Chloe?"

Galeno nodded. "Devon can move in, and use her things if he is very, very careful with them."

Samantha sat back and sighed with relief. "That's awfully nice of her. I could use the money."

Galeno held herself from poking Sam's noodles. "I know it's too soon for Devon to stay here, but we've got his stuff in the car. Can we

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put it in the room for now?"

Samantha rolled her shoulders, exhausted from the day's cleaning. "For tonight, sure. I'll just get a check from him and see if it clears tomorrow. I think he'll fit in."

Galeno pushed herself off the chair gave her a weak smile. "Thanks. Do you have Chloe's number?"

Samantha took a box of index cards off the table and flipped through it. "I have her address, and an old number, but not the new one."

Galeno rose, and headed out the front door. "S'okay. I'll tell her you don't need the rent anymore."

Bit, Ryan, and Devon waited for her news on the front lawn. She halted in front of them and stuffed her hands in her pockets. "Take your stuff up," she said, "It's all set."

The three of them formed a bucket brigade to unpack the car. Galeno walked around the side of the house and collapsed against it. She planned her route to the liquor store. She ruffled in her pocket and found a twenty and a few ones. Craft and video sales were keeping her barely afloat.

She watched the flies buzz over the bushes. Flies were attracted to oil. Poison ivy leaves were coated in oil. She wondered if flies were immune to it, or if they rubbed it on the people they landed on.

Galeno was jolted out of her mental loop by the squeak of footsteps near her. Devon was bushed from the lifting, but he did not join her. "We're done," he said.

Galeno sighed and lifted herself up. "Don't call me, okay?"

Devon kept his distance. "No problem."

Galeno walked around him and slid into her empty car. She saw him waiting in the rear view mirror, staring straight ahead with soft eyes, sorry for her. She made herself chuckle, but it did not stay.

She drove to a Liquor Palace sandwiched between a hair salon and a convenience store. The shop was filled with bottles of every color, except blue. Nobody she knew got together to celebrate the blues. Brown and yellow were the real colors of sadness. She grabbed a forty-ounce without looking at the brand, because she was a big girl. She dropped her money and ID on the counter for the cashier, then took the bottle home. She cracked it open in her loft and took a long swig. It cleared a trail inside her. She poured some in a glass to let it breathe and stared at it like a civilized person.

Her loft was as silent, with Bit and Devon gone. She took her glass and her bottle to her bedside. The drink had foamed a bit but settled down. She took a long gulp. It hurt, with pain dribbling down to her empty belly. She looked at the piles of videos. One of them showed Bit being kidnapped, and another showed Bit and Devon getting mugged.

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They would be back for them. The room still was not hers.

They were ungrateful little bastards. They had eaten her food, shared her bed and used her to get those MinTorque videotapes. They left their stink on Chloe. They almost had her place wrecked. They were not present to defend themselves, blathering about appreciation and saving the lives of others being its own reward. If she had not taken them in last Saturday night, someone else would have.

They should have moved out sooner. "It's not safe for us to stay here," Devon should have said and dragged Bit off to an alley somewhere. Instead, they were lazy. They had sat on her futon, watched her television, and asked her to fuck over her girlfriend so Devon could jizz in her room.

Galeno took the corner of her pillow and balled it up as tight as she could in her fist. She hurled it onto her mattress and lifted the two little videotapes. She shook them to hear the spools rattle inside. The plastic cases were not much stronger than an eggshell. She dropped them on the workbench and swung her hammer against each. Her hands quaked as the hammer broke through the tapes and stopped at the table underneath. She brushed the shards away and ripped the silvery green ribbons out. She had plenty of scissors nearby which could cut through material thick as leather.

An hour later, the bottle was empty. She closed her eyes, but the sleep did not come. Her brain buzzed, as if trying to scratch something sticky away.

Chapter 12—Friday Evening

Galeno's car faded into two red lights and vanished while Bit, Ryan, and Devon watched from the lawn. Devon kicked stones across the street. Bit folded her arms and stared smug at him. "You know," she said, "we haven't had a real celebration yet for last night. Why don't we hit Icarus? It's Friday."

Devon stopped in mid-kick and shrugged. "We might as well. I can always mooch beer."

Bit patted his shoulder. "Cool. I'll see if Markie wants to go. You want to come, Ryan?"

Ryan shook her head. "I'll pass, thanks. I can take the bus back. You guys have a good time though."

Bit gave her a big hug. Devon was watching, so they did not do any more.

Ryan hurried by them into Samantha's house. "I'll put the info we backed up on my server when I get home," she said, "I'll email you the password so you can poke through it."

Bit and Devon followed her upstairs and helped gather her equipment. Devon handed Samantha a rent check that nearly cleared out his bank account.

Bit called Markie and was surprised when she answered her phone for once. "Hey," Markie said, recognizing the number calling her, "I'm getting ready for the club, can't talk long."

"Hey, coincidence," Bit said, "I was going to ask for a ride there. We're still at Samantha's. Devon's moving in here, hopefully."

"Oh nice! Give me an hour and a half," Markie said, "Just to warn you, Kim's coming with me. You can save your comments for later."

Bit smirked. "Hey, that's great. See you in a few." She set the phone on its receiver and gave Ryan a farewell embrace before letting her out with her bulging backpack. Ryan trudged off slowly as if she would return any moment, but did not.

Bit wandered upstairs to Devon's room. She opened the door and saw the white swatches wrapped around his chest like the invisible man, since his shirt was off. He shrieked at her. "Shut the door!"

Bit slipped inside and locked it, averting her eyes from him. When he had finished dressing, she turned to him. He was back into his old vest and jeans look.

Devon noticed her sigh at his outfit and returned the same eye to her blue jeans and pink T-shirt. "You're going like that?" he said.

Bit looked down at herself. "What's wrong with this? Everyone's casual there."

Devon shrugged. "Suit yourself."

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He set his boots down and hunted through his bags for his bootblack kit. Bit took a spot on the floor while Devon took one of the chairs. He put his supplies on the desk, took out his tiny lighter, and set the polish burning for a prayer's length.

"This is a really nice room," Bit said.

Devon did not look up as he scrubbed down a dull patch. "Uh-huh, this is the best place I've ever stayed in. I'm going to have to smoke a lot to get the pot smell out, though."

Bit pulled her legs to her chest. "You'd let me know if any of my relationships were hurting me, right?"

He laid the rag to his side. "What's your point?"

She rested her head on the bed's edge. "You've known Galeno longer than me, and you never said anything about Chloe before."

He took the cloth back, relieved. "You know I'd tell you anything. Can you wait outside? I can't think with you in here."

Bit lifted herself and brushed the dust off her ass. "Fine."

She sauntered quiet to the door, when Devon stood up. "Wait," he said, "Just stay outside a little while for me, please? Just wait. I'm mad, okay, and you're here, and that means you get to hear it. I like Galeno a lot, but she's a kid in so many ways and I thought you, above all people, would understand that."

Bit stopped and folded her arms. "I do. But when you get like that and shut yourself off..."

Devon shook his head. "Maybe I need to be off. I told you that on the Cape. Yeah, I may need help, but you don't have a clue how to give it. Not anymore."

Bit glared at him, huddled around his shoes. "Well, maybe you don't either," she said, and brushed her bangs back, "Look, I still love you, but you can be a pain, too."

Devon sighed and dropped his boots. "Galeno's still my brother, and you're my sister. Now, would you please leave my room for a little while?"

"Sure." Bit stepped through into doorway but the air was tenser outside than in. She almost asked if he wanted anything.

Markie loved stories about heroes rescuing princesses since royalty was loaded. Queens and their progeny had enough spare time to practice giving excellent head. Her princesses had to prove they were worth saving before the act. Rapunzel, the whip tossing ho, took priority over the high-maintenance Snow White. If Markie was going to be Kim's hero tonight, she expected Kim to play the part accordingly.

Markie strapped on her tightest flair bottom jeans that still fit. The squeeze got her juices flowing. Kim would have to watch out tonight. Markie pulled up outside Kim's building, and put on her car's blinkers.

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She pressed the buzzer but did not wait for a response. She returned to her car and let the girl come to her. If Kim did not want to play the game, she could stay on her sofa and watch whatever garbage was on Friday night television.

Almost immediately, Kim emerged from the doorway with her hair mussed and twisted into little spikes. She had thick black eyeliner, black and white striped stockings, and tight red shorts. Her shirt had a pink bunny's ass with a little pom-pom tail over each breast.

Markie leaned over to open the door for her. "Strap your buns in. We're picking up the Bit and the Devon but we're taking our sweet time about it."

Kim's lipstick was as purple as the night sky illuminated by lightning. Markie rolled her fingers at Kim, who crawled over the parking brake and gave Markie a sloppy kiss. She kept to Markie's lips, lest anything smear outside the lines. After the tingle of their touch faded, they parted and strapped themselves in.

Markie checked her face for any purple smudges in the vanity mirror. "So have you been to Icarus before?"

"Not yet."

Markie confirmed she was good to go and floored the gas. "It's okay. They keep rotating the Friday night DJ, though, so it's a crapshoot if the music's any good."

Kim held onto her seat belt and ran her fingers along the edges. "Why's that?"

Markie lifted a hand off the steering wheel to half-shrug. "I heard other clubs were giving the spinners better offers. Icarus doesn't pull in that much."

Kim kept watch on the road ahead, lest a car hit them if she turned away. "That sucks," she said. "Why do the queer bars always get shafted first?"

Markie slowed down when she saw a car with roof racks, in case it was the police. "It's like a curse from the eighties. I heard back then, all the good queer bars from the seventies were turning into dives 'cause their novelty had worn off."

Kim sighed. "We missed all the good scenes. You know, I used to go by this dyke bar on the way to school. I'd see all of them going in after soccer practice. I mean, the place would be packed. Women would come from miles around, so they made enough to pay off the cops."

Markie took advantage of a red light to eye Kim over again. "So, what happened to it?"

Kim furrowed her brow. "It's a Bennigan's now. Anyway, the place scared me. All the bars did. I had to leave home before I was old enough to buy my own alcohol. I bet if they had let me buy any, though, I'd still be there."

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"I never went into a dyke bar until I came to Boston," Markie said. "I don't think they let you be a dyke in a small town until you're thirty-five."

Kim gave Markie a playful smack on her shoulder. The light in front of them turned green so Markie swung blindly at her as she gunned it. "C'mon, quit it. If you start anything, I'll get all hot and sweaty, and I have to drive."

Kim let Markie rest her hand on her thigh and stroked it until they reached Samantha's house. Bit and Devon sat on the sidewalk's edge, dusty and dazed. Markie pulled over to pick them up. She rolled her eyes when she saw Devon's leathers.

Kim pushed her seat forward as he climbed in the back. "Nice threads," she said.

Devon saluted her. "Thanks," he said as he buckled himself in. "Nice hair."

Bit slid in the other side, and brushed her hair back for style. Markie twisted to see her. "Hey Bit, there's a letter back there for you."

Bit reached under the seat and picked up a white envelope. Its return address was listed as the Registry of Motor Vehicles. She gripped the edges and bent them to confirm the thin hard object inside. She ripped it open and pulled out her crisp new driver's license. She squealed and flashed it at Devon.

"All right," she said, "I'm getting trashed tonight!"

Devon touched the glossy coat of plastic and reached over to Markie. "Would you mind stopping at my old place? I bet mine came, too."

Markie shook her head. "Uh-uh. It would be an extra hour. It's not like they don't know you there."

"Pretty please," Devon said, "With sugar on top and ice cream and cake and vibrators and..."

"Not going to happen."

Devon sulked back in his seat. "Meanie."

Markie drove through sluggish traffic and took a spot in a lot near the club that only charged a few dollars. She and Kim bounded ahead while Bit and Devon hung by the car to discuss who would buy the alcohol.

The line into Icarus was short by most Friday standards. Kim stuck behind Markie as they joined it, listening to the buzzing light over the club. A tall raven-haired girl in thick glasses and flip-flops peeked back at them from ahead in line. "Hey Markie, how's it going?"

Markie waved at her. "It's all right," Markie said, "What's up?"

"I just got off a thirteen-hour shift," the girl said, "And I've got another starting at eleven tomorrow."

A big girl in a tight corset spun around in front of the tall girl.

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"Markie, where have you been? You wouldn't be coming to the rally?"

The three huddled together, stepping as a group as the line shortened. Kim watched their backs and glanced around for anyone she knew.

Markie scratched her head. "Which one was it, again?"

The big girl slapped a Xerox in her palm. "The ones against the superheroes, targeting the queer community."

Markie folded it up for her pocket. "Oh, yeah, definitely. It's posted online, isn't it?"

Kim stood on her tip-toes but none of the other girls addressed her. She could have been made of glass. She waited for a pause in their conversation and spoke up. "Hi, I'm..." she said, but the big girl cut her off.

"We put a bulletin out Wednesday, but it's taking its time making the rounds."

Markie read over the pamphlet. "Oh wait, I might have seen it. Sorry, my brain gets full too easy."

Kim kept quiet as the group stepped into the club. The other girls said their goodbyes, and Markie joined Kim's side as if nothing had happened. They gave their cover charge to the door girl and flashed their IDs. The door girl stamped Markie's hand but shook her head at Kim, as she was ten months and fourteen days away from the legal age.

The club was getting tight as they slid through the black cloth in the doorway. Bois guarded the pool tables directly to their right, while the younger crowd congregated in packs around tables and on the dance floor. The bar on their left had dim lamps, while spotlights spread out over the dancers. Kim had not seen so many worlds crammed together.

Markie put her hand on Kim's elbow and stopped her. "Hey, is something wrong? You haven't said a word since we got here."

Kim put her mouth over Markie's ear. "No. I don't know everyone you do."

Markie placed her hand to her mouth, and gave her a quick hug. "Oh shit, I'm sorry. I thought you knew who they were; I mean, everybody knows Amber and Sandy."

Kim nuzzled Markie and began to pull her toward the DJ. "It's okay," she said, "Look, I want to dance this out of my system. You want to come with?"

"Sure." Markie hustled as Kim's soft hand led her over.

The edges of the floor had a few blacklights to contrast against the swinging spots. They stepped on stickers from local groups and the promotional flyers that were littered everywhere. An industrial remix of "You Spin Me" was playing with the lead vocalist singing two octaves lower than the original.

Kim slithered through the clusters of cuties to an open space near

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the music booth. Markie came up behind and rested her hands on Kim's hips, pressing herself close. She swayed her pelvis with every other beat. Kim followed as the bass shook them together. Kim slipped away and faced Markie. She threw her head around to the music and blinked at her seductively. Markie reached out for her, but Kim retreated with a wink. On her next attempt, Kim stepped close and wrapped her arms around Markie's neck. She opened her mouth and let the bass rock both their tongues at once.

Kim tasted lust, but not particularly for her. Markie's crotch ground into her but did not match her rhythm. They could talk and they could kiss, and they could show off. Kim did not know what else they were good at together.

She should have spoken up in the line. The eyes of the other dancers grazed by Markie, and none rested on Kim. They either did not know what to make of her or considered her off-limits.

Slowly, Kim let Markie go. Markie stopped swaying and reached out for her. Kim backed up and gestured to a spot against the wall, where the music was softer. They walked around the other girls to it.

Kim crossed her arms and stared at Markie dead on. "You were right. I can't do this. I don't want to be with you right now."

Markie checked around her to see who was watching. "What the fuck? You felt great on the floor."

Kim nodded and ground her toe into the floorboards. "I know, but this is my fault, okay? I thought I wanted you, and I do want you and I think that's the problem because you don't want me to want you in that way."

"What way?"

Kim swallowed. "For company."

Markie put her hands in her back pockets. "Uh-uh," she said, "I thought we went over this."

Kim stared at the soft curve where Markie's collarbone met her neck. "I want to be more to you than whatever I am now."

Markie swung her head back. "For Pete's sake, I've been played a lot, okay? Tell me you didn't mean to, this time."

"Honest," Kim said, "I could have kept dancing, but it would have hurt more."

Markie turned away and wiped her brow. "You're killing me, you know? It's like I can't flirt with anybody anymore."

Kim took a step back from her. "Well, it's not just you."

Markie rolled the tension from her neck and put her arms out. "This is going too fast for me. Give me a hug."

Kim embraced Markie gingerly. Her body was hard as a cornstalk, and Markie was the first to let go. She put her head against the wall. "When you see me in the street," Markie said, "look me in the eye,

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okay?"

Kim nodded and leaned beside her. "I don't know how to stop this. Goodbye, I guess."

Markie swiveled her head to Kim and wandered toward the food tables. "I guess I'll see you in class," she said.

Kim hurried to the bathroom. She went in an open stall, and sat without using the toilet. The club's exit was on the other side of the room. She tried to figure out how to get to the subway with no escort to buffer her from Markie's friends. She could stay in the stall until the bar emptied, but the toilet smelled foul. She left the stall cracked open and washed her hands. She turned the tap to cold to freeze the blood pumping through her wrists. She straightened her hair and checked her mascara. Her eyes were completely dry, as if she had done all her crying already.

Kim stepped out of the bathroom and walked over to the bar. She scanned the beverages she could not order. She leaned over to catch the attention of a bartender. "Mountain Dew, no ice," she said, and took out a five. A girl on the bar stool next to her was about her age, but had a Sam Adams. She had pink hot pants, a midriff exposed by a tiny T-shirt, and engineer boots like hers. Kim checked out the curve of her back, and the Celtic Knot tattoo sticking out over her butt. Everyone she knew had one of those.

"Hi," Kim said to the girl, "I like the knot tat."

"So do I," the girl said, "I'm Alyssa. I love your boots." She held hers close to Kim's. They were identical.

"Get out," Kim said, "Where did you get them?"

Alyssa's smile grew wider and her cheeks flushed. The brick in Kim's belly started to melt. She hoped this would lead to a conversation and that hugs would be involved.

The line had vanished into Icarus by the time Bit and Devon had sorted out their plans. Devon grumbled to himself, as every seat inside most likely was taken. Bit paid their cover charge and showed her ID with pride. Devon held his hand out to be stamped, but he had no such luck.

"I've been coming here for years," Devon said to the door girl.

"That doesn't matter," she said, "I don't need a five hundred dollar fine right now."

Devon patted his pocket. "What if I just gave you five hundred dollars?"

She looked behind him. "I'd wonder why you weren't off at a strip club somewhere."

Bit pulled him in before he could spend all night trading quips with the girl. As she feared, the club was packed. A new pack had commandeered the pool tables, and the honey who had blown Devon

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off was at the bar.

Devon waved to his crew in their usual booth behind the pool tables and Bit followed him to join them.

A stocky boi about Devon's size stood up as he approached. "Hey stranger. Glad to see you're still with us."

Devon wedged himself on the lip of the booth's seat. "Thanks, Andy. It's been quite a week."

The bois shifted over as far as they could to make room. Bit dragged over a free chair for herself.

Andy bent around Devon to catch Bit's attention, "Oh Bit, somebody here's been looking for you."

Bit pulled herself closer to the edge of the table. "Who?"

Andy zipped her lips shut. "I promised not to tell. She was afraid she'd scare you away."

Bit drooped her shoulders and rolled her eyes. "Okay, you can't just drop that on me."

Devon pointed at the bar. "Hey, why don't you get some beers. I'll shake it out of her."

Andy stuffed her hands in her pockets and grinned, daring Devon to try. Bit squeezed the bills in her pocket that Devon had given her, and headed around the pool tables.

She flagged down the first bartender she could find and asked for two Heinekens. She had exchanged her money for the cold long necks and turned back for the table, when a bubbly woman in a black corset top jumped in front of her, carrying a handful of flyers.

Bit eyed her for signs of rabies. "Hello, Sandy."

Sandy threw her head back, off-balance. "I'm so glad that I finally caught you. You're looking well?"

A cluster of patrons pushed by them, and Bit moved around Sandy to avoid their path. She brushed her bangs back and carefully scanned at the flyers. "It's been a rough week. What are you selling?"

Sandy offered her one. "Nothing. I'm on the organizational committee for the Queers Against Superheroes rally tomorrow. You're phone's been down, you know, but I've been trying to get in touch with you all week. You're the main reason we're having this, and we're hoping we could get you as a key speaker. People are dying to hear."

Bit shook her head. "I have this truce going with the supers right now. I really don't want to aggravate them."

The exuberance fell from Sandy's face, but she nodded. "Of course, I completely understand. Are you coming anyway? I promise you won't have to say anything."

"Maybe." She stuck one of the bottles under her armpit and took a flyer. The rally was booked for two in the afternoon, at the intersection of the busiest roads in Cambridge.

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"We would have scheduled it in Copley Square," Sandy said, "But it was too much paperwork, this soon, and Food Not Bombs is doing something there anyway."

The intersection did not have much space beside the sidewalks. "Uh-huh," Bit said, "Not expecting a big crowd?"

Sandy perked up. "It would definitely be bigger if you were there."

Bit scanned the patrons who were not hounding her for her tale. "I'm good. Thanks anyway."

Sandy beamed and flitted into the crowd. "No problem. Hope to see you there!"

Bit retreated to the boy's booth with her beers. They had put a circular table at the end to fit Devon and other new guests. Devon took his feet down from her chair. "I see she caught you," he said.

Bit handed him a bottle. He lifted the top off with the communal opener, and Bit used it when he was finished. "I turned down the speaker role. Are any of you going?"

The boys shook their heads no.

"Solidarity," Bit said, and raised her bottle high. They joined her, clinked their drinks together, and guzzled them down.

The first beer disappeared in minutes, so Bit excused herself and made another run. Her buzz was creeping up her belly, and with all the smoke in the air she did not need a cigarette. She had not started to say hello to random people. She could handle a few more rounds.

She ordered two more Heinekens. When she put her money down, the bartender handed it back. "It's taken care of," she said, "A friend of yours is covering your table for the rest of the night."

Bit scanned the area for anyone she knew. "Really? Who's that?"

The bartender nudged her to the bar's end. "She's over...huh, I don't see her anymore. Her credit card says 'Jessica Bitters'."

Bit put the bottles down and leaned over to see the receipt. "That's my name," she said, and pulled out her license. The signature was very similar to hers. The credit card number was not.

The bartender confirmed it. "I'll be damned," she said, "I'm sorry about that. I'll just rip up that receipt up so you won't get charged."

Bit let her take the bottles away and rapped the bar, nervous. "What did she look like?" Bit said.

"Thirtyish, Pat Benatar-like with this gold and purple lipstick," the bartender said, "In a jean skirt and a black top. You might try the bathroom. I'll keep an eye out for her."

"Thanks." Bit hurried to the restroom to search. All the stalls were locked, so she stood in a corner and waited for each occupant to leave. Kim passed by, and two girls she vaguely knew, but no one matched that description. Besides Kim, none of them even had lipstick. The beer in her gut started to turn, and she was nauseated. She left the bathroom

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when something bounced off her cheek. It was one of Sandy's flyers, rolled up.

A door leading to the back area of the club was cracked open near her. The club employees were good about keeping it locked. She waited for the bartenders to look the other way, and then slipped inside.

A naked yellow bulb hung off the ceiling. The music faded but the bass thumped through the walls. The room was littered with cardboard boxes and crates. A gray mop sat in a floor sink under a shelf of cleaning supplies.

"I'm glad you came," Melissa's voice echoed in front of her. She stepped into the amber light, with her arms crossed over a black velvet top. Her hair was cropped short, and curled in little whorls with a fresh perm.

Bit stuck her index finger in Melissa's face. "No. Get the fuck out."

Melissa spread her arms wide. "We just want you to hear us."

"Both of us," Troy's synthesized voice said, behind Melissa.

The bulb's glow distracted Bit, so she could not quite see him. "I don't think so. You know what I'll do if you don't apologize and go right now."

Melissa was very calm. "Look, Bit. We're not going to press charges."

"And what was that with the credit card?" Bit said. Her voice scratched from shouting.

Melissa handed her a Visa from a place called Garrison Credit Union, "The card? Here. Keep it. It'll be no good tomorrow. We found this place on the Internet and it's slow on its credit checks. They seemed happy with the fax I sent them of your driver's license."

Bit folded the Visa in half and bent it until it snapped.

Melissa nodded. "We have Devon's, too. The EMTs cut Roland's pants off without searching them, and we grabbed them at the ER."

Bit took out her new license. "If you're offering to trade, you're too late."

Melissa shook her head. "No trades. The truce stays. You keep our technology and we'll keep your licenses. If you release our tech, we release your identity on the 'net and let the thieves burn your good name into the ground."

"Bullshit," Bit said, "My license number isn't my social security number."

Melissa pointed at the pieces of the credit card. "That's why that won't work tomorrow. We also have a card in Devon's name. Did you know that his license number is his social security number?"

Bit blinked and froze. A large shape moved behind Melissa.

"Your friends out there are really hurting for money," Troy said. "Mel already gave Devon's number to one of the girls out there, and she's going to

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have a nice time with it. He can report it as fraud, but it'll seem awfully suspicious that he changed his residence right as the charges were made."

Bit grabbed Melissa's shoulder. "Who did you give it to?"

Troy rustled in the back. "*Get your hand off her, or I'll take it off.*"

Bit shoved Melissa away. She caught her balance and ran a finger down her own neck. "I'm sure you'll be able to clear it, but there's that 'sex' box on your license. This is a pretty open-minded town, but someday you might be in a place where you or Devon want to pass."

Bit stopped, and chewed on one of her fingernails. "You've said your piece."

"Right," Melissa said. "Are you going to that rally tomorrow?"

"It depends if you tell me who you gave that credit card to."

Melissa held her ground. "I don't think so. Why don't you go find out?"

"All right," Bit said. She turned to go, but as she passed the floor sink, she grabbed a bottle of Comet cleaning powder from the shelf and threw it at Melissa's face. The white dust flew around her head and Melissa clenched her eyes shut, spitting out the flakes. Bit reached for Melissa and yanked her by the arm.

"*Let her go!*" Troy roared and stepped under the dusty bulb. His new suit had the carved texture of fur and molded teeth in the snout. He lunged at her to pull Melissa away.

Bit dropped her arm and grabbed the doorknob to the club. She pulled it open and screamed, "He's here!"

The club lights and a hundred stares fell into the little storeroom, aimed at the Wolf and Melissa. Bit hid behind the door as the wave of hip-hop beats followed. The conversations outside slowed to a halt. Bit hoped nobody had brought a gun.

Troy did not stay to find out. He wrapped his arms around Melissa and hurried backward. He broke open a door by running into it, and leapt up before the door swung back.

The patrons rustled about, unsure of what they had seen. Bit poked her head out to watch them. She was paralyzed by their curiosity focused on her. She saw them whispering to each other, and hurrying over from all corners of the room.

The DJ cut the music but the patrons' rustling grew even louder. The two bartenders left their posts and came toward her.

Bit raised her hands up. "It's okay," she said and turned to the crowd. "What you just saw was one of the vigilantes. The one in charge. He's supposed to have a Wolf mask on. If anybody saw the Hawk last week, his outfit looks a lot like that."

A string of 'oh yeahs' and 'huhs' trickled through the crowd. A bartender scowled at her. "You're not allowed back there," she said. "What's going on?"

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Bit put the broken credit card in the bartender's hand. "I found the woman who gave you this in the back room. She let me in, and I took the card off her."

"Speak up," a boi behind the crowd said.

The bartenders backed off as Bit stepped from the storeroom and closed it behind her. She held up one of the flyers. "If you've seen these around, you might be wondering if they're after us. Well, you saw him back there. I've seen them in my home, and my friends' homes, and all over Jamaica Plain and Somerville. And now, he's at Icarus too. Don't he and his friends have better things to do? I know they do. Then why aren't they out solving crime? Because I'm crime now. And so are all of you."

Devon pushed his way through the bystanders, and came to her side. She leaned against the wall while he caught his breath and took their attention away from her. "Hey, I can't live in my place anymore since that Wolf guy wrecked it," he said. "I wish had a camera so I could show you the holes he made. We've been on the run since Saturday and if you could hear what they've done to..."

Bit leaned over in his ear and whispered. "Don't spill anything. They've got our driver's licenses. Your social security number's on yours, and they can sell it to identity thieves."

Devon furrowed his brow. "What do you mean? My license has a different number on it."

Bit's eyes widened and she backed away from him. "Fuckers. Never mind."

Devon put his left hand in his vest pocket like he was addressing funders at work, and turned back to the crowd. "You know they kidnapped Bit overnight? They walked right in, and we have videotape footage to prove it."

Curious faces in the back strained on tip-toes to stare at the two of them. Bit shuddered. They trusted anything that would come out of her mouth. She swept over everyone in front of her. "We'll be giving a full exposé at the Queers Against Superheroes rally tomorrow," she said, "Take a flyer and check the website 'cause the time and place will probably be changing. We'll bring an actual vigilante's costume and the software they use to run it. We'll have a link on the website where you can download the schematics and see their own unreleased home page."

On hearing her, Sandy excused her way through the crowd and handed chunks of papers to pass around. The flyers were whisked around the room and the patrons began discussing them with their friends. Sweaty dancers approached Bit and Devon. "What did you mean like, they were after you?" one girl said with a starstruck gaze.

Bit pushed her bangs back and loosened her shoulders. "Uh-huh. Friday night, I ran away with the Hawk's head," she said. She began to

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say more but her words would spread before tomorrow into rumor. To keep it as her own, she had to tell her story to as many people at once.

"You know what?" Bit said, "Come to the rally and check the website tomorrow. I'll tell you everything about the vigilantes.

The girls nodded and walked back to their friends. She could not tell if they were impressed or being nice. Other people came to her, but Bit held up her hands and repeated the same line.

Soon, Sandy wandered over to Bit with empty hands.

"Omigod," she said, "We might get a decent attendance. You were incredibly fabulous. So you are coming?"

Bit and Devon looked to each other. "We have to, now," Bit said.

Sandy darted her head around. "We need a bigger space, and press coverage. But we can't get a permit this late."

Bit ran through all the public places she could consider. Empty lots had multi-million dollar corporations behind them. The state forests closed at six. The courthouse steps were off limits.

"I can't think of much either," Sandy said, glumly. "The largest space we have is that tiny concrete park down the road from me."

Bit raised her head. It wasn't the only park in town. She had one down the street from her apartment where she had wanted to bury Stephen's bones, before Markie threw them away. It grew empty at dinnertime. It had a row of trees behind a baseball diamond.

Bit took a flyer and scribbled a map to an intersection in Arlington. "There's a park near me. It's not too busy. We can hit it in the evening, if we get our act together. Can you get a loudspeaker or something?"

Sandy bubbled like a kettle full of hot water. "Sure. I have so much to do. It's going to be amazing. Can I get back to you tomorrow morning?"

"Definitely." Bit excused herself and hurried to a pay phone by the club's entrance. She dialed Ryan, who was still awake.

Ryan's voice was low with concern about the late-night phone call. "Is everything okay?" she said.

Bit held out the phone so Ryan could hear the excitement of the club. "Better than okay. I need you to upload that data we got today, and burn as many CDs as you have with it. We're revealing everything at the rally tomorrow."

Ryan began to type on her keyboard. "We are? I'm on it. I'll spread it over as many servers as I can. Call me when you're ready to go."

"Deal," Bit said, and hung up. She dialed half of Galeno's number out of instinct, but stopped. It was too soon. Galeno would do well with a night of uninterrupted sleep.

Chapter 13—Saturday Morning

Bit tossed most of the night. Any moment, they might have made a surprise visit to any one of her friends, and she might be needed. She went through every scenario until they blended with her dreams. She wrapped herself around her pillow but it was too soft to burn off excess energy. She avoided checking the clock in case it kept her up further, like a child on Christmas Eve.

The sun brushed her face when she decided to open her eyes. She relented to it, even though it was only 6:30 in the morning. She was tired but not sleepy. She left her makeshift mattress to shower and decide whether she was up for the day. She dried and moisturized herself, suspended between the dream and waking worlds. Back in her room, she threw on some clothes from the clean pile.

She noted she had some dice near the pile, among her other belongings. Odds, she would return to bed, and evens, she would stay up. She threw them down, and they came up odds. She voted for two out of three, to be sure. They came up evens, twice, so she set them back where she had found them.

She strapped on her shoes and left for the park. It had been a while since her last visit, since only children and the people supervising them usually played there. The air outside the front door was warm, with the faint crispness of fall.

Down the road, the park was empty. Junk food wrappers rustled in the breeze inside the oil drum trashcans, in an offbeat rhythm with the birds' chirping. The park's pavement dissolved into patches of grass and sand, mixed together in most places. A swing set, slide, and rocking pig-on-a-spring guarded the fenced entrance. Bit looked for a seesaw but did not find one. Kids needed friends to use that.

A set of picnic benches lay across from the playground, and the batter's cage and baseball diamond spanned the rear of the park. The cage was wide enough for a large banner, if someone hung one there. The picnic tables were sturdy enough for a television and VCR to run video footage, though not for a generator. The remains of a newspaper from the previous day indicated it would not rain that night. The trees surrounding the park on the furthest side were as thick as a little forest, good for dulling sound. The chain-link fence extended into the trees, as if surrendering to their presence. As the park had a single entrance, it would be easy to brief visitors and hand them pamphlets and the MinTorque suit parts. They would spread information more easily if she gave it away.

The tops of the nearby homes peeked behind the leaves on either sides of the park, but the trees' branches would not be strong enough to

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hold a heavy exoskeleton. With so many people coming, they might not even show up. Bit would have to make sure they did.

She wandered down to Dunkin' Donuts, bought herself a fresh coffee, and pondered whether she wanted to start organizing or catch up on rest. Even with the hot liquid bubbling in her belly, her groggy brain refused to make a concrete choice.

She returned home, plodding up the wooden steps. Markie was in the shower, not working this Saturday, or she would have been up sooner. Bit knocked on the bathroom door. "Do you mind if I use your computer?" she said.

The shower curtain slid inside. Markie was as monotone as Bit. "Go ahead."

Bit coasted down the hallway in her socks and once in Markie's room kept to the trail between the clothes that led to the computer. Bit jumped over Markie's sheet, sprawling off the bed and threatening to block the path.

After turning the machine on, she sent an email to Ryan to see if Troy had left his online address on either of the stolen computers. While she waited for a response, she checked the site Sandy had put up for the rally. As proactive as ever, Sandy had posted directions and bus schedules to the park already.

Markie came in with a towel around her chest. Bit nodded to her and started to log off, but Markie waved for her to stop. "I'm heading out to take care of some bank stuff," she said, "but I'll be back in a few." She rummaged about in her closet.

Bit resumed checking her email. "Okay, are you going to be around this evening?"

Markie threw clothes from the closet on her bed. "Fuck that, I'll be here all day. Give me something to do. Please."

Bit thought for a moment. "I need someone to get a big enclosed tent. There's no privacy at the park and we'll need somewhere to stash the suit parts."

Markie hurled more shirts, skirts, and slacks onto the bed. "Sure, no problem. Hey, why do I keep saving these shitty outfits that my mother gives me?"

Bit turned to admire the pile. A floral print shirt in bright pink lay on the top. "Are you looking for anything in particular?"

Markie slammed the closet shut and rooted through her drawers. "Anything black and see-through," she said. "I don't care if goth is over, I'm doing it today. I am so over women."

The room was growing stuffy as the sun rose further. "It's a little hot for goth," Bit said.

Markie slammed the bureau shut, disappointed. "It's never too hot for goth. That's like saying it's too hot for the blues. Girls are out to hurt

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me, Bit."

Bit spun around in the chair to calm her. "Girls have hurt all of us."

Markie jumped on the pile of colored clothes. "No, they have a raging campaign against me."

Bit raised her eyebrows. "You think you're being a little paranoid?"

Markie bounced up to check her makeup kit. "Nothing wrong with looking out for number one. They even say on the airplane. In an emergency, you put the oxygen mask on your face first, before you help anyone else. Fuck!" She threw a pen from the kit in the trash. "This mascara is like two years old. Forget it. I'm doing broody street urchin instead."

Bit shook her head. "Are you sure you want to help out today?"

Markie grumbled but collected herself. "If I don't, I'm going to go beat up teenagers and blow all my money on used CDs."

Bit was unfazed. "Okay, would you mind picking up a few more things while you're out?"

Markie perked her eyes up. "Like what?"

Bit took a notepad from the desk and jotted down items as she spoke them. "A few hundred feet of heavy chain, a bunch of those quick-link carabiners, and black spray paint. I'll make you a list."

Markie crossed her arms on her bare chest. "All right, Bit, but I don't think I'm comfortable going in this direction in our relationship."

Bit tore off the paper and handed it to her. "It's okay. We're topping Troy, not each other."

The computer announced the arrival of an email. Ryan had sent Bit Troy's MinTorque email address and reported that people were clobbering her site to download the stolen MinTorque data. Bit sent back a response asking her to burn more CDs to give away that night. Markie continued to paw through old boxes for clothes.

With that taken care of, Bit created a free email account and wrote an anonymous email to Troy's address. For the subject, she typed "Genderqueers Everywhere Send Their Love, Marina Boy." She included a link to Sandy's rally site and the words, "Can't wait to see you tonight. Leave your girlfriend behind. She's slowing you down. Love, Bit."

A belt rattled behind her. Markie had changed into tastefully mismatched androgynous glitterpunk. She had blue fuzzies at the sleeve ends of her T-shirt covered in crisscrossed silver strips.

Bit's jaw fell as far as her skin would let it go. "Omgod," she said, "What has that girl done to you?"

"Now you feel my pain," Markie said. "And we're not saying the K word anymore."

Bit stood up and shut down the computer. "Well, thanks for picking up those things. I'm going down the street to make a phone call, in case

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anyone's listening. Then I'll meet you back here." She left as Markie clawed her hair at the sheer effort she would need to put all her clothes away.

The nearest pay phone was back by the donut shop. All its stickers had been carved off but it had a dial tone. Bit squinted her eyes to avoid the glare from its naked silver surface and typed in Sandy's number.

Sandy was especially perky when she answered. "Hel-lo?"

Bit hit the volume button a couple times to hear her over the breeze. "It's me. Just checking in. I sent an email to Troy, and Markie's getting supplies to trap him."

Sandy snorted. "That's not our only worry. Have you been following any of the local message boards?"

"Not really," Bit said, "What's up?"

"Some kids calling themselves the Supabaggas are threatening to show," she said. "They're talking about bringing guns. Can we take the chance they're bluffing? There's no way we can search everyone."

Bit rested her arm on the phone's stand. The rally would be hours away, and Troy was probably reading the same message boards. "I'd tell the volunteers to be on the lookout," she said, "But I haven't heard anything about them showing up offline. They're probably more dangerous to themselves."

A crash of soda cans fell on Sandy's end. "You didn't hear that," she said. "Well, I'll make sure anyone who shows up knows about them. Better safe than sorry. Could you handle media control? I've never really worked on anything that needs this much press coverage before."

"I'll sic Devon on them," Bit said. "I should get back. See you this afternoon."

"Okay," Sandy said. "Ta ta!" She hung up her end.

It took Bit a minute to piece together Samantha's number. The receiver was heating as she held it, so she blew on it before contacting Devon.

She expected to have to go through a roommate, but Devon picked up on the last ring. "Uh, what?" he said, groggy as if he had wandered downstairs on autopilot.

"Boo! We're got a big day ahead," Bit said. "After you do breakfast, I need your nonprofit money-mooching skills. Oh, and I wanted to talk about Galeno."

Devon slumped to the floor and began to drone. "Oh, yeah, her. She's feeling really conflicted like mustard on a jelly sandwich so I'd give her a week to herself."

Bit cleared her throat loudly. "Devon, this is reality. Wake up."

Devon was quiet for a minute. "Oh," he said at last. "I don't know. You talk to her. The fairy dum-dums are calling me."

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Bit sighed. "All right, go back to your dum-dums, but when you wake up again, could you remember to pack up all the MinTorque equipment, except a couple of every item? In case we need backups."

The receiver thumped as Devon stood up again. "No biggie. Bye bye, I'll tell the pixies you said hi."

He let the phone drop, and it clicked off. Bit shook her head. She was definitely not going back to bed.

At the apartment, Markie had not returned from her shopping expedition. Bit resumed her 'net surfing in Markie's room with an ear planted on the front door, in case it opened. She skimmed a few queer message boards and found links to the boasts of the Supabaggas. Their own boards were filled with violent seething in capital letters. The hottest topic involved who, aside from the one boy who had killed Stephen, could call themselves a Supabagga. The most common responses to this argument were, "You stupid," "See how your momma likes it when I bag her," and "'Baggas are the ones that are ready, that's all, man." They left many links to the rally's website with messages proclaiming, "I'll be there with my Glock."

A chill rumbled up her belly.

She scanned her email and saw a new one which Ryan had forwarded to her without a single comment.

From: Cutthroat42@skypemail.com

Subject: Acquiring MinTorque Property

Good Morning. I represent members of the team Troy Noonan once worked for. We have examined the data you have uploaded from MinTorque and are very interested in purchasing the full lot, along with any hardware you have. We would love to see what advances Troy has made since his departure. For proof of authenticity, please ask any questions of us. The info you posted does not state, for instance, that Melissa Lahr started dating him within a year of her hiring, and that Troy had nickname "The Lone Wolf" in his office. Willing to pay cash, depending on quality of merchandise, \$25,000 minimum. Looking forward to your reply. L-M.

Lockheed-Martin. Bit banged out a reply to Ryan, "This is the stupidest move that Melissa has thought up yet." She returned to the flame war for more entertainment.

Soon Markie banged on the front door. Bit switched off the machine, hoping that Markie would be slowed down by her new possessions and not notice the illicit Internet usage. She went out to see her and help out.

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Markie did not have any bags but pointed down the stairs. "I have three buckets worth of chain at my car. Help me lug 'em up?"

Bit had tired herself out simply by carrying a television when she first moved in. "Why don't you keep them there," she said. "We'll just have to haul them back down."

Markie poured herself a glass water to cool off. "No arguments here. This really nice gay guy helped me get 'em in the car in the first place. He didn't even make any jokes about what I wanted it for. I was disappointed."

Bit pulled out a chair for her to sit on, and leaned against the refrigerator. "Cute. How about the tent?"

Markie tossed her head, and a hint of a smile formed on her mouth. "You have to see."

Markie left her drink on the table and guided Bit down the steps. The Toyota was blocking a nearby driveway with its blinkers on. The rear of the car was lower than the front. A wide flat box jutted into the rear seats from the trunk. Through the back window, Bit saw it had a picture of a family frolicking in a tent. The buckets of chain peeked out from under it.

Bit smirked and gave Markie a high-five. "I will so pay you when I can," she said, "I need to stop by Galeno's. Could I get a ride?"

Markie slipped in the front seat and started the engine. "Go lock up. I'll be waiting."

Bit ran to the apartment, grabbed her shoes and wallet, and made sure the door was secure. Markie guided the car out easy, as the heavy rear had thrown the car off balance. Bit relaxed for the first time beside her. Markie reached Galeno's without causing a single hurt feeling on the road.

A flag that Bit did not recognize was hung on the front of the complex. Her gut rumbled as it did at job interviews. When Galeno got mad, she was either loud or quiet. Bit undid her safety belt and put her hand on Markie's. "Stay in. I'll let you know if I need you."

Markie put the radio on a talk channel and settled back to rest. Bit stepped out and kicked aside a piece of sidewalk. Galeno's building had a few extra cracks in the side where the gray paint flaked off like pulsing veins in a forehead.

Bit took a deep breath and shook out her limbs. She tried to press Galeno's buzzer, but held back to compose herself. She took a minute to psyche herself up and hit it quick without thought.

A dirty voice responded on the intercom. "What?" Galeno said.

Bit smiled to sound pleasant, and pressed her lips close to the speaker. "Hey," she said, "There's a rally near my place this afternoon, and we're going to reveal everything about MinTorque at it. I don't know if you got the email." She waited for Galeno's response, but she

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gave none. "I'm here for the tapes, and any copies you have. That's all."

Galeno switched to the "talk" mode before Bit finished. "There aren't any copies. Come around back. I'll toss what I have to you." The feedback on the speaker cut out.

Bit stepped back and pursed her lips. If someone was flip to her, she was flip back and she could not afford to insult Galeno, even by accident. She walked behind the complex to the narrow sandy stretch. She did not see any new graffiti since her last visit.

Galeno's window slid open and she stuck her head out. Bit waved up, and Galeno tossed down a cardboard delivery box, decorated with duct tape. Bit took two steps ahead and caught it. She opened the top and saw the shattered bits of plastic and ribbon. Galeno disappeared into her room.

Bit blinked and looked up at her. "Is this a joke?"

Galeno spoke as drily as if she were reading off a cue card. "Just get out of here." She jammed a fan in her window and turned it up full blast so she could not hear Bit.

Bit put her hand in the box and let the broken bits slide over her fingertips. She considered shouting something back but instead spat on the earth. She wandered to the car and hurled the box in the rear seat. Markie watched her carefully as she strapped herself next to her and drooped her forehead in her palm. "Fuck. Galeno destroyed them. Let's go. I can't take this anymore." She put her hands over her face.

Markie took the car keys out to silence the radio and smoothed a fingernail edge with a file. She pretended to be interested in the squirrels running down the power lines until Bit looked up.

"They can say anything about me that they want to now," Bit said. "And I can't do anything about it."

Markie shrugged. "Maybe not. You don't look crazy."

Bit turned to her. "Would you say that to the police?"

"Yes," Markie said, but it was a slow yes. "Look, about Galeno? I can't talk to that boi. She's all jealous of me 'cause I can look more like a guy than she can. Big fuckin' whoop. You're better off without her."

Bit leaned her head on the glove compartment. "It doesn't matter. If anyone asks why Troy was chasing me, what can I say? No one was there to watch them take me. I'm a joke."

Markie slapped the steering wheel. "Okay, I give up. I don't know what's going on in your head, and I'll never know. And yeah, you're further up shit creek than I am with Kim, but it hurts the same. Or pretty damn close. And even a fucknut like Galeno is up there crying her balls off, too. I bet some of her's sorry, too."

"I wish she'd say it," Bit said.

Markie jammed her keys in the ignition and turned the car on. "Well, hell, I'm going to say it. Most of the folks we know have the

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emotional maturity of a preschooler. And we're grownups—you and me and Devon—and we can't deal with them as grownups. And you can't tell until you spend time with them. Damn, you see my social life. I'm always in hope. Dunno why, but I am. I don't know if it's worth it, but you see me going back, so it probably is."

Bit rolled down a window and put her arm out. "So what do I do now?"

Markie coasted toward the main street. "Go to the rally. And if you don't, I have a big-ass bill for you, girl, for all that shit in the back. You've got all these folks psyched that you're gonna give this big exposé, and you better deliver."

Bit blocked the sun from her eyes with the vanity mirror. "I know. This isn't about the rally though. Even if the people there buy the whole MinTorque story, what about the police or the news? I don't know what's going to happen when it's all over"

Markie slipped on her shades. "Neither do I. Tell you what. We humiliate those super suckers so bad tonight, they'll forget all about you. Make you ancient history compared to the pounding the media gives them."

Bit nodded. "I can live with that. But Troy's going to have it in for me worse than ever. The only way he won't touch me is if everyone knows he's itching for me."

Markie parked in Samantha's driveway and followed Bit to the front door. Devon answered the bell when they rang it. His eyes were shining blue, and he had on white workman's T-shirt with comfortable sneakers. Bit handed him the box. "We're screwed."

Devon stood aside for them to enter. "Why, what's up?" he said and opened the box's top. He froze and pulled out a strand of tape with its edges frayed. He stroked his lip and turned to Bit's cold stare. "Jesus. I've got to get that boi committed."

Bit shuffled and stared at the rug. "You know, this wipes out everything I was going to say tonight."

Markie sat cross-legged on the floor and held her chin up to watch them.

Devon jerked his thumb at the stairs. "We still have the evidence in my room."

"Which will get us arrested now," Bit said, "Or people might think we bought it all at Radio Shack and Boston Costume."

Markie tapped each of their shins to get their attention. "Hang on. They're coming tonight, aren't they?"

"Troy's gang?" Bit said, "I sent them that nasty email, so probably."

Markie reached up and gently took the box away from Devon. "Definitely!" she said, "They don't know these are gone. So, we bluff

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their butts into showing up. What's wrong with that?"

Devon shrugged. "She's got a point. They've never done an official public appearance. If we know they're coming, we can have something ready for them."

Markie took Bit's hand and slapped the empty tape into it. Bit hefted its weight. "Those suits can't be cheap to run. I guess it wouldn't be so bad to see them spend a few to find out that we don't have anything," Bit said.

Devon put the second tape in her hands. "As long as they act like they hate you, it's good enough."

Bit exhaled quick. "Okay, let's just keep going. Get everything in the car and over to the park. We can pick up Ryan and Sandy."

Devon and Markie looked at each other, but neither spoke. They joined Bit up the stairs to collect the parts. At the top, Devon jinxed the silence.

"So what if they don't show up?"

Bit threw up her hands and walked into his room. Gossip traveled fast around the queer community. She might have to leave town.

Chapter 14—Saturday Afternoon

The CBS affiliate building near the banks of the Charles River had great glass windows so that anyone passing could see how empty its lobby was; the real work was hidden within. Ryan and Bit heaved a bundle draped with a blanket up its white concrete steps. They had changed into presentable attire. Ryan had scrounged up a dark blue shirt and black pants, and Bit had found a flattering green V-neck and matching shorts. Bit swung open the front door with a spare finger and they entered the quiet reception area. A broad-shouldered security guard shook his head before them with the disapproval of a scorned grandfather. He snapped his fingers to alert others around him and pointed at the package. "What's that?"

Bit pulled off the blanket and unveiled the Wolf's head and arm. She forced her eyes to relax to enhance her smile. "Hi, I'm Jessica Bitters, and we have a scoop for you, if we could speak to a reporter. We know who the vigilantes are and we have proof here."

The security guard shook his head. "Out."

Bit tilted the mask back to show him the inside while Ryan struggled to take up the lifting duties of Bit's free arm. "This is serious," Bit said. "This is a genuine MinTorque head and arm. We're having a rally ..."

The guard pointed at the door. "Get that out of here, or I'll have to make a call."

Bit nodded to Ryan, who squeezed a flyer from her pocket and offered it to him.

The security guard reached around the front desk and picked up a phone.

Ryan dropped the pamphlet on the ground, and they scooted backward out the door. "Have a good one!" Bit said as they hurried down the steps to Markie's car.

Devon waited to open the back door for them while Markie kept her fingers on the ignition. Bit and Ryan dropped the suit in the back seat and crawled inside. The back wheels were sunken from the chains weighing down the trunk. Markie looked at her watch and stuck her head over the seat. "What, they think it was a bomb?"

Bit and Ryan looked out their adjacent windows. "Okay, Plan B," Bit said. "Can I use your phone?" Markie passed it back and Bit dialed the number for the CBS affiliate's tip line.

A click indicated the other end had picked up, and an automated voice took her through a menu, which led her to an intern. "Hi, I'm Jessica Bitters," she said, "And I have a high profile exclusive for you. We know who the vigilantes are, and we have one of their suits right

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outside your door. We're holding a rally tonight to announce our findings, and we're offering you the right to break this exciting story nationwide."

The intern thanked her and informed her that they would review her story in a few days.

Bit snapped the cell phone shut, and twiddled it between her thumb and index finger. "Are there any presidents around here we can take hostage?" she said.

Ryan strummed the lifeless fingers at the end of the suit's arm. "I'm not sure you can say 'vigilante' and not have them think 'superhero,'" she said. "Even if there are superheroes here."

"No, they're superheroes," Bit said, stretching the final s to sound like a z. "They're so l33t."

Markie's trigger finger itched to throw the car in reverse. "So, who's next? PAX is a couple buildings down."

Bit rolled her eyes. "We're not that desperate. We'll do NBC and head back. FOX is all the way down in Dedham, so we can just call them, and ABC, and the *Globe*. Damn, somebody has to be interested in this."

Devon took the phone and made several calls, but had no more luck than Bit. Markie checked how much gas she had left and took them toward the park, without interruption.

Galeno drew herself into a ball on her broken futon. The dust settled on her television nearby, glittering in the sunlight. It formed a layer over it like fur. She kept her fingers off the remote. If she turned it on, she would stay transfixed all day, and the video footage would not reappear on her tapes. Her time would be better spent doing things. She grabbed her lucky mug off the workbench and drained the coffee inside until she could see the ceramic frog at the bottom. She refilled it from the pot she had kept going all morning. Her brain tumbled less when she closed her eyes.

On her next sip, she was inspired. She had new projects to try. She could sell a new system of femme flagging with colored bangles worn on either wrist, or earrings. Those would sell better than eyeglass hankies. She could create a new color system for her generation. Mauve would mean one wanted to beat your ass and not have to see you again afterwards. Lime would indicate desire for oral with potential commitment. Neon pink would indicate dancing, grinding and public fondling.

If she wanted to go for the big time, she could do a remake of *Bound* with real screwing and a real butch. She could perform a photo shoot of a conga line of bois, each with their fist up the next one's ass. If it looked like art, she could show it in a famous gallery in New York or as a joke card in Spencer Gifts. She could start an Internet radio channel of sex

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noises strung together that would speed up for each listener, depending on how much they paid.

For all her ambition, her loft was still a glorified college dorm. The Twister game on the floor had been funny for the first couple months she had lived here, but now was as much a part of the room as the crack in the ceiling corner. Something inside stank like gym shorts, and she would have to tear the place apart to find it.

She looked at the clock. It was two. Chloe would be awake, unless she had taken somebody home last night, or her ulcers had been acting up, or her housemates were burning that cedar incense that made her sneeze. Galeno did not call her often in the morning. In the past year, she had not called her much at all.

Galeno lifted her phone. She had to know where she stood. Don't say maybe, baby. Chloe had to suck up to her for once. Let the Goddess beg.

As usual, the phone rang twice before she heard a voice. "Uh, hello? Galeno?" Chloe said.

The line grew silent, not even breathing. A sneeze exploded over the line. Chloe usually held them in her nose but she let this one blow out, full force.

Galeno spoke fast, in caffeinated frenzy. "Hi, were you up all night? I'm really sorry that I got you up, and I can call back later but we have to talk."

Chloe sniffed. "Okay, sure. Y'know, I thought you'd wait until next week to call me."

Galeno rested her elbow on the workbench to prepare for a long session. "I know, hon, but this is oodles important."

"Oodles, huh," Chloe said, "If this is about the room, I still don't know."

Galeno whirled a leather needle in her fingertips to focus. "It's not. I mean, it is. I mean, what if I told you that I told Samantha that Devon could have the room and use your things?"

Chloe inhaled quick. "I liked that room. I was going to bolt there if anything happened here."

"Is that what I am, too? A place to bolt?"

"You know that's not true."

Galeno plunged the needle into a pile of leather. "Make me believe it. I want to, but it's not enough."

"What brought this on? I thought we had a good thing going."

Galeno clamped her mouth around a whimper. "I don't think I have the energy to wait to see you any more. You're just a voice on the phone and a picture on my wall now, and if that's all you're going to be, I want to know. I don't want to wait, I don't like surprises."

Chloe's voice grew weak. "This is still sudden. You know I don't

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like rushing things.”

“I was yours two weeks after we met,” Galeno said, “And you only found out about your gig in L.A. three weeks before you left.”

“That’s different.”

Galeno spun around in her chair. “No, you’ve had years to think about seeing me, and I don’t think you’ve made up your mind yet. As long as I let you, I don’t think you ever will.”

Chloe hissed at her. “Take that back.”

“I won’t,” Galeno said, “I love you. And I can’t keep doing it if I’m stuck on your ‘to-do’ pile.”

Galeno heard the sounds of a head banging against wood, possibly the headboard.

“Devon’s moved in already?” Chloe said.

“Yes.” Galeno laid her face on her knees. The coffee swarmed to her head. She should have made tea.

“I know you have class,” Chloe said, “But I have Monday free. Do you want to come here?”

Galeno blinked. Every muscle in her face fell loose and she sat up, pounding her thigh. “More than anything,” she said.

“I’ll order you a ticket for tomorrow,” Chloe said, “Something cheap, okay? Maybe with three or four stops.”

“I don’t care,” Galeno said. “I need to see you.”

Chloe sighed. “I don’t know how I stand with you anymore. Face-to-face, I mean.”

“Can I stay at your place?” Galeno would have to pack. Parking at the airport would cost unless she hauled her bag to the train. She would have to call in sick to her teachers. Chloe needed a present, but she had no time to make one.

Papers rustled on Chloe’s end of the line. “I’d rather you stay somewhere else. Hmm, there’s a hotel down the street which is pretty nice.”

Galeno nodded. Even though Chloe could not see her, Chloe could sense her motions. Only people with a real connection could do that.

“Okay,” Chloe said, “I’ll email you the details. I guess we’ll catch up when you get here.”

“Yeah, we will,” Galeno said, “See you in a couple days.”

“Ciao,” Chloe said, and then remembered she was supposed to add something, “Hon.”

“Be good,” Galeno said without thinking, and held the button on the receiver down to hang up.

The smog flowing around her lifted. She leapt off the chair and jumped in place several times. Breakup sex was almost as good as sad sex. She looked around her room and tried to find the things she would need. She had to choose among the clean, good, or sexy underwear. She

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would need a container for her toothbrush. She would need water and snacks for the plane.

She needed to tell someone. The receiver lay in her hand. She dialed Devon's number, only to hear that it had been disconnected. She had Chloe's old number on speed dial and pressed it. It would have to be re-labeled. No one picked up. She did not have any more success with Bit's number. Markie's cell phone was busy. Finally, she called Jake.

As soon Jake picked up, Galeno blurted out her news. "Omigod, guess what? I'm going to see Chloe Monday."

Jake gulped. "Galeno? No shit."

Galeno kept going, pressing the receiver to her mouth. "I know, we're probably going to break up or something but who the fuck cares. I'm so ready, and she's paying, and she's never done something like this before."

Jake struggled to get a word in. "Hot dog. Listen, can I call you back later? We're heading out to volunteer at the rally."

Galeno's mind froze on realizing where everyone was. "Okay, sure. Fuck it, I'll probably stop by."

"See you there," Jake said, and hung up.

Galeno did not know if she should hug Devon or smack him; probably both. She could get away with it.

She hunted through her bureau and laundry piles for street-safe clothing. She assembled a green top with jean shorts. Big hairy legs were acceptable for exposure at protests.

She dumped the coffee pot's contents down the drain. As she washed it out, the phone rang. She wiped her hands and swiped it up.

A young male voice on the other end said, "Is this Galena Marquez?"

Galeno dragged the phone on its long cord to the sink and continued her washing. "Yes."

"I'm returning your call. My name is Mark Ellis and I'm a reporter with the CBS News service. I wanted to clarify a few points you made about the vigilantes and the rally tonight?"

Galeno turned off the water to hear him. "What are you talking about? I didn't call you."

"You didn't? I apologize. It must have been somebody else. Sorry to bother you." He clicked off.

Galeno stared at the receiver. She had not called anyone last night when she was drunk. She dialed star-six-nine to get his phone number. A recording informed her that the number was protected and could not be given. She rummaged through her cabinets until she found the phone book. She took out an old piece of paper that had a list of contacts from her days in the video industry. She dialed CBS, and an intern received her call.

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"I just got a call from a Mark Ellis," Galeno said, "You don't have anyone by that name working for you, do you?"

The intern checked her phone list. "I don't see anyone there," she said.

"Thanks," Galeno said, and booked for the door. She was not about to be played again.

The summer day had made the park's visitors lethargic. Markie parked in a free spot by the pizza joint across from the park. Bit and Ryan covered the suit, while Devon and Markie hauled the chain buckets out the back. They tossed a pile of magic markers on the top to disguise the contents.

Devon checked the nearby roofs, and they were clear. He hoisted his bucket in two arms and followed the others to the street's edge. The cars passed at irregular intervals and Devon did not risk crossing by himself. Bit and Ryan had their supplies in hand. Markie stepped into the path of an oncoming car and stuck out her hand. The car slammed its brakes and stopped within ten feet of her. Markie waved hello to the driver, then hoisted her bucket and crossed the street. Ryan scurried ahead, in case the car decided to speed up at that last minute. Bit was sure to make eye contact with the driver to establish a mutual understanding. Devon stared ahead as if nothing was wrong.

Several mothers sat on the benches and watched their toddlers explore the playground, while keeping an eye on the dozen queers sitting on the picnic tables across from them. As Bit entered the park, Sandy ran over to her. Sandy had a dark red tank top thin enough to reveal her ample breasts and earn disapproving scowls from the mothers.

Sandy air-kissed Bit, Devon, and Markie. She shook Ryan's hand. "Finally, you have arrived!"

"Ryan, this is...," Bit began to say.

"We've met, at that party," Sandy said, "Pleasure is mine, Ryan."

Ryan swung the bags under her arms. "Yeah, thanks. Where can we drop our stuff?"

A young woman wheeled an empty stroller toward them, and Bit stepped out of her path. "You know what?" Bit said, "Let's not get in the way of the people who actually live here. We can set up in the trees behind the outfield."

Sandy pumped her pelvis against Bit's and trotted back to explain this to the volunteers. The girls, boys, and genderqueers stared at each other, but when no solidarity emerged among them, they succumbed to Sandy's proposal. They staggered after her in small social clumps to the trees, carrying coolers, blank placards, and thin planks for signs.

Devon gave his arms a break and then hoisted up his bucket. "We'll

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need more volunteers than this. I mean, twelve's amazing but you know how these things go. We'll lose half of them if we don't provide food outside."

Bit jerked her head to the street. "The pizza place is close enough. I'll keep them busy."

"Let Sandy keep them busy," Devon said.

Markie hurried beside them. "Yeah. She may be a flake, but she looks like she's having fun, and you don't."

Bit shrugged. "They don't know what they're getting into."

Devon caught her eye. "Right, and you're going to say as little as possible."

Ryan poked her head around the side of the bag. "Don't worry. We'll do fine."

The trees behind the outfield were scattered thin, and the ground was naked of brush and bramble. A bed of last year's leaves with trash mixed in covered the earth. The trees stopped at a fence protecting the street on the far end. The volunteers were hidden from view, barely.

Bit recognized only a few faces from Icarus, chatting in groups of two or three. Devon, Markie, and Ryan dropped their baggage in a pile and lay down to catch the rays filtering between the branches.

Sandy zipped from clique to clique, setting each on small projects. Bit sneaked up to Sandy and caught her between groups. "Could I speak to you for a second?"

"Sure." Sandy followed Bit to a small clear area.

"I brought as many drinks as I had," Sandy said, "Even the ones I dropped. If anyone gets sprayed, don't tell, okay?"

Bit folded her arms. "Don't worry. I think we should break up the teams into two groups, one back here, and one in the outfield. The first one can draw on the placards and the second can nail them to boards here. It won't look so suspicious that way."

Sandy glanced at the chain buckets. "I see. And what's the real job for the second team?"

Bit pulled out a line of chain, and scattered carabiners on the ground. "We're going to make a big spider web out of this. When we put up the tent, we'll lay it inside with two lines coming out either side. We can put the suit parts inside as bait. When Troy goes in, we'll drop it and hold him down, with all of us pulling."

Sandy smiled at the image.

With a flutter of kicked leaves, Markie interrupted them. The day's first bead of sweat ran down her face. "Hey, we left the tent in our apartment. Can you give me a hand to go get it?"

Bit shook her head, but noticed Devon wandering around for work. "I want to, but I have to get the web started. Devon! Can you help?"

"Sure," he said. None of his bois from Icarus had shown, so he

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hurried after Markie out of the woods. Their return to the car was shorter than the trip across the park. Devon glanced at the spot behind the batting cage where the tent would go. Divots in the earth indicated where picnic tables had stood. They were moved recently, by the state, the mothers, or MinTorque. He broke away from Markie and carefully tapped his fist in the ground, around the divots. Nothing leapt out. The earth did not cave in, and no metal sensors rang. Devon jumped on the spot, but still nothing happened.

Markie came over with her arms crossed on her chest. "Feel better?"

Devon nodded. "Don't mind me. I'm getting the paranoia out."

Markie kept him close on the way to her car. "Whatever you say."

The drive back took less than a minute, but all the parking spaces they could see were taken. Devon suggested it would be simpler to carry the tent to the park, so Markie dropped Devon off at the apartment while she found her usual hidden spot behind a bank. She locked her car and, coming out to the street, was surprised to hear a girl call her name.

"Markie!" She turned around and saw an electric blue shimmer with Kim's head poking out of the top. Markie started walking faster, away from her, but her footsteps sped to a sprint. Markie resigned herself and stopped. She faced Kim, whose eyes were sparkling again, like they had in class before their first night together. A college girl from Icarus trailed behind her.

Kim's shirt and shorts reflected in the sun, and Markie squinted. She noted Kim's PDA was still strapped to her belt. The other girl had a bright pink miniskirt. The two of them were supposed to complement each other.

"Make it quick," Markie said.

Kim swallowed and came to an unsteady halt. "I know. I wanted to give you this." She offered Markie a folded up cloth, tacky brown-and-orange plaid. Markie picked it out of Kim's hand dubiously, careful not to touch her skin. The cloth was light, and a little stiff. Markie sniffed it to make sure it would not kill her.

Kim rolled her hand in a circle to encourage Markie. "Shake it open."

The cloth tube fell out three feet long. Its top had a two straps attached to either side of the cloth. The bottom had a small hole tightened by an elastic.

"You put your plastic grocery bags in it," Kim said, "So you can recycle them. I made it myself. I was going to give it to my grandmother, but I thought you'd like it."

Markie fluttered it to fill it out. It was ugly as all sin. "I'm not your grandmother."

Kim glanced at the girl she was with, and turned back to Markie. "Of course not, but I thought you'd like it."

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The girl was cute, but too preppy for Markie. "It's not bad. Look, I've got some things to do right now. See you later, kid."

Kim nodded and turned back to her new girl. They retreated to the bus station at the other end of the road.

Markie folded up the tube and stuffed it in her pant's waist. She watched the girls fade away in the long street.

Markie and Devon sent pedestrians skirting from the sidewalk as they lifted the heavy tent back to park. They put the tent down a moment when Sandy arrived with another project for Devon. Markie let him go and entered the woods. The secluded rally camp had tripled in size. Rows of girls were nailing up placards. Links of chain clinked in smooth hands. A few people stopped to glance at her, to confirm she was not the police.

Bit dropped a handful of quick-links beside the workers who measured out the chain, and hurried over to Markie. "Welcome back, and don't worry. We heard a siren go by here so folks are getting antsy, but no one's been in here to see us."

The volunteers chatted quietly in small clusters, cross-legged on the earth. Each had its own nervous rhythm.

Markie jerked her head the way she had come. "Tell you what. I'll be on lookout by the baseball field. Maybe I can make some of those 'MinTorque – Might Makes Right' signs."

Bit gave her the thumbs up, and Markie left. Bit glanced around as hammers struck too loud and babies cried in the distance. Her feet crunched the leaves as she wandered. Each step was too heavy, as if someone behind her matched every one. She kept walking. The volunteers were glancing at someone behind her, but did not stop their work. At the chain pile, Ryan was lying on her side, counting links and marking some with tape. A few bees hummed by her but she did not seem to notice them. The footsteps behind Bit tromped faster, so Bit spun around.

A black metal beak swung by her face, and she jumped. Devon stood there, panting. He held a pair of bolt cutters and blinked when she jumped away from him. "What, no 'hello'?" he said.

Bit took a second to calm. "No, I was just...never mind. Thanks for picking those up."

Devon dropped the cutters on the ground. "Don't mention it. So, what do you need sliced?"

Bit pointed to Ryan and the marked links on the chain. Devon nodded and grabbed a soda from the cooler nearby. The sun streamed at them from a patch in the canopy, and he had sweat stains under his armpits. The exercise was not good for him.

Bit crouched down beside Ryan and positioned a tree between her

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head and the oncoming light. "How many loops to go?"

Ryan patted the pile beside her. "The loops are done. I'm measuring the links that hold them together now."

Bit stood up to find things to keep herself busy. Devon lifted the bolt cutters before she could reach them. He stomped his empty can flat and slit it between the cutters' maw. The parrot-shaped tip of the tool crimped the can apart and it leaked out the last few drops of soda.

"That doesn't look too hard," he said. He slipped in one of the links Ryan had marked. Bit stood back in case the link flew in her direction. Devon strained himself, holding the cutter in two arms, but the chain remained firm. He rested one of the cutter's handles on the ground between his feet, and pressed his entire body against the other handle. Eventually, the link broke.

Bit smirked at him. "One!"

Devon glared at her. "Okay, take your butt and your comments out of here."

Ryan raised herself up and put her tape beside the bucket. "I'm done. I need a break, so I'll see you in a few."

Bit turned up her nose at Devon. "Since I'm not wanted here, I'm going too."

Sandy passed them on her rounds and noticed Devon's sweaty body. "Can I get someone to help you with that?" she said. Before he could respond, she snapped her fingers to a couple girls who had finished nailing their signs. "Could you do me an awfully big favor and help cut the chain?" she said. The girls followed her immediately, eager to do something more than smack metal through wood.

Bit and Ryan took drinks from the cooler and wandered out to an unoccupied corner of the park. They sat on the sandy grass and spread out their legs while the ants crawled over them. Ryan left a few feet for Bit to roll her arms in place. "I think I've figured it out," she said. "We're in proximity lust."

Bit flicked off an ant that was heading toward her thighs. "Why do you say that?"

"Because it's good to be around you," Ryan said. "And it's good when you aren't there, too."

Bit wiggled her toes. "That's one way, I guess. Maybe that's what we were doing last Saturday night. I mean, when Devon, Galeno, and me ended up in bed then."

Ryan rolled on her chest and stroked the grass. "Ah. You really get around."

Bit shrugged and looked at the hair falling over Ryan's forehead. "It was good. I mean, I had fun, but it was decompression, like us. I don't know if we'll do much hanging out when this is all over."

Ryan took a blade and chewed on it. "Why question a good thing?"

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She shrugged slightly.

"Just to be clear," Bit said.

Ryan smiled. "I am clear."

A small group of girls in earth-friendly tones crossed the diamond and talked with the sign-writing crowd, before slipping to the woods. Bit shook her head. "More coming; this is crazy."

Ryan's face fell and got to her feet. "Yeah, I have to use the bathroom. Do you mind waiting?"

Bit pointed to the park's entrance. "Just go in the pizza place, and head for either bathroom as if you belong."

Ryan shook her head. "Easy for you to say. I wish there was a word for me, sometimes, so I could ask, 'Where's the little Ryan's room?'"

Bit squinted at her. "Genderqueer's not enough?"

Ryan shrugged, "It's not my word. Too dykey, you know?"

"I guess."

Ryan waved her index finger at Bit. "Business first, gender talk later, okay?"

"Sure, I'll be here," Bit said. "Or back working if you're too long."

Ryan tried to scowl at her but only appeared confused. She threw her drink away and headed across the street as Bit waved goodbye.

She had not expected the restaurant to be so packed. Short-sleeved bois and sandaled dykes swept up every inch of space, often sharing two to a seat. The pizza had swept them from the street before the park had. Ryan almost turned around. Their conversations about college and girlfriends grated as if they were heavy metal fans. They expected her to understand their Ani DiFranco jokes. They were out, loud, and proud, as if being inward and proud was something of which she should be ashamed. When they finished their meals, they would swarm to the park to help set up. A few stared at her to gauge her as something undatable.

She slipped by the food line and touched one of their arms by accident. She chose not to say "excuse me" and ducked inside a small hallway. The women's room door was locked, so she dashed inside the men's. Her tension lifted inside the single stall with the walls so close.

When she was done, she held her breath and scurried past the crowd outside. Across the baseball field, she found Bit talking to Sandy kneeling by her. Ryan slowed and gave herself time to eavesdrop.

"Have you seen how many T-shirts around here are absolutely bare?" Sandy said. "Even yours. They need to have something written on them. 'Supers go home,' or 'If this is your protection, I don't need it.'"

Bit pretended to write on her open palm with a phantom pen. "I think we have some stickers around here."

"But these are washable markers!" Sandy said and waved a handful of them at Bit, "Look, I've written on this tank top three times and it's

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come off after every run through the laundry."

Ryan inched closer, and saw Sandy had put her money where her mouth was. Her shirt read, "MinTorque and their Supers: the Real Sexual Deviants."

Bit folded her arms and held firm. "Look, it's not going to happen. If I want to make a statement, it's not going to be something kitschy over my boobs."

Sandy shrugged and noticed Ryan. "Oh well, I tried. Hey! Would you like to use these markers to..."

Ryan held up her hand, "I'll pass, thanks."

A loud bang echoed from the woods, and a woman's cry of "God fucking dammit!" followed.

Sandy hustled to the noise. "No one better have died."

Bit turned to follow her, but Ryan put her hand out to hold Bit's forearm. "Can I borrow your apartment keys?" Ryan said. "I want to take a nap for a while."

Bit dug her keys from her pocket and popped two off their ring. "Sure. Are you doing all right?"

Ryan shook her head. "Just kind of overwhelmed," she said. She slipped the keys in her pants and gave Bit a quick hug.

"Okay," Bit said, "You know how to get there from here?"

Ryan pointed in the correct direction. "I will be back in time to see you perform."

Bit waved to her, then hustled after Sandy. Ryan passed through the activist and maternal gauntlets unscathed and hit the street. She jingled the keys again. They were so archaic. This was supposed to be the twenty-first century. Houses were supposed to have AI controlled locks with laser defense systems that would recognize personal electric fields and open automatically. Any moron who could roll tumblers with a needle could get into a private space now.

She took a left at the pizza place and looked for the Thai restaurant over which Bit lived. Halfway down the street, Markie's voice called behind her. "Ryan?"

Ryan turned and waited for Markie to catch up. She furrowed her brow, as Markie never had talked to her alone. Ryan stood stiffly as if she was camouflaged. "Yes?"

Markie gestured in the opposite direction. "If you're going for supplies, the hardware store's that way."

Ryan took out one of the keys. "I'm going to Bit's place for a nap."

Markie held up a brown-and-orange cloth tube, wrapped up around a heavy object inside. "Hey, I'm heading there too. Cheap-ass head broke off the hammer, and almost took someone's face off. This is the last time I shop at that hardware store, you know?"

Ryan resumed her walk, and Markie joined her. "Are you going to

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fix it?" Ryan said.

"I don't know," Markie said, "I think I have a spare one in my closet. Did you know the pizza place is crammed with all these people from Icarus?"

Ryan kept the deadpan sincerity of her natural voice. "Really?"

Markie checked Ryan over to determine if Ryan was playing with her. "I heard there's a carload from Northampton coming down, too. This place is going to be packed tonight."

"Uh-huh," Ryan said, unsure of whether she should return. She tuned Markie out while appearing attentive. The cars and radios nearby were distracting enough. A couple of white teenage boys passing them were mildly interesting.

"...Supers can come...any which way," one of the boys said, "Take 'em out 'Bagga-like."

Ryan bristled and confirmed they were glancing at the park ahead. One wore a Patriot's jersey and buzzed blond hair. The other sported a Coldplay band shirt and held a brown paper bag in his hand. She gripped Markie's shoulder and put her finger to her lips, then pointing to the boys with her thumb. Her mouth formed the word, "Supabaggas?"

Markie shrugged as if she could not understand the boys. "Why do you think that?"

Ryan clasped her hands together. "They're scoping out the area. Ask them if they are. The worst they can do is say no."

Markie looked at their sagging jeans. "They could shoot me."

Ryan shook her head. "They mostly live in chat rooms. I'm surprised they can walk."

Markie took Ryan's arm. "Okay, but you're coming too and taking any bullets for me."

Ryan gave a headbang which was supposed to be a nod. The two of them caught up with the boys. Markie stuck her hands in her pockets and handed her folded tube to Ryan. The boys took their time as they passed the park, watching the rooftops.

Markie spoke up behind them. "I haven't seen any either."

The boys stopped at the corner outside the park. They shuffled around, legs hidden inside their bulky cargo pants. Their necks were raw and thin and their cheeks had red patches. Their eyes were dull from years of practice, though a glimmer of interest showed through.

The boy in the Patriots jersey dug his hands a little deeper in his pockets. "How you know what we're looking for?" His head was rounder than the other boy's, and he had more meat on his bones.

Markie cocked her head at him while Ryan stayed at her side. "I don't, but maybe I'm after them too."

The boy tossed his head back, and stared at her over the bridge of

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his nose. "And what would that be?" His companion's arms twitched.

Markie put her hands on her hips. "Same thing all Supabaggas're looking for."

The two boys snorted, but caught themselves. They smiled with derision. "You're not Supabaggas."

Markie shook her head, "What, no girls're 'Baggas?"

The companion in the Coldplay shirt chuckled. "Maybe some girls, but not you."

"You've never even met any Supabaggas," Ryan said. She shirked back but it was too late.

"Who we meet's our business," the Patriots boy said. "Get lost."

They turned to cross the street, when Markie ripped the tube out of Ryan's hand. "So where's your piece?"

The boys turned back with confused stares. "Keep your voice down," the Patriots boy said and approached them slowly.

Markie offered the hammer's handle wrapped in the tube to him. "If you're a Supabagga, you got to have a piece. I got mine. You got yours?"

He touched the heavy handle, and Markie gave him three seconds before she whipped it back. "Is that for real?"

Markie and Ryan nodded. "We even already bagged one a couple days ago, but no one knows about it yet," Markie said. "Come to my car, I'll show you."

The boys looked at each other. The Coldplay boy reached into his paper bag and took out a stick of gum to chew.

"Just ten minutes," Markie said. "Then you can think whatever you want."

"Sure," the Patriots boy said, without waiting for his friend, "I'm Bone-Z on the boards and this is Otacon."

Markie jerked her head back. "I'm Markie, and this is Ryan. My car's this way."

As Markie led them down the street, Otacon bumped into Bone-Z, but pretended it did not happen. "Ryan," he said to them. "Is that like Jack Ryan?"

Ryan turned a cold eye toward him. "No. Just plain Ryan."

Otacon stumbled as he tried to keep as slow as her. "What's your screen name?"

"I have several," Ryan said, "You don't know me from any of your boards."

Bone-Z pointed at Markie's tube. "So, what's in there?"

Markie narrowed her lips. "My dad's Glock. How about you?"

"It's coming."

Markie widened her eyes at him. "What do you mean, 'coming'?"

Bone-Z focused straight ahead with absolute faith. "It's on its way."

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Markie scowled as if she did not like competition. "How many others are on their way?"

Bone-Z slowed down, and Otacon matched his speed. Markie and Ryan stopped before they lost the boys. Bone-Z pulled his arms tight to his chest. "If you're not even on the boards, how can you be a 'Bagga?"

Ryan shook her head. "The boards are a joke. You can't talk about Superbagging in public."

Markie began to walk away. "Look, if you don't want to see the Wolf's head, that's fine. I thought we were doing you a big favor."

The boys looked away from each other. Otacon spat his gum out on the street.

"C'mon," Markie said and tapped Ryan to go. It did not take long before the boys hurried after them.

Bone-Z caught his breath beside Otacon. "So, how'd you bag 'em? You had to have witnesses."

Markie did not give him the benefit of her attention. "We did it at their secret headquarters."

The boys pretended to swat them away. "Okay, you're so bullshit," Bone-Z said.

Ryan held her hand up. "The MinTorque company makes them. Look them up on the 'net."

"That was on the rally site," Otacon said.

"Yes, but we've been inside," Ryan said, "They have hundreds of suits there, and they're coming for us all."

Markie made a fist and held it in front of Ryan, who took a few seconds to understand that she was supposed to copy her. They banged fists, and Ryan did not let out how much it hurt. "We got to work together, man," Markie said.

Bone-Z hit Otacon's outstretched fist as well. "Even if you are lying, we stand by each other," he said. "I don't know who else is coming, though. Crayman and Edge said they might be here, but they say a lot."

"So why'd you guys come?" Markie said.

Bone-Z exchanged a glance with his friend. "You aren't Firehind, are you?"

Markie narrowed her eyebrows. "No, he said for you to come?"

"He's setting us up. He's got the piece, but he's a pussy. He knew we're not all talk like the boardies."

Otacon drooped his head as they walked. "We're gonna be cops someday, once we get out of Medfield High. Fuck college. The Supas are perpetrators that need taking down."

Ryan trembled but tried not to let it out.

"How do you know Firehind wouldn't wuss out on you?" Markie said.

Bone-Z smirked. "He probably will, but we're here."

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Ryan glanced at Otacon. "Are you all the way out in Medfield? That's pretty far outside the city."

Otacon shrugged. "Yeah, the place is a dump if you don't get in on a union. That's what my dad says. Cops, contractors, whatever."

Bone-Z hit him on the back of his head. "Your dad's a fucknut."

Otacon turned a hard eye at him. "And your mom's a ho. Hey, how did you girls track the Supas down anyway?"

Ryan winced at the use of the word "Supa." "We kinda tracked it with the helmet from the first 'Supa' that went down last week."

Bone-Z's jaw dropped. "You took it?"

"Yeah," Markie said, "Cracked right up the side with wires and shit hanging out."

Bone-Z shook his head. "That ain't right. You robbed a brother of his trophy. You got to give it to him. The court says he'll probably be out in eighteen months."

Markie glowered at him. "Well, we don't have it anymore."

Bone-Z kept to her side, insistent. "It doesn't matter. If you lost it, you got to retrieve it. You got to go back. The brother earned his trophy. If I had bagged one, I hope that's what you'd do for me."

Otacon looked at the wispy sky. "He's a legend in the lock up. He don't have to prove a thing anymore. I heard three police departments on the West side want to hire his ass when he gets out."

"Good, whatever," Markie said, "I know what we've done, and don't need to prove it. My car's down that road."

Markie guided them to her Toyota. Bone-Z and Otacon leaned by the bank's wall, out of range of the drive-through cameras. Markie unlocked the back door and Ryan unwrapped the Wolf's outfit from its blanket. Markie confirmed that no one was coming, Ryan stepped aside to let them see.

Bone-Z crouched down in the doorway and Otacon leaned over him. Their brows furrowed when they saw the lifeless, empty helmet and arm in the back seat. "No way," Bone-Z said. "That looks so gay."

Ryan carefully pushed it toward them to touch. "It's what they wear."

Bone-Z lifted the Wolf's head and ran his fingers over the shiny surface. He knocked on its eyes, and flipped it over to feel the helmet inside. Otacon reached past him to stroke the arms and twiddle the fingers.

Bone-Z looked up at Markie. "This is faggier than Superman," Bone-Z said.

Ryan pried their fingers off the suit. They stepped back first, unsure how to handle her touch.

Markie shut the door to give Ryan time to pack the suit back up. "Show's over," she said. She paused as she spotted an elderly lady

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approaching, walking a miniature poodle, hunting for a patch of grass or tree side. Markie leaned against the car to hide the Wolf's pieces. Bone-Z and Otacon noticed the woman and slumped over the other windows, trying not to appear suspicious. The woman gave them a good glower from head to toe, as if they were the cause of every problem in her life. As she led her dog away, Otacon spat out, "Bitch," and the two of them started laughing.

Ryan hid until they stopped. She climbed in the back seat and finished packing the suit away.

Markie let her out and hung over it. "Well, sounds like you're going to be waiting a while for Firehind. We're working on a way to capture the Supas at the park. Why don't you come down and help?"

Bone-Z gazed down at the pavement. "I don't know."

Markie flashed a quick smile at him. "They've got cute girls there. The place is crawling with them."

Bone-Z looked at Otacon. "You in?"

Otacon shrugged and gaped at the back of the car. "I guess so. The boardies'll be so ripshit when I tell 'em."

Bone-Z wiped his nose and shuffled in front of Markie. She caught his stare head on. "We get the next head," he said. "You already got one. We aren't going back without a head. We may as well not go back at all."

Markie waited to let him go ahead. "Sure, it's yours." Her hand stroked her necklace. She remained a few feet behind him, leaving more space to run. She nodded to Ryan, who stuck the rolled up hammer in her back pocket. "Let's go."

Ryan trotted after Markie, following the boys back to the park. Markie squinted at her. "Are you sure you aren't going back for a nap?"

"No thanks," Ryan said. "I'm awake now." She did not even have to rub her eyes.

The next wave of volunteers broke out of the pizza shop in the late afternoon. They scattered over the baseball diamond, searching for someone to coordinate them until Bit and Sandy managed to get their attention. Bit conscripted a few people to finish the web, while Sandy scattered blank signs and the remaining markers among the rest. Other volunteers brought them flyers that needed folding and then took over the explanations on how to do things.

Devon wandered out of the woods, winded from his chain cutting. He handed off his bolt cutters to Bit and almost collapsed near her. "What else can I help out with?"

Bit eyed him to ensure he would not have a heart attack. "Do you want to set up the tent? We should clear its spot out now before people start working there."

Devon agreed and checked the nearest cooler for a drink. With the

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new arrivals, it was empty. He wandered away to search for any remaining sodas. Bit headed back to the woods to be rid of the bolt cutters. She approached a femmey chain worker with well-defined shoulders, who was sitting on the ground. "We need someone to clip the chain. Would you mind taking over for a little while?"

The girl was busy admiring the rings of the web they had assembled already. "Huh?"

Bit presented the heavy iron jaws to her. "Would you mind cutting chain for a little while?"

"Oh, sure," she said and took them in her hands. A few of her friends joined her to hold the first link steady as she clipped each side with effort.

Bit exhaled slowly. Sandy always got her volunteers to hear her requests immediately.

As each length of chain broke free, a group of butches, bois, and their partners dragged it away to fasten it together with carabiners. Bit joined the new crew and took a few metal carabiners of her own to check the volunteers' work. She rolled a couple on, and tightened the locks as hard as her thumb could push them. The buzzcut boi next to her attached four in the time she took for two. Bit fiddled with one of the carabiners the boi had locked on the chain. The lock was at the end of its thread, but it was not squeezed down. Bit loosened it easily with her index finger.

She pointed it out to the boi. "Excuse me, could you make these tighter?"

The boi continued talking to an even cuter boi beside him. "So, I said I didn't care how much money he owed me, I just didn't want to see him again."

Bit waited for a break, while the boi added three more loose connectors, and his mouth ran nonstop. Bit considered it might be better to be silent and thought a bitch than to open her mouth and remove all doubt. However, Troy could break out of a loose web with ease. Bit tried to find the words to tell them how strong the suit would make Troy. A piece of chain could break off and slice someone up, even. Every excuse of which she could think sounded paranoid. She could not describe the violence to people who had not seen it with their own eyes.

Bit spoke up, louder than before. "Pardon me for a second. I was wondering if you could tighten the connectors more?"

The boi kept to his rhythm, still talking to his friend. His partner tapped him on the knee, and pointed at Bit. "Dude, I think she wanted to say something to you."

The boi turned to her. "Hey, what's going on?"

Bit held back a sigh. "I was wondering if you could tighten the connectors a little more. I can unscrew them with one finger, see?" She

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spun down a loose one.

The boi smiled at her and made a half-assed squeeze on the connector in his hand. "Oh, sorry," he said. He tightened the next one but lost his attention to the other boi, and continued screwing the locks shut without the final push.

Bit put down her own carabiners and started to tighten his. She watched the workers on the other side of the web to see their progress. One girl put a carabiner on every link instead of every four. Bit dropped her chain and slid over to the girl.

She took a deep breath. These were simple tasks. A machine could do them, but they did not have one for this. "Hi," she said, "I was wondering if you could space the connectors out every four links? We have a lot but not that many."

The girl stared at Bit and nodded her head as if she was speaking to a two-year old. "O-kay."

Bit backed off and watched to make sure she did remove the connectors and space them out with a good twist of her thumb. Bit returned back to the boi. He had discovered a trick to attach carabiners faster by giving their locks a single power spin with his thumb that made a pleasing buzz. The carabiner's locks jiggled and unscrewed themselves slowly when he had released them, but the boi did not seem to care. No one did. This was a big party to them. They had jobs and lovers and gender acceptance in dyke communities across the nation, and they could not attach a set of link connectors properly. It was too much for her.

Bit shouted at the boi. "Please, please, please, can you TIGHTEN THOSE?"

The volunteers stopped work and turned to her. The boi's cheeks flushed.

Bit's mouth hung open and she spat her words. "What can I do to convince you that we are in danger? The web must be loose and the links must be tight and why don't you believe me when I say it? What do I have to do for you to believe me? Please tell me. I don't know, anymore. I wish I did. I wish you'd tell me. What am I doing wrong?"

A rustle shook behind her. Sandy was running to her. "Are you okay?" She offered Bit a hand to stand up.

Bit nodded her head maniacally. "Yes, I'm fine. I want us all to be safe. Is that too much to ask?"

Sandy helped her up and put an arm over her shoulder. "Come on. There're other things that need to be done. I'll watch the web, okay? Devon's almost done with the tent."

Bit wiped her eyes clear. Sandy guided her away from the web. It was impossible to compose herself. She kept an arm over her eyes. As they passed each cluster of people, she saw them turn to check on her.

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She peeked out, but their first glance was of compassion, sliding into embarrassment and confusion.

Sandy escorted Bit into the tent. Inside, Devon was propping up poles. Bit let Sandy go and smiled weakly at Devon. "Need some help?"

Devon gripped her hand and put it on a pole. "Yes. Don't think. Hold this tight so I can pound the supports in."

She pushed her body into the pole to ensure it waved as little as possible. Devon took a rubber mallet to the orange spikes around it to secure it. They repeated their actions on the next pole. It was so simple. The only other people in the tent were a couple of straight teenage boys wearing a Patriots jersey and a Coldplay shirt. Devon had to stop every few spikes to correct something they were doing wrong. They listened and tried to do right honestly.

She knew that, for sure, something was very wrong with her.

When the poles were secured, Devon and the boys gave them a final shake for luck and emerged to the outside world, ready for the next task. Bit stayed inside the tent.

"Good job," Devon said, "Go get a cold one, then come see me."

The boys ran off to the pizza place, and Devon grinned at them. They were sweet, though beaten-down. The tent had reeked of a cleaning chemical, and he sucked in the fresh air. Sandy spotted him and brought over a group of new volunteers who all wore large shirts, multicolored with Latin motifs. One of them carried two large plastic banners rolled up.

Sandy's regular bounce had worn away from the day's work. "Devon, these wonderful people have brought us a blank banner. Could you get it painted up? I'm out of slogans and I have to arrange for some tarp and super soakers."

Devon patted her on the shoulder. "I got it." She stomped off without any introductions.

A short woman with buzzed hair released the banner and shook his hand. "Hi, we're from the Northampton Town GLBTI," she said, "We read your web announcement, and we realized you could use the backs of these old banners from the last Pride march. Oh, and I'm Ashley."

Devon took a moment to process it all. "Hey, I'm Devon. You came all this way?"

Ashley beamed. "Wouldn't miss it. We don't get much exposure anyway in town."

Devon nodded. "No problem. We'll put it up on the batter's cage when we're done." He cleared off a strip of outfield and waved the group over. They unrolled the banner and encouraged more volunteers to paint it. One of them recommended "MinTorque, Vigilantes, Let Us Be," as a slogan, and Devon could not think of anything to trump it.

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Each person staked out a letter and filled it in on their hands and knees, as if they were drinking from a river. Devon stood nearby and took requests.

"Can you get me some more blue?"

"Is there any white? I just fucked up."

"I don't think I have enough room for this 'L'."

"Yes you do, just put it at an angle."

Devon heard a light chuckle from Markie seeing him play mother hen. She threw him a cold root beer. "Hey Devon, catch!"

He was distracted so the soda bounced off him and hit the ground. Markie put her hand to her mouth and said, "Omigod! I'll get you a new one."

Devon shook his head and aimed the can away from the crowd to spray the trees. When it had ceased foaming, he took a long gulp. Markie wiped her brow in relief and ran off to another job. Devon lay back against the chain link fence and closed his eyes to let his body crash. Too many feet wandered by as he slowly relaxed into the earth. One set stopped in front of him, and he peered up to convince whoever it was to wait.

Galeno stood over him in floppy shorts, with shaking hands. "She wants me to come out there," she said. "She already emailed me tickets."

The ground dropped out from under Devon. His jaw fell after it, and he shimmied up the fence to his feet. He remain paralyzed before her until he was sure she was serious, and gave her a double high-five. They laughed and threw their arms around each other, drizzled and sweaty. "Are you getting back together?" he said.

Galeno grinned with insanity. "I don't know. I don't care. I'm going to see her again."

He clapped her on the shoulder. "When are you going?"

"Tomorrow, noon. She's picking me up at LAX," she said, "I tried calling you everywhere. You have to get a cell phone."

Devon raised one eyebrow. "Shouldn't you be home packing?"

Galeno shrugged. "I tried. I can't do it. There's too much to choose. And fuck that. I want to celebrate. You got a huge crowd here."

Devon nodded to the busy volunteers who had completely taken over the park. "Yeah, and I don't have to feed them. This is going to be a good night, even if it's just us."

Galeno gripped her own wrists behind her back. "So's there anything I can do to help?"

Devon pointed at the coil of power cables by the tent. "Well, the generator and the sound system should be here soon, and the television and VCR."

Galeno became very quiet.

Devon stuck his hands in his pockets. "Oh," he said, "The tapes."

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Galeno looked away as her cheeks fell. "No, it's okay. I let them slip my mind, too. Fuck. I wish I hadn't. I don't know what else to say. Where's Bit? Maybe she'll understand or something."

Devon took her arm and moved her toward the pile of placards. "We'll be leaving Bit alone for a while. The stress is getting to her."

Galeno twirled herself around. "I'll make it up to her. And you. Damn, I'm going to see Chloe again! Is this so unmanly of me?"

Devon patted her back. "That Twister game in your room is unmanly of you. Congratulations, hon."

A low rumble drifted from the park's entrance. A large white van pulled up at the gate and shut itself off. Devon took her arm and walked toward the van. "Come here."

"Are those Troy's folks?" Galeno said, "They're pretty brazen."

"No," Devon said, "It's probably Sandy's friends with our gear."

The van's side opened, and a well-dressed woman stepped out, followed by a couple men in jeans and red T-shirts. "WFXT, FOX 25 News" was painted on the door in professional lettering. The van's crew began to carry camera equipment and lights out.

Devon stopped in place. He looked at Galeno who was astonished as him. "You bastard," he said, "Did you call them?"

Galeno lowered an eyebrow at him. "What do you mean?"

Devon rolled his eyes in frustration. "We spent all afternoon trying to get them to cover this, and we didn't get any nibbles."

Galeno tapped her foot on the ground and watched them unload with eagle eyes. "Maybe they were listening more than you thought," she said, "You left them the website, right?"

"Yes."

"Figures," she said, "So, you want me to grease them up for you?"

Devon picked up a stack of pamphlets from a nearby box and handed them to Galeno. "That would be very nice. Wait here." He jogged back into the woods and returned with a handful of the elbows and kneepads from the MinTorque suits. "They can keep these. Show them the tough little motors inside that keep us from bending the parts. Cutting-edge tech."

Galeno stuffed them under her arms. "I'm not holding anything back. I might tell them what hang-ups you have in bed."

"And fuck you too," Devon said, pushing her toward the van. He grabbed the first pack of volunteers nearby who were obviously chilling. "Hey, guys. FOXNews showed up. Help them any way you can, okay?" They nodded, and he ran to get the word out before the volunteers spread it among themselves.

Bit lay huddled in a ball beneath the tent. She wished she could see auras. If she had one, hers would be glowing dark red, but she did not

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believe in them. She was radiating something that scorched anyone who came near her. She scratched at the ground and tossed a clod of soil. This was a day where she would drop every cup she touched, snap at every person who passed, and bite her own tongue so many times the taste of blood would become familiar.

She crawled over to the side of the tent that echoed with the crowd's voice and lifted up the flap. She peered out at the sign-scribblers, board-nailers, and hand-holders. Someone in hot pants was talking to Devon: Galeno. They seemed to be getting along. A girl walked by with eyes drooped to the ground and saw Bit looking out. Bit jumped back, dropping the flap. The world was not ready for her. She had to do something.

She checked under another wall and saw a news crew with large heavy cameras, booms, and lights walking into the park. They might be asking for her.

The occasional clink of metal from the woods shot through the volunteers' conversation. MinTorque had to know what was up. They might set a forest fire or cause some other widespread panic to flush out the volunteers. Nothing was happening yet.

She slipped into the center of the tent. She needed to calm down and go out like nothing was wrong. The volunteers would pretend not to see it in her face, and all would be well. Everyone manages panic by keeping it a big secret, only shared with the chosen few, and she did not have the right friends.

Devon used to feel like this a lot, but he never told her how he dealt with it beside smoking and pillow-biting. She had no one she could throw against a fence and stuff a cigarette into their mouth. That had seemed to clear Devon up.

Bit tensed all her muscles from her toes, to her crotch, to her chest, to her eyebrows. She reached down at the orange spikes and ripped them out of the ground, one by one. She flung them at the ceiling of the tent. She leapt onto one pole and heaved herself back. The pole popped out of its hole and the entire tent collapsed inwards. She dropped a few feet against the earth, and the heavy burlap folded itself on top of her. Her lungs sucked in all the air that was left inside and she laughed.

The ground trembled with footsteps hurrying toward her. Bit snaked out toward the front entrance as they lifted the tent over her. Devon stuck his head inside and knelt to help her up. "Are you okay?"

Bit shook the dirt from her hair. "Yes. I just had to get something out of my system."

Devon noticed the orange spikes uprooted and scattered. "Are you sure?"

Bit's eyes glowed with mischievousness. "Uh-huh. I figured it out. People think I'm a little crazy right now."

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Devon shook his head. "No, they're worried about you."

Bit gestured toward an empty rooftop. "I meant Troy's people. They're watching, I know they are. Go get the chain web. I don't care if it's done or not. This is the perfect opportunity to set it up. They'll think you're just helping fix the tent after my little tantrum."

He made a motion to smack her and stopped short. Her smile was infectious. "Okay, you mean you planned this?" he said.

She shrugged. "Not really. It's just working out that way."

Devon shook his head at her. "You know what? Galeno's here."

Bit bent down to collect the spikes. "I saw. What were you guys talking about?"

Devon bent down to help her. "Chloe's flying her out to L.A. to talk."

"No way," she said. "Is she going right now?"

Devon stuck his chin toward the camera crew where Galeno was working. "She's here to help, believe it or not."

"Did she bring her camera?"

Devon tried to remember. "I didn't see it with her."

Bit pointed to the news van. "Can you ask her to get it? We'll probably want to watch this later, and I don't trust the networks to show anything useful."

Devon nodded and ran off. Bit gathered a pile of spikes and rested. She waited until Devon, Markie, and Ryan brought the web in its buckets. Bit followed them in and helped them raise the tent back to its former glory. The motions of hammering and bending were easier with practice.

When they had hammered the supports in, the tent swayed like a tall building in the breeze. They lifted the web to the top of the tent and secured it to the poles. It pulled the spikes deeper into the earth and dug the pole's edges into the heavy fabric. One of them tore an edge through the coarse material. Bit stared at it and tapped Markie. "Can I borrow your phone?"

Markie tossed it over and Bit dialed Galeno's cell number.

Galeno picked up quick, as if expecting someone else. "What's up, Markie? I just finished with the interviews, and I'm going to take off."

Bit swallowed. "It's me. Hi. Can I ask you a favor?"

Galeno inhaled slowly on her end. "Anything. Are you okay?"

Bit checked herself over. "I'm doing all right."

"I'm sorry," Galeno said, bursting out, "I hunted through all the tapes I could in case I had forgotten I made backups, but I didn't. Fuck, I don't know what I was thinking."

Bit cleared her throat. "It would be nice if we had them, but we don't and they're not coming back. So, that just means we have to work harder now, okay? I need some help."

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"Name it."

Bit looked at the tiny rip above her. "You wouldn't happen to have a leather sewing kit in your pile of projects, would you?"

Galeno laughed. "Yes, I think I have one or fifty. I'll go pick some up. Hey, if Devon didn't already tell you..."

Bit chuckled. "Yeah, about Chloe, he did. That's so cool. Listen, could you bring your video camera, too?"

"Sure thing," Galeno said.

"Get going. Really, I can't wait to see you again," Bit said. They both hung up, and Bit handed Markie her phone back.

Devon connected the last carabiner to the tent pole and came over to Bit with smug satisfaction. The deadly chain above them swayed and creaked. "We should get out of here. This isn't safe."

Bit held a pole to keep the web from pulling itself down. She turned to Markie and Ryan, "Can you guys bring the Wolf suit over, please?"

Ryan nodded with nervousness. "We're starting the show, aren't we?"

Bit folded her arms. "Soon."

People began clapping outside the tent. Bit peeked out the front. A squad of dykes was performing a simple cheerleading routine. "Eh, oh, eh, oh, Superfolks have got to go! Eh, oh, eh, oh! Superfolks have got to go!" they sang as they danced around each other in a line. Other queers gathered their placards and stood up. The conversation died away.

Bit held the door flap open for the others. "Get going. We're too late."

Bit shot out of the tent, while the others darted in opposite directions. She spotted Sandy by the swing sets, followed by a crew carrying a small gas generator. They unrolling a nylon tube to hold the power cables together. Another group was setting up a portable television and VCR on the picnic tables, while making a path for the team hurrying in with the public address system.

Bit brushed her bangs back and walked up to Sandy, pointing out the cheerleaders to her. "What happened?" Bit said. "They're going to burn out the crowd if we don't get the show on the road."

Sandy waved her hands in the air. "I know, I know. People get bored and these things start themselves."

Bit took one of the generator's handles and helped to bring it into the woods. She directed the crew to run the last lengths of chain through the nylon tubes with the power cables. Bit and Sandy lay the tubes from the generator to the public address system through the tent and then to the television. Devon tossed some of the suit parts in the air for the pleasure of the volunteers and stood in the midst of a throng of outstretched hands. While he distracted the crowd, Bit and Sandy

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returned to the tent and clamped the chain to the web. After they had secured it, Devon entered and dropped the rest of the loot inside. He heaved a breath and wiped away his sweat. "They're insatiable out there," he said.

Bit smirked at him. "Uh-huh. Sandy, we should post someone to watch the tent out front, like they're guarding it. Troy will probably set up a diversion to lead them away before he comes. Tell them to just go if it happens. I'll have Ryan really watching the tent."

Sandy ran out to draft a volunteer. Bit and Devon followed her out and surveyed the park. New people were arriving, taking up signs, and milling around to view all the cute people. The news cameras were fixed on them, shooting footage from different angles.

One of the girls by the front gate called out behind them. "Hey Bit!" She led over a fit, middle-aged woman in a running outfit. Bit turned to see, not recognizing either of them. The woman had her dark hair tied back with a band the same color as the fluffy orange socks that overflowed from her sneakers. She wore matching running shorts and tank top, both well-tailored. She had a mild, though large, bruise on one leg.

Bit nodded to the volunteer and sized up the woman. She seemed familiar. "How can I help you?"

"We've been looking all over for you," the girl said, "Here she is. Excuse me. I've got to get back to work." She gestured to Bit for the sake of the woman accompanying her, and retreated to the park's entrance.

The woman waved to the volunteer, "Many thanks!"

Devon stayed by Bit's side. The woman seemed as threatening as any suburban bookstore visitor. She extended her hand to Bit. "Hello, I'm Sylvia Hendrat."

Bit took her hand. She gave Bit a short shake like a corporate manager would give. "Do I know you?" Bit said.

"You threw me into the street last week." Sylvia said. Bit released her and checked the street for police cars. Sylvia's eyes were similar to the faint memory she had of them in her mind. Her face was unmarked.

"You do remember?"

Bit took a few moments to realize she was shell-shocked. She nodded while her head spun out of control. "Yes," she said and swallowed. "Look, I don't have any money."

Sylvia waved her offer away. "No, I understand that. It's all right."

Devon took a step back, to get out of the way.

Bit scanned Sylvia's body but did not notice any more injuries besides the bruise. "I'm sorry," she said, "Are you all right?"

Sylvia smiled as if she got that question a lot. "Yes, quite. I stopped by because I read your web page, and I wanted you to know that you have my full support."

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Bit looked wide-eyed at her. "Thanks?"

Sylvia clasped her hands together. "It got me thinking, how much you people must be suffering from having these horrible folks after you. I come to rallies like these and hear all kinds of stories from the gays, especially the children, and I know it's awful being who you are. You don't need any more trouble, and these people are strong enough to stop a car! I even watched one do so after you grabbed me, in a panic. I completely understand. So I called the police this morning and made sure that they dropped all the charges against you."

Words piled up so fast in Bit they jammed together on the base of her tongue. "Really?"

Sylvia smiled at Bit. "Indeed. All I got was a few bruises. I can't imagine what you have gone through. You do have a place to live?"

Bit folded her arms to her chest. "Yes. There's a hole in the wall, but it's mostly fine."

Sylvia stretched out her arm. "Splendid. I've got to finish my run, but it was good to meet you finally. We must do lunch someday, and you will put up your story on the website?"

Bit beamed at her. "Yes. Thank you, Miss Hendrat! I can't begin to..."

Sylvia shook her head and began to run in place. "Save it. You've got this rally to expose those awful people. I hope they put them away for good. Peace to you."

"And to you." Bit said and waved at Sylvia as she jogged out to the street.

Bit turned to Devon, who still was struck dumb. "Okay," he said, "Usually I can't stand those women. Even when they give money. But, wow."

Bit hugged him and whooped. "Don't question it. This is incredible. We are so going to kick ass."

People started gathering near the entrance, and Bit took Devon over to see what was up. Three more news crews had pulled up to the park. As no parking spots were left, their vans stopped in the street with their blinkers on. Bit did not expect Galeno to be back to act as media liaison, so she ran toward them to take the job. She noticed Devon was not at her side and glanced back to see him darting out of the tent with an armful of suit pieces. Sandy had placed a few volunteers to hand out pamphlets around the portable television. Bit grabbed several flyers, and gave a quick presentation to each news team, down the line.

Her excitement crumbled as they aimed their microphones at her. "Hey, I'm, um, Jessica Bitters," she said, "And, uh, this is Devon Manetta and we're being, uh, targeted by the, um, superpowered vigilantes of Boston we'd, uh, like it to stop."

Devon was calmer. "You should see what they did to my place. It's

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in the Somerville police logs," he said and held out a stolen part, "Have an elbow pad."

Despite their interviews, the crews decided to stay. Bit and Devon retreated to the swing sets to cool down. Bit rocked with her feet in the sand under her. "You know what's funny," she said, "They didn't recognize our names, and we left them the messages about the rally."

Devon launched himself off the ground. "I don't know. You weren't especially coherent."

Bit glared at him as he glided back and forth. "Remind me never to do you a favor."

Devon kicked his feet out to sail higher. "I just call it as I see it."

"Is this a hint I shouldn't take the mike tonight?"

Devon flew by her. "Oh come on. You did great at the wake. You probably just need some motivation or that old dress. Me," he thumped his hand over his heart, "I've got all the motivation I need right here." He turned to her, which sent him off balance and he planted his feet on the ground to stop twisting.

Bit giggled. "I think you lace up your boots so tight, you can't tell when you're nervous."

Devon shrugged. "Whatever works."

Markie and Ryan skidded by, carrying the Wolf's suit between them while the other volunteers distracted the news team. Bit leapt from the swing to help them carry it into the tent. The tent rocked as if it would crack any moment. Bit unwrapped the suit and lifted each piece to inspect it. She rattled the head and flexed the arm carefully.

Devon followed them in and caressed her shoulder. "Bit, if you want to be fearless, that's fine. Just not with me in a ripping tent with several hundred pounds of chain over us."

Bit nodded. "I know. I just need a minute. Have you heard from anyone if there are any more Supabaggas here than those two?" She looked to Markie for confirmation but did not receive it. "If Troy has people here, they know about them too, but he's not doing anything about them. I don't like it."

Devon knelt beside her. "Unless he's not coming. I wish that was true."

Bit put her hand over his. "It's okay. As long as we immobilize him for a few seconds, I know we can take him down for good."

Devon cocked his head. "How?"

Bit grinned and tapped her forehead. "I thought of it yesterday," she said, "Get Markie and Ryan in here, so we can talk. Why do you think I asked for Galeno to bring her leather sewing kit?"

Sandy stood inside the batting cage and rapped on the microphone, listening to each pound dissolve in the restless crowd. Above her, a

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couple of the volunteers hung the massive banner. She looked up to ensure they did not fall on her, and then addressed the people who had gathered all around the diamond. "Hey, people!" she said, "Guess what?"

The crowd had been trained in the big arena shows of the eighties and nineties with the big stage rap. It was intoxicating for both artist and audience. Sandy listened for her voice to echo across the park.

"What!" the crowd said, shouting back.

Sandy put her fist in the air. "The sound system has no feedback on the first try!"

The protesters threw up their hands and their signs and cheered.

Sandy gave them an extravagant bow. "I know, I know. But I'm happy when it happens. And when I'm happy..."

"We're happy!" the audience cried out on cue.

Sandy gestured to the camera crews stationed around the diamond. "Exactly. I know you're going to be great and let's give a big hand for our wonderful friends at CBS, ABC, NBC, and FOX for coming here this evening. Give them a clap."

The roar of palms was loud but not as enthusiastic as it could have been. Sandy could have pushed them with, "Oh, come on, you can do better than that," but she did not want to use up the momentum this early.

"Well, let's get down to why we're here today," she said. The sand below her darkened. It did not threaten rain, but the sky was drawing in more clouds. "For about a year now, we've all been following them in the news. They've called them 'Vigilantes' to keep from saying superheroes. These weren't even the friendly kind that releases police boots off cars. We all remember getting that first email or seeing that first online log entry that led to a police report of some guy in a suit who could jump really high and knock a person down with a shove. We all remember what we thought at first. 'How dumb.' But you know, what came just before that? 'How cool!' Well, since then, they've helped a lot of people, and I'm not going to question how much of that was public relations scams. That all changed last week, on Friday. We saw one of them up close, in person. And if you didn't, you must know someone who did."

She paused to take a piece of paper from her pocket, and read from it.

"At nine o' clock Saturday, superheroes broke into the apartments of Jessica Bitters, Bit to y'all, and Devon Manetta. Devon has had to move out since then, as his place is unlivable. On Monday night, Bit was abducted from hiding out at Galeno Marquez's apartment. She was tortured and released on Tuesday. On Thursday night, they stopped a pack of superheroes from wrecking Galeno's apartment. On Friday, we

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all saw them at Icarus. Even on paper, it spells harassment, queer harassment. So, which one of us is next?"

She reached down to take a drink from her water bottle, and let it sink in. In the audience, volunteers passed out pamphlets and the stack of CDs Ryan had burned.

"If you don't already have a pamphlet, please take one. It's information. It's all we have against them right now. They're from a company called MinTorque over on the waterfront, and you'll find a printout of their website folded inside your pamphlet. You can read data taken from their computers on the CDs going around. There aren't enough for everybody so the rest of you can download it from the link in your pamphlet. Now, to tell you about how we know all this, we've got Devon himself here. Hey, Devon! The people here didn't come all this way to hear me jabbering!"

Devon remained next to Bit and Markie in the back of the outfield, scanning the crowd for any sign of trouble. He blushed as he heard his name called and turned to Bit. "You need to be up there more than me," he said.

Bit pushed his back. "I know. You get going."

Devon hurried up to the cage through the crowd who gave him the same courtesy as any slam poet. A group of bois from Icarus pounced on him, slapping him on the back and chanting, "Devon! Devon!" faster and faster until they encouraged others to do so. He reluctantly clawed his way out of their grasp.

Sandy had not set up a platform for him so he took her spot at home base. People behind the first few rows strained to see him on tiptoes. He gave Sandy a hug and took the microphone from her fingers. He recognized Galeno darting through the crowd, holding up her video camera and trying to find a good position. He waved to catch her attention, and then gestured to the outfield, "In the back," he mouthed. She understood and made her way to see Bit.

A few bursts of light erupted around him from the cameras and cell phones. He stretched out his palm to block his face, in case he looked crappy in them. Nearby, two of the camera crews were focused on their reporters giving an update on the event, leaving the other two crews to keep an eye on him. It was that much less likely that his mother would see him now. He noticed Markie was sneaking behind them to meet up with Ryan by the tent. It would not be long now.

"Hi," he said to the audience.

"Hi," they called back. He jumped slightly and they laughed.

He knocked on the microphone. "I'm not used to this sort of thing. You'll have to forgive me. I'm really a big wuss, and I don't like to blame people for anything, but I know this past week could have been avoided easily. Last Friday, Bit and I were on our way home from Icarus when

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we were jumped. As you know, we were 'rescued,' and after Stephen Noonan was shot, my friend Bit ran off with his helmet. Now, the MinTorque folks knew who we were, and they knew where we lived. And at no time did they simply knock on our doors and say, 'Hey, can we have our brother's head back?' That's all they had to do. Instead, they raided my apartment and Bit's at the same time. They thought it was better to come barging in and wreck everything we had, than to try to be civil. I don't know exactly what this says about their opinion of us."

He smirked. "Well, actually I do. They were scared of us, and they were too macho to be strong. Since I've met Troy and Justin Noonan, I can say that if I was some townie boy from Hingham, and I wasn't a threat to their machismo, I probably would have gotten that friendly knock on my door. Of course, because Bit and I were 'weird,' so that meant that we killed their brother, Stephen. Look at us. We're deadly. And you know, I'm tired of it!"

He stomped the ground. "In that tent is the helmet, and part of Troy Noonan's suit. I want you to see exactly what I saw last Saturday, when he burst into my room like the Gestapo. But hell, who'll believe me? We're all serial killers, right?"

The crowd nearest the park's entrance turned toward a screech in the street and a loud impact of metal and glass. One of the news vans veered toward the entrance as a passing car slammed into it.

Devon almost missed the dark shape that leapt from the house behind him into the back of the tent. A shrill whistle sounded from where Ryan was crouched near the swing set.

Devon screamed into the microphone "They're here! Everyone grab the cord!"

The volunteers dropped their signs and trickled through the crowd like streams of rain over the wet earth. They heaved the nylon tube covering the chain and electrical cords from the ground. The newer attendees whispered among themselves and joined them slowly as their friends encouraged them.

Devon raced behind the public address system to unplug it, as the cord lifted away. Bit and Galeno fought their way to the chain, apologizing to the people they pushed by.

The chain clanked as the volunteers pulled it from both sides and sent the tent rocking to the ground. The poles burst through the tough fabric and broke out of the ground. The burlap wobbled and its trapezoid form fell away into a mess of bulges. In the center, one large shape loped about furiously. The people near the tent scattered away and joined the volunteers in their conga line ripping through the nylon to grasp the chain. They pressed themselves into any space left, and fell back as the line became packed.

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The tube was slipping. It was tough to hold onto the heavy links which did not fit their hands. The crowd cried out when the chain lurched forward and dragged them a few inches toward the tent. The bulge stood up and put a clawed hand through the top of the tent. Even the station whose van had been hit turned its camera crew back to the writhing figure trapped by burlap and metal.

Devon rushed to the rear of the tug-of-war near the woods, where he did not have to fight for a place in line. Markie and Ryan had been close to the chain while hiding and had a good spot near the front. Bit unplugged the television to keep it from being drawn into the fray. She and Galeno stood by the news crews to see the outcome. Galeno ran her camera down the crowd, taping Bone-Z and Otacon grinning ecstatically as they gripped the chain. Bit scanned the air for any more dark figures, but there were none.

The bulge pulled its arm inside the tent and hunkered down. It popped upwards, lifting the attendees close by into the air, before it came collapsing back down. It leapt again and the air reverberated with its deep bass snarl. It did not leave the ground, as the grapplers were prepared this time. They leaned down over the chain and dug their feet into the earth. Many only touched the chain because there was no room for them, but they were convinced that it was their own energy holding it down.

The bulge thrashed in every direction, tossing the billowing tent off itself more. Bit grabbed a few remaining volunteers and dashed up to the tent, grabbed a door flap, and yanked as hard as they could. The tent cascaded on top of them to reveal the dark growling figure with a hint of gold under the metal web. It struggled like Atlas to hold up the world.

The attendees paused to see and their grip slackened enough for Troy to toss himself backward on the ground, in hopes of slipping out from the web. It held.

Bit crawled from the tent and hurried away before anything worse happened to her. She hustled to the woods and took a couple cans of spray paint they had stashed from the hardware store. The attendees began cheering themselves on when she returned. "Hold it down! Hold it down! Waaaaay down!" the cheerleaders called and the attendees echoed the chant.

Troy's next leap took him a few feet from the earth. When he landed, the weight of lifting several queers did not bring him to his knees. They were growing tired.

Troy reached two hands into the center of the web and pulled at the first ring of chains. It bent, and then broke away. The chain bits flew in all directions and the grapplers ducked. Their weight pulled the web over Troy's shoulders, and his canine head poked through the center. It seemed bulkier than Bit remembered it. Its ears pointed straight up and

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the muzzle, locked shut, seemed to be eternally sniffing the air. Its eyes were blank. Troy's fingers were caught as the web held them against its collar.

The volunteers closest to Troy let go, afraid of a second round of shrapnel, giving Troy the chance to leap again. The others hung on, so he only cleared a few inches as his own strength waned. His thump to the ground was not as loud the last one. The grapplers cheered, noticing something was wrong. The news reporters stepped closer. They set up tripods and hauled extra cameras out.

Bit shook her head at the roofs nearby. Troy would not have come all this way by himself. They must have a backup plan of some kind. Bit spotted the Patriots jersey in the flurry of torsos heaving on the chain. Ryan had mentioned they were invited by a "Firehind." She picked up her spray paint cans and whispered to Galeno, "Keep your camera on that kid, Bone-Z. Whatever happens, don't lose him." Galeno nodded and aimed her camera toward him.

Bit held a can in each hand and ran toward Troy. The grapplers rocked him back and forth to keep him off balance. He was too distracted to notice her standing before him.

"Hope you got some thermal vision in there," Bit said, and unleashed the paint on his face.

Troy reached for her and shook his bonds. He whipped his head around but the paint coated his eyes and cheeks like a raccoon's, dark against the gold paint in the low light of the evening. Bit's fingertips were covered in black, and she could not smell anything but the acrid chemicals. She dodged his thrusts, eyeing the chain's tension and not letting herself be drawn too close. If the next ring snapped, it could shear her windpipe.

Devon, Markie, and Ryan began to chant, "Bit! Bit! Bit!" which the rest of the crowd picked up quickly and joined in. Troy stopped struggling and resigned himself to her spray, long enough to point himself at her straight on and snarl, "Bit."

"That's me," she said. "Say you're sorry and we'll call the whole thing off."

Troy jerked himself at her. "Why should I?"

"Suit yourself," she said and darted away to toss the nearly empty cans into a nearby garbage bin.

Sandy and a volunteer raced to take her place, each holding Super Soakers. They kept further back from Troy and spread their legs out to anchor themselves down. They pumped up the pressure and sent forth two streams of reeking liquid. Even Bit started to gag from the stench, as strong as smelling salts and rotten pickle juice. The attendees contorted their faces as the scent hit them. Those only touching the chain let go to hold their noses shut.

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Troy whipped himself about to avoid the brunt of it. He wobbled and let himself be pulled to his knees. Sandy ceased her spray and fell back. Troy shook his body and pulled at the next circle of chains. It twisted and shuddered, sending everyone to the ground again.

While he struggled with the next ring, two more volunteers ran over. They hurried to either side of him and held up two air horns toward his ears, blasting out. The grapplers gritted their teeth, as the sound reverberated through their gums.

Troy drew himself to his feet and swayed in a figure eight. He yanked at the ring of chain and it bent outward. The volunteers dropped their horns and bolted as the links sheared and snapped away. The web slid down his chest and the grapplers, fearing he would be free, yanked back in panic.

Police sirens echoed from far down the road.

Troy shook his torso to each side. Markie yelled, "Back!" and tried to pull him over. Others followed her lead, straining with last-ditch effort. Their grunts were steady and their hands turned red from the friction. Troy put all his energy into standing upright, leaning his head into his chest and making tight fists. Soon, he caved to the pressure. With a creak, they yanked Troy onto his rear. He tossed his arms wide to brace his impact.

Galeno watched him fall out of the corner of her eye, keeping her lens on the two boys as Bit had said. She could multitask. She wanted another camera. She did not care how many professional media cameras were pointed at the action with Troy, she could do a better job. She saw a flash of bright color in the view through the camera lens. A thin volunteer in a baggy multicolored shirt and a red cap broke away from the chain and handed something to the boy in the Patriots jersey. Galeno zoomed in close to catch their faces. She trusted the camera to catch what she was too distracted to see. She called over to Bit. "Look!"

Bit swung around and saw the red cap pass by Bone-Z. Her heart leapt into her throat, and she swallowed it down. "Focus on the handoff!" she said to Galeno and took off after the figure.

Galeno taped Bone-Z as he dropped his grip on the chain. He clutched his arms tight to his chest. Galeno had seen that look in the eyes of boys from which her folks told her to keep away.

Bit hoofed it across the trampled diamond as the figure raced toward the woods. Galeno kept the camera on Bone-Z while her own eye followed Bit. She remained still, trying to decide what to do while the crowd screamed and the dust from Troy's fallen body hovered in the air.

Devon saw the figure race by, shirt billowing, with Bit on its tail. He let his chain go and hurried after them. The figure barely made the line of trees before Bit dived at the ground and snagged the fugitive's ankle.

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The figure tried to shake her off, stomping on her fingers. Bit cried and let go. Devon leapt over her and collided with the figure, wrapping his arms around its waist and falling down.

Then they heard the gun shot.

As soon as Bit disappeared into the woods, Galeno returned her attention to the camera in time to see Bone-Z point the gun at Troy's neck, and pull the trigger. The blast sucked its own sound back into the barrel as it spit out the slug, leaving the ricochet to echo around the park. Plastic shards flew up around Troy's torso. Bone-Z trembled. His hands rattled the weapon that had jerked upwards, and no longer pointed at the target. The recoil remained in his gut and he stiffened, unable to stop looking at Troy's unmoving form.

The attendees scattered, letting the chain fall limp on either side of the body. Bone-Z dropped the gun on Troy who did not move. The gun clattered as it hit the broken shell armor, and slid onto the ground. As people in the crowd began to tell each other that Bone-Z was unarmed, they settled down. Slowly they gathered around the body, in search of a better view. The queers nearest Bone-Z held their ground. They pursed their lips, but no one spoke.

Bone-Z sucked air in short bursts. He fluttered his eyelids, washing away the liquid collecting on their edges. He stared blankly at the crowd surrounding him. No one ran. A siren's whoop blew from the street and stopped. Bone-Z jerked his head around, hunting for a place to go. His foot touched the body, which rattled slightly. He stepped back.

The crowd waited for him to escape. Bone-Z turned for the woods and bolted. The attendees stepped aside to let him pass, and to allow two police officers into the park. The officers ordered him to stop. Bone-Z cut across the outfield to the fence. The news cameras tracked his motions as he scampered over it before the officers could reach him. They shouted at him to stop, but he kept running. Looking at the crowd around them, they hurried back to their cars to radio for help.

Galeno kept her camera rolling without breaks. Markie and Ryan rushed over to Troy's supine figure to inspect it. Bone-Z had not claimed his prize. Ryan brushed the plastic shards away and rubbed her fingers over Troy's neck. There was no blood and no exposed flesh.

After the gunshot, Bit almost forgot to help Devon keep the wriggling figure from escaping. She grabbed the figure's arm and ripped the hat off.

"You're sick, Melissa," she said.

Melissa squirmed in Devon's arms, but Bit grabbed her hands and held them tight. Her short hair shook out. She kicked at Bit, who bore the brunt without fighting back.

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"Is he still alive?" Bit said.

Melissa perked her head up at the sirens and heard them stop. "You better let me go. This is assault."

Bit pressed Melissa's arms down against her chest. "If you'd stop struggling. What's going on?"

Melissa calmed but glared at Bit. "If you're worried, it's over between you and me," she said. "Now let me go, or I'll call out to the police."

Bit dug her knees in the earth to hold Melissa with more tension. "Well, you haven't yet. Go wild if you want to. Troy wanted to get caught in that web, didn't he?"

Melissa turned away. "You know what my co-workers can do to you. We'll have you up on so many charges you won't get out in twenty years."

Bit remained resolute. Devon clung to Melissa tight and nodded that he would not let go. "Like you fucked up Bone-Z's life?" Bit said. "Uh-uh."

Bit stood and left Melissa in Devon's clutches. She grabbed a roll of duct tape from the web's construction site. Melissa wriggled but Devon was too determined. When Bit returned, Devon helped her tie up Melissa and laid her on the ground safely. Bit put a piece over Melissa's delicate mouth. They escorted her to the outfield and gazed down the length of nylon-covered chain. Bit shook her head as Troy stood up on his own feet.

Devon put a hand on Bit's shoulder. "Okay. Let's take him down."

Troy stirred as Markie and Ryan ran their hands over his arms and joints several times, checking for any other damage. Their hearts pounded as he groaned in agony.

Markie put her hands on his shoulders, and leaned over him. "Are you okay?"

Troy shook his head slightly and snorted twice. "Yeah, just got the wind knocked out of me," he said, "Whatever you sprayed me with, I think it helped wake me up."

Markie sat back and wiped her brow. "Sandy said it was some combination of rubbing alcohol, cabbage water, and some medical stimulant she got off work."

Ryan strained to hear the motors' whisper-quiet activity as Troy moved about. "How are you feeling?" she said, "Can you stand up?"

Troy leaned his arms back and sat upright. "I think so," he said. His gears hissed slightly. "Damn, how close did that sonofabitch have the gun?"

Ryan stroked the heavy fabric around his neck. "That was amazing," she said. "Where did you get this stuff?"

Troy brushed her arm away. "I signed fifty non-disclosure forms and

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put up several million to insure it," he said, "so I'm sure as hell not going to tell you." He lifted himself to his feet and slid off the remaining pieces of the web. An attendee began to applaud, and more joined in. Another rush of air blew behind Ryan, and four of the Faceless suits landed around them. One landed on the batting cage and bent down over the banner. With a single slice of its finger, it split the ropes. The banner unfolded to reveal what was written in its center, in bright corporate blue, "MinTorque's SuperSuit: You Are The Power."

The crowd silenced their applause, and murmured with each other to work out what it meant. They scanned for the group who had brought the banner, but they had disappeared.

Troy shook a card out of his wrist and handed it to Ryan. "*See that Devon gets this,*" he said. Ryan took Devon's driver's license from the extended claw and inspected it for damage. It had a few scratches, but was otherwise in excellent condition. She put it in her pocket and stepped away from the circle the Faceless suits had created.

One of the Faceless suits plugged in the public address system, and another shooed Markie away from Troy. Justin, in his Lion suit, leapt down beside Troy and embraced him. The crowd clapped slow to the show of affection. Troy and Justin realized they were hugging before a crowd of queers and released each other.

"You've got the wrong idea," Justin said in a shout. *"He's my brother."*

Troy bent over and picked up the gun by its barrel. The crowd parted for the two officers returning, who accepted it from him. One of them slid the weapon into a plastic bag. "What's happening here?" he said to Troy.

Troy put up his hand. "*I already called your station and explained everything,*" he said. "*Give us twenty minutes and we'll be out of here.*" The police backed off with reluctance. Troy turned to the crowd and cameras, waving both arms.

"It's all right. There's no crime done."

The officers backed off to the park's entrance to wait for backup while inspecting the damage to the news crew van.

Two of the Faceless suits joined Troy. They guided him over to the batting cage, as the paint still covered his helmet. They reached under his collar, and undid a set of zippers and straps. The crowd inched forward and strained for a better view, twittering like finches. The Faceless suit lifted off the Wolf helmet and revealed a haggard Troy underneath, sweat soaking his hair and caking his face. He shook some of the droplets off and took an unfiltered breath. A Faceless suit handed him a water bottle and he washed his mouth out, spitting it behind him. He picked up the microphone from the ground.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and everyone else," he said, "It's great to see you all. I hoped you would come. I'm Troy Noonan, CEO of MinTorque

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Incorporated. What you have just seen is a demonstration of our latest product, the MinTorque SuperSuit." He made a quick gesture to the news people. "Hang on, can you guys move over a little so the cameras can get a better view?"

The contingent of multicolored volunteers emerged from the park's entrance, holding pamphlets and stacks of press kits of their own. They escorted the crews from the four networks through the attendees to spots in front of Troy, passing the kits out and scattering the rest among the attendees.

Troy posed humbly for the camera.

"Thank you," he said, "I was terrified when I saw that kid over me, and I can't tell you how much. Boys like him need a lot of help, which I hope he can find somewhere. But I never doubted that the SuperSuit would protect me. As you saw, an accident like the one last Friday will never happen again. Let me stress, never again. I was planning to show you later under controlled circumstances, but what's done is done, I guess." He turned around and gripped the side of the batting cage. He heaved it off the ground, and the press clapped.

The crowd grew restless at having been played, badly.

Troy let the batting cage fall into the sand behind home plate.

"Thanks to these patented MinTorque motors, which are highly efficient in the amount of resistance they can generate, anyone wearing this exoskeleton can move minivans as if they were Styrofoam. They can leap twenty, twenty-five feet. The best part is that the SuperSuit anticipates your motions, allowing you to be as graceful as any dancer."

He threw out his arms and undulated in a precise wave. "Eventually, users will be able to program it to do things I can't conceive with simplified Java-based tools. The SuperSuit is available for industrial use, and those people who can afford it will wonder how they ever lived without one. Each suit is custom-designed, so no one but you can wear it."

No one saw Bit emerge from the woods with Devon close behind her. She startled the crowd when she yelled to Troy. "So, any rich wife beater can pick this suit up to make her little accidents easier on himself?"

The crowd turned around to see her with Devon pushing the duct-taped Melissa out. Markie, Galeno, and Ryan rushed through the attendees to join Bit's side.

Troy rolled his eyes and gestured toward Bit.

"Everyone, my self-appointed nemesis, Jessica Bitters. This woman has made it her life's goal to ruin my company. She has broken into my premises to give you the pieces of the SuperSuit in your possession. I'm not worried. Please keep them as a sample of our product. Also keep the stolen data on the CDs she has given you. They contain test data, which

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will verify my claims that the MinTorque SuperSuit exceeds the performance of any commercially available machine run on electric motors. The battery on my back can last hours on end while exerting the same force that you have seen me use today."

The police officers noticed the struggling Melissa and approached Bit and her troupe. Devon stood fierce beside Bit with his hands clamped into fists. Markie and Galeno glared at Troy, as they held Melissa still. Even Ryan had her arms at her sides, and tapped her feet with impatience.

Bit cupped her hands around her mouth to shout. "So that Supabagga who shot you? You didn't set him up at all?"

Troy frowned. "Of course not. MinTorque has worked very hard to co-operate with the authorities and ensure every action in public is pre-approved. You can ask the Boston commissioner himself if you like."

Bit grabbed Galeno's arm, holding the camera and pulled both up as high as they would go. "Really? Because we have, on videotape, footage of this woman giving the gun that shot you to that boy in the Pats jersey."

Galeno broke away and ran to the press gathered around Troy. She played the footage she had recorded back on the camera's tiny screen for each crew. The reporters nodded and asked her for copies. Each handed her a jack so she could give it to them immediately. The officers joined the reporters to watch the slow footage as well, and appeared convinced.

Troy narrowed his eyes at Galeno in front of him, and then at Bit in the back. Melissa blinked and remained steady, waiting for help. The crowd whispered and even the Faceless suits gathered in a little circle, ready to leap. Bit tapped her fingers on her forearm while they waited for the footage to be confirmed. Markie stroked her rune necklace. Devon grinned like he had smoked a hundred cigarettes at once.

The sides of Troy's lips fluttered. He flexed his left hand and wrist, and the tiny motors turned the electric current into tremendous power. He gazed up at the banner they had smuggled into the rally, and then to Melissa. The reporters leaned forward. He was taking too long to answer.

Troy put his hands over his eyes. "Melissa, what were you thinking? I don't know how to say this. This is my lover, Melissa, and I never thought she would do something like this for my money."

Melissa screamed an incomprehensible curse at him behind the duct tape. She flailed about and tears flew from her eyelashes. She turned her head away from him.

Troy bit his lip but focused on her behind the crowd. "I wish I had known something was wrong. I would have tried to be a better person."

Galeno ejected the tape from her camera and handed it to the police.

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They accepted it and followed her over to Bit.

Markie and Ryan dropped the sunken Melissa and backed off as the police approached. Melissa tossed her head and held back a muffled sob. Her hair fell neatly into place, as if it had memory. The officers lifted her up. "Please come with us," one of them said. He gently pulled the duct tape from her mouth.

Melissa exploded at the batter's cage. "The fuck!" she said. "You don't even have the balls to come clean with anything! Guys, Keith, Travis...somebody say something! You agreed to this! You all fucking agreed to it!"

The officers put their arms around hers, and slowly turned her toward the gate. "Let's go," one officer said, and led her through the attendees.

Ryan blinked and stared at the ground, her chest itching inside where she could not reach. She wanted to throttle one of the supers, and shout "Answer her!" though there was the chance she might be hurt. She slipped behind Markie to block her view of Melissa.

Markie kept one eye on them, in case they decided to touch Bit or Devon.

Galeno turned to Devon and smirked. She patted her trusty video camera. The hum of the speakers interrupted their concentration and Troy spoke again.

"I'm sorry this happened," he said. "I really love her. Now, where were we? My personal life isn't nearly as interesting as the SuperSuit..."

Bit followed at a distance to ensure that the police took Melissa in their squad car and not a secret getaway van. Melissa was good at setting traps. Two squad cars pulled up beside the first, and their drivers gathered close. Melissa was cuffed and escorted into the back of one. Bit sighed with relief and returned to Ryan and Markie.

"Guys," she said, "This is it. Check under the web for any suit parts left, and then run out of here."

Markie nodded and stuffed her hands in her pockets. Ryan reached around Bit and gave her an awkward hug. "We're gone," she said. "Take him down."

Bit gave her a quick squeeze and sent her off.

Devon had his arms crossed to keep them from choking Troy. He stared at the man who continued his sales pitch. He was so entranced in thought Ryan had to call his name twice before he noticed. She stood beside to him, pacing as if she had to get moving. "What's up?" he said.

Ryan held up his driver's license. "Troy said to give this to you."

He accepted it with care and inspected it for damage. "He did, huh? Bastard."

Ryan nodded. "I have to help Markie. Thanks for the head and everything."

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Devon winked at her, and she ran off to collect the remains of the stolen suit. He flicked the old license against his palm. It may as well have had "farewell and good riddance" on the back.

The line the police had cut through the crowd filled to get a better view of Troy. Bit chewed her fingernails to steady her nerves. The suit kept Troy graceful, but he paced more than usual and swayed his arms too quickly. She stepped in the tiny spaces between the other attendees to move toward the batting cage. Devon pushed his way into the crowd and tapped her shoulder. She spun around to see what was up.

Devon held up his license. "I want him," he said. "I know I can take him. I know this was your plan and all, but he just gave me a big 'fuck you.' Besides he's pretty raw right now. I think I know what he's going through."

Bit checked the license for the hologram that marked it as authentic. She returned it, annoyed. "Are you sure you want to do this? I really want to be up there. He hates me more than you."

Devon gripped her arm. "I'll get him going. He won't be as crazy around me anyway. Look, if you want to go ahead, do it."

Bit glanced at the prancing Troy and swallowed a warble in her throat. She clasped his hand between hers, and held it tight. "Okay, you take him," she said and fell back to the outfield.

Devon waved to her. "Don't worry about me. I'm a rock." He watched her disappear.

Bit hurried back to Galeno and checked the park's entrance. The police were waiting but not yet preparing to scatter the crowd. Markie and Ryan carried the suit parts past them with steady nerves honed from shoplifting. The police seemed satisfied with the explanation Markie gave them and let them leave.

Bit took Galeno's arm. "You should get going too. I can scale the fence behind us but when the crowd goes wild, you might have trouble."

Galeno heaved a sigh. "I wanted to see Devon, but I can't see shit without a chair or something to stand on."

Bit hugged her. "It'll be on the news. Besides you got a girl to see. Stay safe, okay?"

Galeno winked as she wandered toward for the entrance. "Now why would I do a thing like that?"

Bit gave her the thumbs up. "Get out of here." She stood on her tiptoes to make out the action in the batting cage while Galeno hurried away.

Devon stood beside the camera crews and glanced at the crowd around him. He pursed his lips and swallowed. That was a lot of attention for one man to carry, but he had the luck of the Boneyard. This was as good

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a time as any to ask for it. He made sure that he kept himself in Troy's eye as often as he could. He stuck out his index finger and thumb upright, to make a little pistol, and whispered, "Bang!"

Troy continued as if Devon did not exist. "...proprietary system running in parallel for optimum efficiency," he explained without a stop. Devon followed the nylon cord into the woods to the generator powering the public address system, and shut it off. He returned to the baseball diamond, and passed one of the Faceless suits, who was rushing to turn it back on.

"Damn, Devon," the Faceless suit spoke in Keith's distorted voice, "Will you leave us alone?"

Devon did not look back at him. "After tonight, no problem." The crowd clapped loud when Devon emerged and booed when they heard the microphone come back on. Devon smiled. Sandy held his spot by the news crew, and scooted away for him to take it.

"Well, I can see you guys want me to be brief," Troy said, "And I couldn't agree with you more. At our website, you can find..."

Devon broke through the crowd to the batting cage and spit on his chest. Troy scowled at him and wiped off the saliva with his glove.

Devon wagged a finger at him, and spoke loud enough for the microphone to catch each word. "Let me tell you something about your suit. It seems to stand up under anything, doesn't it? Pounds of pressure, water, even point-blank gunshots."

Troy motioned to the Faceless suit that he wanted Devon escorted out of the batting cage. "If you'll excuse me," he said.

Devon shook his head and planted his body sideways, so he could address Troy and the crowd with ease. "But it's got a huge weakness that you're too chickenshit to let the people know about," he said. He shook his fist in the air like a preacher.

Troy looked at the ground, anticipating a very bad joke to follow. "And what would that be?"

Devon smiled. "Well, I could tell you, but why don't I show you?"

The crowd stepped closer. They held up the placards and hushed themselves.

The Faceless suit approached Devon, but Troy held his hand out to stop them. His face grew stern. "Hang on. What did you have in mind?"

Devon held up his hand and undulated his fingertips. "C'mon. Hit me."

Troy furrowed his brow. "What?"

Devon patted his soft cheeks and scruffy facial hair. "You heard me. Hit me. Wind up that arm of yours as tight as it will go and then lay it on me. Right here in the kisser."

Troy shook his head. "No, you're crazy."

Devon bellowed out, "Hit me! Hit me!" The crowd took up the

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chant and he let them carry it as the blood surged to Troy's face.

"And not because you want to," Devon said. "This is for science. Once the world sees how useless your suit is against simple things, nobody's going to touch the thing ever again."

Troy stepped back from him. "I'm not some bar drunk."

Devon charged at him and punched him in the chest. His own hand was ripe with the pain of flesh hitting a solid wall, but he continued to shout. "I'm not bluffing. It's as real as the broken glass in your front door. It's as real as every computer geek reading your source code. And it's as real as Stephen is dead and that you'll never see Melissa with any love for you again."

Troy seethed under the suit, and twitched at every blow Devon landed. He raised his right arm. The motors hissed and Troy yanked the arm back tight, ready to let it spring forward and shut Devon up.

Devon leapt back. He gave a silent prayer that Ryan and Markie had done their job right. He stuck out his own arm and gave a magician's flourish.

Troy screamed in agony. He dropped his right arm to his side but the sharp pain under his elbow would not stop. It was white hot and blinding. Troy's mouth was stuck open. The sound bellowing out did not end. He screamed until he was hoarse. He fell on his side and began to weep.

Devon swiped the microphone from Troy's twitching hand. The queers and reporters stood astonished and began speaking to their friends beside them. The Faceless suit and Justin cowered in a corner, afraid to approach him.

"Relax," Devon said into the microphone. "He's not in any real danger. I hope he got his tetanus shot though. Justin, come over here."

With his Lion mask on, Justin swung his head around to see how much of a jump it would take to escape from Devon.

Devon waved him over again. "I won't hurt you. Promise. Hey, everybody, give it up for my assistant, Justin Noonan!"

Justin walked over stood behind his writhing brother. Devon indicated for Justin to raise his arm, and expose the joint under the elbow.

"There's actually a lot of flaws," Devon said, "But the one you've just seen is a leather sewing needle slipped through this crack under the elbow here. It had plenty of time to work itself through the squishy material they use here for flexibility. There's also another needle in his other arm. We didn't know whether he'd punch me with his right or left. When he squeezed it back, it went right in. Justin, why don't you get Troy's arm off and help him out?"

Justin bent down and dragged Troy aside. The Faceless suits hurried forth and worked quickly to unbuckle the wounded arm. Devon

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grew quiet, and his heart slowed. He looked at the fresh faces around him. The lights of the news crews shifted from him to Justin cradling his brother's twitching body. The armor on Troy's arm clattered to home plate and he cried out as Justin withdrew the needle. There was much less blood than if it had hit an artery.

The crowd jerked at the squawk of a bullhorn. A line of police officers entered the park, with their hands on their riot sticks. "Please disperse!" the officers called out and advanced on the crowd. No one had a clue where they should run. Each attendee hunted for a fence they could scale and darted for it. They broke into chaos, and everyone hurried in a different direction.

Devon brought the microphone close to his face and said, "That's it, kids. Go home. Nothing left to see here." He joined the throng surging toward the fence behind the batting cage. They left the generator and the public address system behind.

The panicked attendees overwhelmed him as the police continued their call to disperse. The crowd grabbed at any open space in the fence's wires. The smaller, thinner people scampered over the heftier ones, and fell to their feet on the other side. Devon groped for the fence as if he was swimming underwater with the current. He pulled himself upwards, but only the tips of his boots caught the fence links. He gasped for air and gripped the metal rail when he reached the top. He clung for his life as other hands latched onto his shoulders, and launched themselves over the side. They squashed his armpits against the rail, and he gritted his teeth. His feet lost their hold and he dangled in place.

"Hey Devon!" someone called, "You're on the way!" Two hands grabbed his boots and pushed them up over the side, sending him to the leaf-covered ground. He looked back. Sandy was struggling over the top in his spot. She was caught in the rush of people, and extended her arm down to him. Devon pulled her over and helped cushion her fall. She stood up and brushed the dirt off her legs.

"Fuck," she said. "We lost all our equipment in there. Nobody'll ever trust me to run one of these again."

Devon grabbed her hand, and they joined the people running to the street.

"So?" he said, "There's no way the networks won't show this coast-to-coast. We'll remember you got this going."

They headed around the police cars barricading the street and hustled off for public transportation. Devon scanned the people running by for Bit but she was nowhere to be seen.

He had faith, though, that she would come back.

Epilogue— Saturday Afternoon, One Week Later

Devon had covered the walls of his new room with newspaper clippings and web page printouts, protected behind cheap plastic frames. Samantha's household had become used to the sharp taps of a hammer driving nails into the wall with each new article. The man who ran the photo store where Devon bought the frames had started to call him by his name, and followed with, "The usual today?"

Since the first magazine article had come out bearing his likeness, Devon had no clue where he would put them. He had checked out the photo albums but they were places for sappy baby pictures, with the scent of dust and heavy inks. He preferred to keep photographs on the computer, which only smelled of ionized particles and new compact discs, fresh from the music store.

His own MinTorque server sat under the desk, with the hard drive and modem that Ryan had rebuilt for him. He had to dedicate time each day to reading all the email which came pouring in, and he was only up to Wednesday's batch. The picture on his desktop was set to the image from last Sunday's paper, showing Devon holding out his arm while Troy grimaced in pain and collapsed before the crowd. It was a toss-up between that and a still frame from the convenience store camera of Troy in his first Wolf suit, buckled over as he was clotheslined by a long door handle while in pursuit of Bit. She was out of frame. She was not in any of the images circulating the newsrooms and the Internet, except a brief piece of footage of her confronting Troy while she stood beside the bound Melissa. She had not been invited to join him on his interview with the show *Chronicle*, or his thirty-second piece on FOXNews. She was lumped into the background with "gathering of young lesbians," "the organizers of the impromptu rally," and "the group of Devon's friends."

Devon had asked the news reporters if they wanted to talk to the person whom MinTorque truly had been after, but they had replied, "No. Just tell us your story. It's exciting enough, and the people want to hear from you."

Devon had tried to fit in snippets about her, but those sections were always edited out. They focused on his tales of "It came busting in," "It caught the car I was in when I reached the bottom of the hill, dragging me to a stop," and "I wasn't sure the needles would really work."

Eventually the effort to mention Bit was not worth it. He had let his public relations persona take over and told the story of how he saved his friends from MinTorque. The reporters left him to his newspaper-

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padded room to check his email and start his grocery list for that week.

The room was becoming a little more his every day. The sheets of plastic that had kept the room sterile were folded up in the closet. Over half his clothes had made it into the bureau and the coat hangers. The rest sat in a pile behind the door for whenever he had time to get to them. He kept his remainder of the suit parts taken from MinTorque under his bed, along with his shoes and cleaning supplies.

He would turn over a new leaf in this new space. He would keep it neat and tidy. He would watch a minimal amount of television. He would eat carrots and broccoli with every meal. He would not smoke in the house, as much.

He stuck his head out the window and lit one up. It was easier than marching all the way downstairs. In his own nest he could enjoy the luxury, and the furniture had several years of pot stench to drown out.

When his cigarette had no tobacco left to offer him, he snuffed it out and looked down at the open trash can three stories below. It was about the size of the moon in the sky at night. The sun passed the halfway mark above him and he stared at it for a few seconds. Once the blazing image was burnt in his cornea, he looked at the trash can and blinked until the sun's image overlapped the can's opening, about the same diameter. He had tossed rocks at the sun and moon before, and if they were not so far away, he would have hit them dead-on. But the cigarette was not as heavy as a stone, and the sun and moon had never been three stories under him, so he wrapped it in a tissue and placed it in the trash in his room.

Bit would be coming over soon. He hopped on his bed and stared at his only news clipping that did not feature any picture. It had been taken from the business section of the *Boston Globe*.

“Industrial developer MinTorque Up For Sale—Following a disastrous announcement and a mass exodus of employees, the start-up MinTorque exists only as the owner of several key patents. Company founder Troy Noonan has offered them up for sale, providing the buyer also absorbs the full bulk of MinTorque's own debts, which are said to range in the hundreds of millions...”

The words “mass exodus” conjured the images of swimming rats and masts disappearing under waves.

The doorbell rang, and he hurried down the flight of stairs in his socks to get it. When he opened the front door, Bit was facing away from him, distracted by the passing cars. She spun around and was surprised to see him so soon. Her face did not light up like it once did. She carried an empty cloth sack under her arm. It was supposed to be filled.

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Bit crossed her arms and took a deep breath. "Hi. I didn't hear you come down."

Devon backed up to clear a path and stay out of her way. "'S okay. Do you want to come in?"

Bit wiped her sneakers on the mat before entering and popped them off by the door. "Thanks," she said. She followed him back up to his room, keeping to his slower pace.

"So, how's everything going?" she said as they reached the second floor.

Devon let the banister lead him up. "Not bad. Work was pretty understanding about last week. I'm helping Sam rearrange the living room and stuff. Oh, and did I tell you I got an email from Keith?"

Bit's hair bristled down her neck. "No, you didn't."

"He said everybody at MinTorque got scared Troy would turn on them next, so they ran off. He even asked if we could go out for coffee sometime. I sent it right to the recycle bin."

Bit nodded. At the top of the stairs, Devon ushered her into his transformed space. She stepped in gingerly, and sat in his desk chair. He hopped on the bed and folded his hands in his lap. They stared in silence at each other for a few moments.

"You didn't bring the Wolf head," he said, "I thought you said you would."

She shrugged. "I changed my mind."

He looked at his word-strewn wall. "I really need it. The producers at 60 Minutes and CNN want to see it. They'll pay good money, and you know I'll split it with you and the guys."

Bit folded the sack up. "Yes. Ryan says it's in decent condition, considering everything. So are the suit's computer and the arm. But that offer from the Lockheed engineers is real. It's cheaper for them than them bailing MinTorque out. And it's gone up since then, more than the news people have offered you."

Devon shook his head, "Even if it is real, I bet I can make more getting more news companies interested. You have to trust me on this one, okay?"

"I do," she said. "But they might hire Troy back if they don't have his product. And it's not like we're really helping the military-industrial complex either. We only have a fraction of all MinTorque's data, and there's a lot Lockheed will have to reverse engineer."

Devon fell backward on the bed. "And they won't buy without the head? Bit, do you know how many times I have considered calling you an asshole?"

She brushed her hair back and stared away from him, rolling her eyes. "Yes, I know."

Devon pulled himself up and tossed his hand at the framed

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clippings. "No, you don't. I'm sorry if you're jealous or something, but do you think it's easy being under the spotlight? With all these people staring at me, getting pissed when I stutter or anything. Oh, and you know they want me to wear make-up? I don't care if it is guys' make-up. Bit, it is your living hell. You know you weren't ready to face Troy last Saturday, and you couldn't do all these interviews now."

Bit cocked her head to one side and drew her lips tight. "I've known that forever," she said. "It would have been nice to be in some of these pictures, but, fine, they do mention me occasionally. No, this is about you."

Devon pulled back a little. "What about me?"

Bit leaned forward and rested her head on her palms. "You haven't called me in a while, and then last night I got the message to come by and bring the head. I don't like just doing favors, okay? You've never asked me about my side of what happened, either. Just because you were there, you think you know everything that went on?"

Devon stomped his foot against the bed frame. "I am doing what I can here," he said. "I told you I needed some time off. I get so fucking stressed with every interview and there's a chance I'll say the wrong thing and dammit, why do I have to justify myself to you?"

Bit shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "I don't want to have to explain myself to you. I don't like that we aren't talking. I'm scared that it's because you're getting a swelled head. Maybe you're resenting me or you think I can't handle that you're the pop sensation of the moment or..."

Devon threw up his arms. "I'm sorry I asked you for the head," he said. He dug under the bed and pulled out the box of suit parts and slid them at her. "Here. Take it all. Sell it. Keep the money for all I care."

Bit stopped the box with her foot and leaned back in her chair. "Do you think that's what I want?"

He sighed heavily. "I don't know, either. Why don't you tell me?"

Bit blinked at him slowly. "I want to be your friend. I want you to trust me and listen to me and do the occasional hangout. We haven't even gone out or anything since the rally. Ryan and I had a party, and no one else showed up. That's it."

He looked down at the box of parts at her feet. "Well, I don't feel like it. The less I've been talking to you, the better I feel, and it sucks and it shouldn't be, but there it is."

Bit could not respond so they remained in silence. She stared out the window and noticed cigarette ash on the sill. She stood up.

"Mind if I use the bathroom?"

Devon looked at the door. "Knock yourself out."

Bit took slow steps and let herself out of the room. The knot in her stomach undid itself when she reached the ground floor. She knocked

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on the bathroom door, but it was cracked open with no one inside. When she washed her hands, the cool softness made her yearn for a long shower.

She knew why she should not see Devon for a while. Bit trod carefully up the steps and prepared to dive into Devon's room again. She rapped his door and called out, "I'm back."

"Come," he said. He still was hunched over, staring at the suit parts. He did not look at her.

Bit took her seat again, and crossed her legs in his field of view to get his attention. "You used to hang around other clubs besides Icarus before you transitioned, right?"

Devon met her eyes. "Did I?" he said. "You're talking about the Galleon? That place folded last winter."

She nodded to him. "Okay, but if it was still open would you go there?"

He gave a tiny shrug. "Eh, probably not."

She turned her head in the general direction of Somerville. "How about your old room?"

"Definitely not."

Bit sighed. "I don't go home much," she said. "My old bedroom feels like it's been saturated with radioactive isotopes. I go in and I become a kid again, and everything I thought I escaped comes back. The best thing I can do is leave."

Devon returned his hands to his lap. "My house isn't that bad, but it isn't great either."

Bit brushed her bangs out of her eyes. "I think places can be toxic for us, if we spend too much time being unhappy in them," she said. "At least we can move away."

Devon lowered his eyebrows. "Are you leaving Markie's place?"

Bit smiled. "No. Markie and I are okay. We're like we used to be, so we aren't paying attention to each other. She's giving herself some time alone, too. All her porn is down off the walls. She's putting up Max Parrish prints, though I don't know how long that'll last."

He took a pillow and plopped it on his chest to hug. "Good ol' Markie," he said. "What about you?"

Bit looked at the jumble of parts below her. "I think you're right. We do need time apart. I can't look at you without getting stressed. I've been at the breaking point with you for so long, I don't know how to be calm around you anymore."

Devon nodded. "But you're okay with Ryan?"

Bit smirked. "Well, we do engage in tension-relieving activities."

Devon sniffed at her. "Ah. That explains it. Did I tell you that I took out a personal ad?"

Bit's eyes widened. "Damn, any hits?"

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He shook his hand in the air. "A few. I didn't mention I'm trans, 'cause it cuts down on the fetishists. Still, I got to figure out which boys I'm going to have to give the talk to."

Bit bowed at him from the chair. "Good luck with that."

Devon put the pillow back. "Thanks."

She sat against the back of the chair and let her shoulders relax. "Maybe Galeno can help you narrow the field."

Devon looked at the ceiling. "Doubt it. She hasn't come back yet. Chloe's setting her up with some video gig, and I don't think it's one hundred percent legal, if you know what I mean. She's got experience in smut, though, but I warned her that place'll eat her alive if she's not careful."

Bit nibbled on a fingernail. "Whatever," she said. "I guess it leaves one more empty room in Boston."

He pointed out the window. "You want it?"

Bit glared at him. He played innocent and threw up his hands.

She stood up and stretched her arms. "I should go," she said. "From what I've heard, toxic relationships have a half-life of a year, so we might as well get started on it."

He rose to his feet and embraced her. He nestled his head in her neck. "It was nice to know you, Miss Bitters," he said.

She breathed in his hair cream and memorized every detail: his tension, his feet between hers, and his arms wrapped around her chest. "It was a pleasure to be in your company, Mr. Manetta."

They stayed together for a minute, until the embrace had lost all feeling. They released each other at the same time.

Bit reached over and lifted up the box. "I will mail you the check," she said. "Then, I guess it's 'Don't call me, I'll call you?'"

Devon nodded. "Same here," he said.

He escorted her down the stairs to the front door. He was eager to get more money, but he said nothing. He had never had money before. It would probably go right into the student loan bin, and anything left would go into the surgery bin. Bit would use her share the same way.

Devon opened the front door and let the breeze come in. Bit gripped the box against her chest and bowed to him one last time. "Take care," she said.

Devon returned the bow. "You too."

She lifted her sneakers and spun around in the doorway. "By the way," she said, "You probably should keep to smoking outside."

He shook his head. "Mind your own business, and don't be minding mine."

He smiled and closed the door with care, sealing her outside.

Bit sat on the doorstep and laced her sneakers on. She rose and headed for the bus stop. She told herself she was simply a woman

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walking home, leaving a good friend behind to keep herself sane,
because that was what humans did.

Alicia E. Goranson (www.alicia-goranson.com) is a writer from the Boston area. She makes desserts to give away as gifts and not eat herself. She gives fake answers to telemarketers while prefacing each with "I am about to tell a lie." She purges her closet every year of clothes she has not worn in the last half-decade. She tells stories about the strength of the underdog and the unloved. She seeks to flesh out stereotypes until they are unrecognizable, whole people whose ghosts remain even if they are torn apart afterward. She is a winner of the Project: QueerLit Contest.

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