

The Variant Effect
GREENMOURNING
Part One: Dawn of the Day
G. Wells Taylor

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CHAPTER 1

Pinocchio had always dreamed of being a real boy.

But what a waste of time that turned out to be. Dreams teased him all night long, convincing him that things were the way he wanted them to be—then *poof*, gone when the alarm clock rang. Or they'd taunt him, hanging out there just beyond his reach, only to disappear the moment he touched them. Dreams left empty shapes in his mind, and desires and need—and nothing more. They were illusions. They weren't real. They were nothing and that made him furious because Pinocchio wasn't *nothing*.

He was something: something *more*.

So Pinocchio gave up on dreams. They were as useless as childish wishes and the blue fairies that didn't grant them.

He tried to be practical. Pinocchio went to school and learned and studied and hoped that the day would come when the real circumstances, when science and technology would evolve enough to make such a transformation possible. Some genetic fix or pill or procedure would be discovered that would make him into a real boy. Make it true. Make it real.

But that turned out to be another dream. Another wish in need of a fairy.

So Pinocchio took things into his own hands.

Well, not *his* hands. He was still looking for those. He hadn't quite found the right pair.

The hands he used instead placed his new feet into the large plastic cooler. Pinocchio pushed the severed and bagged extremities down into the ice with a plunging action that made a roaring noise—and he froze as goose bumps prickled. *Careful now. Don't want them to hear.* He closed the lid with a quiet *thump*, and slipped its hard plastic lock into

place with a *click*. Then he nudged the cooler with the toe of his slipper and slid it across the carpet until it rested beside his backpack by the front door.

He unfolded a six-by-six vinyl sheet and set it in place under the window where a dark green garbage bag waited to be filled. The blinds were drawn. No one would see.

Pinocchio turned to look at the man on the bed. He just stood there a minute, looking.

The man on the bed was looking back at him over the bloodstained gag; his breath was coming in desperate, rapid-fire whistles. His eyes were wide and white with pain and terror. His face was sweaty and pale with blood loss and shock. He grunted weakly, promising the world.

The man wouldn't last long, which was good. That annoying whistle was getting on Pinocchio's nerves.

The man on the bed wasn't going anywhere. The ropes that fastened his wrists to the headboard had held him in place while Pinocchio worked. Same as those that bound his legs with a series of tight loops just over the knees and in around the bed frame. *Those* knots had served a double purpose. They'd both secured the man *and* kept him alive during the procedures.

At first Pinocchio had contemplated taking all of the legs. It would have been faster and easier to take them off at the hips or knees, but unwieldy to transport. And he had to be careful—he got so excited when he found new parts. He had to be cautious, and a little extra work would keep him safe. So he had decided that it would be worth the effort to strip out the muscle, veins and nerves that belonged to the feet. And in all truth, he did not like the man's knobby knees and hairy thighs. They had surprised Pinocchio when he first got a look at them. Their awkward and ugly design did not go with the feet.

The man's feet were incredible.

Pinocchio had gotten his first look at them earlier on that heat wave day, when the man on the bed had taken off his shoes and socks to wade in a Metro park fountain. Pinocchio had been sitting on a bench nearby, alone, unhappy—trapped in a body that wasn't his. He had been contemplating a quiet death—just ending it for once and all, when he saw the feet flash across the grass and leap into the spangled water.

Their beauty, their movement, caught hold of his spirit and lifted it up. A voice, his conscience perhaps, said: *You can still be a real boy. You must never give up!*

The feet were perfect: the toes were short not stubby, the arches flexible bridges from powerful heel to forefoot, and the skin was smooth ivory. They were just the way Pinocchio had imagined they would be. And there they were, marking a pathway back to optimism, back to life and to his calling. *He could be a real boy.*

But he'd have to be patient. His urgency was understandable, but dangerous. So, he reined in his emotions and sat on the bench in the shade to watch the man play with *his* feet in the water.

An hour passed and Pinocchio followed the man on foot through the shimmering heat of the day, surprised and curious about his destination, keeping his rising excitement in check—until he found out where the man was going...

Home was a room at a rundown motor inn. Pinocchio knew the type, a bachelor apartment rented by week or month and sparsely furnished, accessed by an open stairway that ran up over the parking lot. There you only had to pass the neighboring units and knock. The location was puzzling. The man was fit and healthy. His hair was cut and

clean. He didn't fit the surroundings. Perhaps a student's life kept him in such poor accommodations.

But the important points were: No security entrance. No buzzer.

So Pinocchio had retrieved his van from the park, gone home to get his equipment and had returned some hours later when the sun had set and the shadows were black.

He had knocked and the man had answered. The fellow took one look at Pinocchio, at the goggles and filter-mask and he smiled. *Is this a joke?*

Pinocchio gave him a long blast of pepper spray in the eyes and nostrils. The man tried to speak but choked. Pinocchio pushed him back into the room and shut the door behind them. Blind and gasping, the man swung a fist in the air, lost his balance and fell on his face.

Pinocchio leapt on top and trapped the man's wrists behind his back. The fellow chewed on Pinocchio's leather glove as the recycling bag was pulled over his head and the plastic pressed to his nose and mouth.

He was unconscious in minutes, and then...

Vivisection was time-consuming, but time well spent, and it was difficult to pass on when the opportunity presented itself. One learned so much when the stakes were high. True, he could have quickly hacked the man's lower legs off, but that was messy, and messy was dangerous. Pinocchio had already caused himself trouble with such reckless behavior.

His mission depended upon calm, deliberate actions.

Obviously, he could cut corners when the subject's survival was unimportant; but there were great challenges to performing the procedures where the man lived. He didn't know the fellow's life or social network. Someone with a key could have entered at any moment.

But Pinocchio had to learn patience.

Some sound did escape the fellow. Behind muffling strips of duct tape, he chewed the ball-gag to bits before passing out halfway through the procedure and Pinocchio only discovered the trouble when the fellow woke up and started choking noisily on the pieces.

He cut the tape away to help, but had to smother him again when he screamed. All that excitement despite the calming ebb of blood seeping around the tight ropes closing the fellow's severed calves.

Severed.

Pinocchio realized he had been watching the man too long. It was time to go.

The man sensed it. He knew, because he summoned the energy to tense his entire body, pull at his bound wrists and shake the bed as Pinocchio approached.

He hissed past new strips of duct tape as Pinocchio loosened the ropes that bound his legs—and then he bled.

Blood pumped out, poured off the sodden mattress and pooled on the carpet. The man gasped, kicked his mangled stumps in the air. Scarlet spattered the ceiling and floor. He shivered in one rigid spasm, gave a long sigh and died.

Pinocchio watched the bleeding slow to a trickle and stop.

He moved to the vinyl sheet by the window and removed his bloody clothing: gloves, surgical gown, pants and slippers. He dumped them in the center of the sheet, as he

always did. Before changing back into his street clothes he'd bundle up the mess and bag it. He'd take it home to his apartment building to incinerate.

Pinocchio stood there a moment naked—listening.

His Variant-enhanced senses kept him safe, kept him focused on the noises outside the room and in the street. Variant protected him and gave him the strength to make his dream come true.

But he had to be careful. The authorities in Metro knew about him. He had already collected a few new parts—had been at it for some time. But recently, he discovered a tongue and took it too hastily, and from another a pair of eyes that were to die for. In his excitement Pinocchio had left a mess; and in the mess something remained that connected other donors.

These authorities called him Pinocchio in the news-feeds, as though that would insult him. But the name was perfect. They must have guessed what he was doing, because they were right. All he ever wanted was to be a real boy.

They were looking for him, so he had to be careful. He had to be patient.

It was just a matter of time. If things went the way they did back in the day, Pinocchio would soon be free to act. The authorities would have their hands full with the Variant Effect in the public again. They wouldn't waste time looking for him when the skin eaters formed their first hunting packs.

It was good luck that his application to join the new Variant Squads had already been accepted. Pinocchio would hide inside the panic.

CHAPTER 2

David White watched the flickering lights of Metro from his spacious office on the top floor of the Cousteau Building. His reflection in the glass was a dim silhouette cast by the energy-efficient lighting in the outer hall. The cityscape reflected in his half-full tumbler of scotch. He took a drink.

GreenMourning Environmental owned the Goodall Complex and used the upper floors of the Cousteau Building to house its Executive Branch.

David was its president.

He grew up wanting to save the planet, but knew almost from day one that he couldn't save humanity too. Something had to give, and it looked like the species was going to join the other doomed success stories in the fossil record. This was just the end result of the *runaway evolution* that his father used to talk about.

Something of a pop phenomenon, Jack White had been a favorite on the lecture circuit and news panels as the voice of the pseudo-science of GreenMourning. The elder White was an otherwise uninspiring anthropologist, uncharismatic but with his startling shock of premature white hair, flamboyant lecture style and love of attention, he was gold to the ratings-driven news cycles at the dawn of the digital age.

Jack White had had his son, David, late in life, the accidental product of a union between the startled older scientist and a very young Chinese doomsday groupie. It turned out that the graduate student from China had been looking for American citizenship and fame. Instead, Ling found out the hard way that she was schizophrenic,

and her first episode would be her last when she leapt to her death from the Clarkston Bridge where it spanned the polluted waters of Metro's Leland River.

David was three when it happened, and while his mother's suicide devastated the boy, it also set the stage for the exciting life that followed. Many times young David would wake in his tidy room in their cluttered Metro apartment to find his father's old hands caressing his forehead. Back from a tour or research trip, Jack would wake him with gifts, regardless of the hour or his nanny's protestations, and they'd talk the night away. Those discussions were never dumbed-down and in time they created a deep interest in the boy for science and the environmental impact and eventual extinction of the apex predator, *Homo sapiens*.

By the time he was seven, David and his nanny had become Jack's constant companions, traveling the world with him. His father's celebrity was in high demand for its ability to shine media light on any environmental issue, populist or political. His father often joked about the premium these organizations paid him to read their eulogies. David inherited much of his father's intellect, but none of his mordant humor.

During this time, and up until he attended a Canadian University where he majored in business and minored in environmental studies, David learned about his father's GreenMourning Theory. Scientists were quick to call it "philosophy," and David agreed. Jack White admitted it wasn't strictly scientific, and was more a distillation of the various available theories he had talked about and studied—an obvious conclusion that was brought together by instinctive knowledge and common sense. Natural laws were its strongest components—pointing inward at a load-bearing hub of enlightenment.

David had little patience for the theory. It was based on the psychological and emotional disconnect that occurred in *Homo sapiens* as humans evolved away from contact with the natural world. It was a fairly simple extension on the impact of habitat loss on species but his father swore up and down that his GreenMourning Theory described the basis for all of humanity's ills.

David didn't buy it, though a wide selection of the mainstream audience purchased it in eBook, video download and documentary form. The touchy-feely post-baby-boomer crowd leapt at the idea of getting back to nature and quickly incorporated the GreenMourning Theory into their healing circles, magic drumming parties and Reiki massage parlors.

David, fresh from university and smelling profit, made overtures to his father about the creation of an over-arching business entity called GreenMourning Environmental. He sugar-coated the pitch with dreams of this business entity becoming a global organizer and fundraiser for all things environmental.

He had to move quickly though, before his father frittered away the GreenMourning profits on donations to the same non-profit organizations David mentioned in his proposal.

The pseudo-scientific elements of the GreenMourning Theory fit well with Jack White's idealistic naiveté, and the pairing turned David's practical stomach. It was just that sort of foolishness that had doomed the world to environmental catastrophe. Only by understanding business and the harsh realities of finance could any group hope to make a positive impact on the environment by altering the human behaviors that drove it toward destruction. Forget honor and trust—you had to be cutthroat. Eat or be eaten.

David took control of the company by the end of its second year, and used GreenMourning's considerable media weight to increase its financial holdings many fold over the next five. During that time, GreenMourning started absorbing smaller 'like-minded' groups, with promises of "pooling resources" only to fire the activists and sell off their assets as soon as possible.

GreenMourning Environmental had been in the process of making a clean environment profitable when the pharmaceutical giant Bezopastnost issued its first lots of Varion. It took years for the impact to be felt, and longer for it to be understood.

By the time the truth became apparent, in the weeks after the Variant Effect was first noted, David had no illusions about what it represented. He had always imagined that humanity's success would be its own undoing, and to some degree Varion was that.

The thought that people would take the Varion drug not to control, but *eradicate* the emotional impact of life, the vagaries of genetics and wellsprings of creation—to cure by creating a calm place in the brain devoid of natural stress—simply boggled David's mind. With such disconnect, what would they become?

When he realized that the side effects of Varion might very well cause human extinction *in his own lifetime*, David decided that chance had given him the opportunity and the power to oppose those who were profiting from the process. Perhaps he could stop or delay it and leave extinction for future generations to experience.

And he had for a time, until an accident set it free again. Now it was coming back, stronger than before. But he believed in the survival of the fittest—and he was still busy surviving.

David smiled.

He walked to the desk, flicked a button on his palm-com where it rested in its power station. The connection buzzed. A female voice answered.

David said: "Natasha get Brass on the phone, please."

CHAPTER 3

Beachboy sprinted along the hallway—cinderblock walls flashing by to either side. His breathing was loud and annoying, rustling and echoing in the vinyl hood. His lamps were on low—giving him just enough light to navigate the shadows. He didn't want to draw any attention.

It was a textbook case, as Borland would grumble. The squad had been called out to Metro Polytechnic University because students were missing past curfew—the numbers had added up over the last couple of nights. *Think!* Borland would say. And then Hyde would hiss: *History!*

The university had an Olympic-sized swimming pool for its own programs and to offer as a venue for international and world-class athletes to train and compete. Beachboy knew the tunnels and dark spaces under and around the facility were the most likely places to find Biters. Again, *textbook*.

The whole scenario smelled of skin eaters—and they were the toughest *Variant Effect* to deal with. The most dangerous to fight. And experience with them often came at the price of your life.

As Beachboy knew only too well. *Mofo paid the bill and I wrote the check!*

Even with the nightmares, he was considered one of the lucky ones. He could only believe that as long as he had a little something to take the edge off. Whiskey was nice. Tequila even better. And activity kept the memories at bay, work and fitness—anything repetitive and mindless—so he jumped at the chance to take the point while the squad held its position and awaited his report. He would relay back coordinates while he tested his hood's new heads-up display or HUD. The mapping apparatus had been unveiled at the stationhouse that morning and roundly mocked by Borland and Aggie.

But it was all by the *new* book for the *new* day. Even though the veterans warned the recruits against trusting technology, they conceded you were as good as dead without it.

It didn't surprise him when the HUD's GPS malfunctioned under all that concrete and water or that within a few turns and gaps of shadow, he was lost. Separated from the squad was bad, but it got worse when he heard something following him. Almost silently, hard to pick up over his own breathing, a pair of feet was echoing the movements of his own. The sound was maybe 20 yards to his rear.

He'd turned off his intercom so he could hear what was happening and what was coming up fast behind. He'd toggle it back on when he needed to contact the squad. Or when he had something to report.

Whatever was on his trail had picked up its pace like it caught his scent and was suddenly anxious for...

Skin.

He moved from his position, angling at a sprint under an archway of steel girders that stabilized the swimming pool's walls. A quick run through shadow and then...

Was that a hiss? And that—a footstep?

Something was coming fast. Beachboy had been in worst places since the squads reactivated, but he wasn't stupid. This was bad. The Variant presentations in Metro had grown from two or three in a month and were now averaging five in a week. He was always quick to volunteer—quick to go after any monsters that lived *outside* of his head.

But he wasn't suicidal. At least, he didn't think...

He grunted, recognizing part of the architecture that held up a long stretch of maintenance walkway. He wasn't lost, not when he remembered the shape of the pool and building. The squad wasn't far away. He'd figured that out after he'd given the maps in his HUD a clockwise spin and realized they were correct; they just needed to be re-configured for north and south. At one point the digital map projected a chain of Metro Coffee shops across the inside of his face-shield, and he laughed.

Don't get cocky! He hefted his gun and poured on the speed.

But something was coming, and the low light from his hood-lamps forced him to slow—just in case—in case, he was being chased into an ambush.

Ssskin!

They aren't that smart...*are they?*

A noise. Close on his heels. It would be on him if he turned. A thick concrete pillar loomed ahead. He dodged behind it, slammed his back against the cold surface and swung his shotgun high.

Beachboy held his breath, strained to hear over his hammering heart.

Footsteps. Close. Running. Closer!

And a loud *popping* sound. *A snap!* Like someone wearing vinyl—running—*was it backup? Or have they got one of us?*

He didn't have time to wonder. The thing was coming too fast. It was right *there!* Beachboy counted the footsteps, snarled, then whipped out around the pillar, gun level and cocked.

Nothing. Just shadow. That was stupid!

And a compact body struck him in the left side—knocked the wind out of him. Strong hands gripped his suit and gun, forced his elbows up, shoved him off balance onto the ground. His chest convulsed on dead air when he slammed against the concrete.

“*Stupid!*” he gasped in the dark. “*Death wish!*” The thing must have swung around the pillar and doubled back. *For an easy kill...*

But hands were on him now—pinching. A head dug into his ribs, and pushed him along the floor, wedged his shoulder against the pillar. He tried to get his gun free, but it was pinned under him.

Hiss! That was it. Next would be...

Ssskin.

And he felt his throat close up. A shiver ran through him as adrenaline surged. *Stupid considering...*

His shoulders wrenched painfully as the thing flipped him onto his back and his hood-lamps lit the concrete ceiling, illuminated his attacker's slippery vinyl covering. *A bag-suit!*

Got one of us! A wave of terror closed his ears...the ocean roared. *This shouldn't be happening. Don't panic! They can't get me.*

And Dancer's face moved into the light from his hood-lamps. Her eyes were wild with anticipation as her strong hands tore and ripped at his vinyl hood—her lips were stretched back in a grimace like a smile and she snapped even rows of sharp, white teeth.

He tried to shift his weight, but his arm was trapped, the other was tight under Dancer. She was grinding it into his chest with her pelvis. She suddenly moaned and snapped her teeth.

“*Goddamn!*” Beachboy blurted, kicking his legs. Dancer's fingers clawed under his hood, hooked on his face-shield and wrenched it off its moorings.

She slid her body over his, grinding her weight, driving up and down his length as her snapping jaws nipped his neck, and then her lips opened...

And closed on his.

Her hands worked frantically—so did *his* now—pulling at the vinyl bag-suits, grabbing snaps and buckles, ripping Velcro open while their lips pressed and their tongues caressed. They twisted on the floor, more flesh coming free of protection. Their tunics came up; their pants slid open and down.

And Dancer's fingers wrapped around his rigid member.

“*I don't want your skin, Beachboy!*” she breathed, sighing as she sank down onto him and he thrust up into her. They moved together slowly, rhythmically against each other's strength.

“*I want your flesh,*” she hissed.

They quickly built to climax. Dancer's incisors sunk into Beachboy's chest when she came. He didn't feel a thing.

A short time later they lay on a heap of clothing and vinyl in the dark, their naked bodies still entwined.

The squads had been using the halls under the university pool to train. Some baggies liked to come in after hours for extended studies.

“That was nice,” Dancer whispered, shifting to set her head on Beachboy’s bicep.

“And then some...” he agreed.

Not long after Parkerville he’d discovered Dancer’s interest in night classes. They started out by sharpening their squad skills, and before long it turned into *this*. They were still using shield-names. He doubted it could ever go much farther.

“I think about Parkerville,” she said.

“Me too,” Beachboy nodded.

“And *surviving*. You can see why Borland and Aggie are the way they are.” Dancer went quiet a second, and then. “And Captain Hyde. Losing his daughter that way, after suffering so much. How does he keep going?”

Beachboy remembered the tunnels, remembered getting separated from Borland and fighting Biters with Zombie and Lilith. He broke from them to lead a pair of Biters away. When he returned, he guessed that Zombie and Lilith had gone after Borland.

“They never found her body; maybe Hyde hangs onto that,” Dancer said softly. “But she couldn’t have got out. The hotlink was sealed.”

Beachboy remembered finding a dead woman floating in the water with a skinned dog nearby. Her head was smashed. The broken stock of a shotgun bobbed beside her.

Beachboy grunted.

He remembered running along the tunnel, falling over Lazlo’s body—his skull was cut open, brain gone—what? Beachboy remembered hurrying through the floodwater—a gun battle behind, and gunfire up ahead.

He saw Zombie where the tunnel opened on dim light. Then a flash, a gunshot and Zombie fell. Brass was there across from the dead baggie and witnessed the whole thing.

Borland too. He must have been standing by Zombie. His .38 was smoking. Beachboy listened to all he could stand and ran back the way he came...

Dancer’s fingernails bit into Beachboy’s cheek and ripped him out of his reverie. He turned his head toward her.

“Let’s do it again,” she whispered and smiled evilly, searching the pile of vinyl for her underwear. “But this time *you* be the Biter.”

“Don’t think I won’t bite you...” Beachboy said, as he looked for his boots.

CHAPTER 4

9:00 a.m. – Early in the New Day.

Borland grumbled under his breath as the bus lurched through traffic.

Headquarters had said it would be a one-hour wait for a squad car so Borland told them to stuff themselves; he’d get there on his own dime. Barely back to the squad for 10 months, and they were already treating him like a second-class citizen.

Same old song and dance.

The taxi company promised a longer wait so that had left Borland hoofing it down to the shelter in front of the falafel joint where he waited with the great unwashed for a Metro city bus.

Goddamn bus.

His cohort Hyde had his own transportation. The Horton was a cross between an ambulance, mobile home and a communications center, and there was a driver to go along with it. It was also available on call and waiting to pick the damn cripple up from the home, if he ever went home. Instead, Hyde spent most of his time buttoned up in the vehicle where it was parked at the stationhouse while Borland had to take a bus.

Goddamn hobgoblin.

The transport was one of the perks of trundling around in a wheelchair dressed up like a refugee from Halloween land. With his black, oversized coat and hood, the skinned Variant Squad veteran haunted the stationhouse when he wasn't cooped up in the Horton, and he did as he pleased. Borland had seen him on more than one occasion sitting in his wheelchair off to the side, the glow from his e-board throwing a ghostly glow up under his hood.

Supposedly hard at work.

But Borland knew the old cripple could cop naps when the mood hit him, and people let him alone because it would require looking up under that hood to tell whether he was asleep or awake.

And under there was an eyesore that belonged in a freak show.

Nobody had the stomach for it.

Borland had heard through the grapevine that Hyde preferred to work at night when the activities were more subdued, and there was less likelihood of interruption.

Or *interference*. Hyde liked to do things his own way.

Any time Borland wanted to cop a nap, he'd have to weasel his way into the upper berth on either squad transport or slink off to the utility room at the back of the stationhouse where there was a creaky little cot.

But he'd only tried that once and almost got pinched. Unlike poor Hyde, it was okay to ride Borland. Why not, he was a big and easy target to hit. He'd already received a couple of reprimands for being intoxicated on duty, and he knew his POO sessions after Parkerville were more about washing his brain than balancing things in there.

What else did you expect? That's the way the Psyche Operations Office worked.

He gritted his teeth and snarled under his breath as the bus stopped to pick up another refugee from Ellis Island—this one a tall man with skin the color of coal and eyes to match. He was wearing the kind of ill-fitting mega-store clothing that suggested a church sponsor, and minimal amount of time on American soil.

And only an immigrant would wear those colors: bright yellow, green and orange.

Borland hunkered down. He shifted his bulk and slid a wide thigh over half the seat beside him. He wasn't in a sharing mood.

How much more am I supposed to take?

So he studied the scars on his hands as the new American walked over and waited for some kind of social grace before opting to hang from the handrail overhead. Borland caught the bright orange pants in his peripheral vision and he groaned his displeasure.

Goddamn orange pants.

He had been an hour behind schedule when he called for a squad car. And he was only late because his new system had failed miserably: have two drinks after dinner instead of half a bottle.

Whoops! Where'd that whiskey go?

He was trying to be good. He did like the POOs on his case had told him: Pick music you like, and think of a happy place.

So after a microwave dinner, he had poured a drink, and dialed up a download on his palm-com—even ran the feed through his television’s surround sound and settled back on the couch as some French-Canadian songbird started warbling about the *Titanic*...

But Borland didn’t have a happy place.

He shifted on his seat uncomfortably remembering tears, anger and then waking up on the couch in his underwear.

If it ain’t broke...

He didn’t have much of a hangover. Even with his fragile new attempts at self-control, his body was still so acclimated to boozing that he rarely felt any of the severe side effects.

So just another day in paradise.

He did feel crappy, but he was looking forward to breakfast. That would do it, turn his mood around. There was a ten-minute window between buses at the Metro station where he was supposed to transfer. That would allow him time to grab a jumbo hotdog and coffee from the East Indian’s cart.

He knew that flew in the face of the weight reduction diet the squad doctors had put him on, but he knew how to drive a mild hangover to a better place, and he required grease, sauerkraut and hot peppers to make that happen.

The bus swayed on the curved ramp coming into the station and the big black man shifted with it, managed to grind off the edge of Borland’s boot with his big red running shoe.

Borland scowled at the seat in front of him, wishing he were wearing his squad jumper with captain’s bars.

Get some goddamn respect.

His stomach grumbled sickly as he glared through the flyspecked window.

Streets came in from every point of the compass to a terminal that over the years had grown to look more and more like a mega-store. At the Eatery you could get pizza and beer or have your prescription filled in a couple of the shopping options it now offered. There was even a strip club.

But Borland was focused on the East Indian’s hotdog cart as they hurtled into the hodgepodge of buses, mini-vans and shuttles that slid and slipped around the terminal. The Eatery was on the east side of the complex, a quick walk from the downtown bus ramp. It had a collection of about eight different fast food places with doors that opened onto a big fenced-in grassy area boxed on two sides by bus ramps and on the third by the highway.

The East Indian kept his cart down there, not far from a central wading pool and fountain that was surrounded by picnic tables. There was a sculpture in the pool of a big grizzly bear standing up on posts with one paw raised, ready to murder any of the three leaping salmon positioned atop posts of their own.

Borland could just make out the thing’s brass fur as his bus swept up the onramp, positioning itself to enter the terminal.

With New Years only two weeks gone, Borland knew there should be snow and freezing temperatures. *That was the way it used to be.* True, they’d had a trough of cold

air around Christmas, wet snow and the like, and a couple blizzard events before that, but the temperature kept bouncing up well over freezing and erasing all evidence.

Not like the way it used to be.

Global warming had become the planet's Variant Effect. It looked like the same world, but you couldn't trust it anymore. He didn't know if they were having a mild winter, or an early spring.

He just didn't know.

The bus shuddered and roared through some gears.

Right. Jumbo hotdog.

He couldn't waste any time.

Because he wasn't the only one who knew about the East Indian.

Winner take all!

The bus heaved to a stop under the covered arrival ramp.

Borland lurched out of his seat, moved past the big black man and pushed through the doors ahead of a young mother juggling a baby, a bag and a folding stroller.

And Borland was out into the stream of commuters, fighting his way toward the stairs. It was every man for himself.

He had ten minutes.

No sweat.

In a little under four minutes, he was walking away from the East Indian's hotdog cart careful to avoid wearing the mustard that was dripping off his jumbo dog. His tie was already decorated with a light brown chevron smear.

There were more people in the picnic area than he thought there'd be at that time of day, but a good number were kids being shepherded by male and female teachers, workers or babysitters—exploiting the unexpected warmth.

Farther along by the wading pool, in the shadow of the big brass bear, Borland saw an old woman in a pale blue leisure suit sitting at a table with a couple of tots. The kids were eating bagels and the oldest was standing on the bench beside the old woman and shouting in her ear as she stared blankly into the distance—overwhelmed.

Spare the rod.

Then a group came out of Pablo's Mexican Pizza. Asian to a man, they wore the rumpled clothes and sleep-lined faces that suggested a cross-country tour bus had put in to Metro to water and feed its cramped cargo. The passengers looked surprised by what they found as they unwrapped the colorful wax paper.

Look at all the goddamn camera phones!

So, there was more activity than Borland would have liked had he been interested in staying. He glanced at the clock over the terminal door and saw he had about four minutes left.

The jumbo dog was delicious.

The air in the picnic grounds was surprisingly moist and warm. The sunlight came into it at a sharp angle, turned gold by a haze of bus exhaust.

His eye was drawn back to the pool when a woman started shouting at the youngsters who were playing around the edge. One of them had gone wading, and was starting a trend. Their minders were trying to round them up before they were all soaked.

Then Borland shifted his attention back over to the old lady in the blue suit. The kids had taken her bagel, and she was just sitting there talking to herself, deserving the worst they could dish out.

He chuckled to himself, relishing his breakfast, enjoying another mouthful of jumbo dog and hot peppers as he moved into position by the trashcan glancing up at the terminal clock.

Getting close...

Borland raised the hotdog for another bite as a scream echoed through the picnic grounds.

Everybody froze.

Terrified eyes rolled around looking for the source of the sound.

Borland included.

Then a single, harsh hiss slid through the sudden silence—really dominated it.

It made Borland wish he'd never come to the East Indian's hotdog cart.

He drew his .38 as a wave of terror swept through the crowd: kids ran and adults scrambled to pick them up, to get them away.

The stampede that followed was started by the single word hissed again:

“SSSKIN!”

CHAPTER 5

9:00 a.m.

Agnes Dambe set her teacup down. Winced as the gentle action brought a twinge of pain from her broken hand and wrist.

It's the only way girl: use it or lose it.

The damn thing had almost been healed from the mess in Parkerville when she got ambitious while training the new recruits in hand-to-hand.

Ambitious? Strange... She never thought that way before.

She took Hazard the squad driver up on his challenge to spar at the end of the fight training session. He was over a foot taller than her and with a seventy-five pound advantage, but as her mentor Marshall Lovelock had always said, *fighting was more about skill than strength.*

And it was true, Hazard was strong; but his heavy, bodybuilder muscles slowed him down—evened out many of his advantages. Being faster, Aggie could leap inside his longer reach to punch and kick past his sloppy in-fighting defenses. She'd been thrilled at first. A quick victory over a more powerful opponent was just the thing she needed.

Plus, she enjoyed putting a young braggart in his place.

At the start of the training, she'd ordered the squad to set the fight ring up at the back of the stationhouse, and by the end she had Hazard, face-bloodied, doing his best to hold himself up against the ropes.

A hint of her old battle lust came up on her—something about seeing all that male muscle in full retreat, and a once-arrogant expression replaced by bewildered defeat. But she'd decided to make an example of the side of beef. It was simple to her. If she didn't hurt him, he'd never learn how to protect himself or respect her.

The other baggies had postponed their showers to watch, and had drawn in tight around the ring. Most of them were brand new recruits too—replacements for those she'd lost in Parkerville.

They'd never seen Agnes Dambe in action.

And she wanted to be sure they never forgot.

One of her solid lefts got Hazard deep in the solar plexus. That jackknifed his body forward just as her newly knit right fist was flying in for some chin music. But she'd mistimed it in her excitement—with the win so close—and her knuckles rang off his forehead. She caught all of his weight like she'd hit a bag full of bricks.

And the *cracking* sound had come as such a surprise that she almost let out a scream.

She found out later that the bones had fractured along the same lines from her knuckles down into her wrist.

The pain was incredible, but Aggie had covered it by biting down on her lip almost hard enough to bring blood. That new surge of pain was intended to bring her feelings under control, and to teach.

Goddamn! His shield-name should have been *Rockhead*.

Aggie ended the fight, but managed to hide her injury by sending the recruits who had dallied to watch on a five-mile run through Metro before they showered.

That cleared the house long enough for her to let Gordon the medic have a look. He checked and confirmed the fracture and reinforced it with a clear plastic cast.

And he knew enough about his captain to keep the injury under his hat.

Goddamn Rockhead Hazard.

Aggie sat at the breakfast nook in her one-bedroom apartment. The nook consisted of a curving table and bench seat combination recessed in the wall across from the stove, fridge, counter and cupboards. The kitchen opened on both ends. She looked out at the front hallway. That led up the stairs on the left to the small attic bedroom and bath, or straight on to the front door, outer hall and elevators. Behind her the room opened on a living space with big windows where she kept her weights and bench, wide-screen, couch and shelves for old collectible books, music player and speakers.

Agnes smiled a humorless smile as she flexed the fingers on her fractured right hand, as the left brushed the e-reader's touch-screen, opened the digital magazine to the photo spread.

She smiled again, looking at the *Photoshopped* fashions.

Where is Agnes Dambe going to wear that?

She ground her teeth, studying the full color display.

It showed a woman—*younger* they were always younger nowadays—dressed in a blazer, blouse and skirt combination. Agnes didn't bother much with dresses anymore, certainly nothing with spaghetti straps for revealing shoulders.

She had nowhere to wear such a thing.

Her lifestyle, weight training and yes, her age...made the set and heft of her shoulders strong and definite, and yes, *remarkable*.

She remembered the first black president's wife—the tall woman with the strong arms and powerful physique. How the press had hounded her about those arms and shoulders. How the public had admired.

She was proud of her strength.

And so was Agnes; but a part of her pined for the delicate, yearned for the dainty when she studied her fighter's body in the mirror.

Lovelock had taught her no defense against the might of western fashion.

She frowned at the thought. It made her so: obvious, predictable...*female*. She shook her head and reached out for the teacup. The china was warm to the touch and told her the tea was now drinkable.

Agnes lifted the simple brew and took a sip, enjoying its bitter warmth. She never took anything in it during the weekdays. Saturday and Sunday she spoiled herself with honey, even milk when she wanted to indulge. But during the week, she kept it simple, and kept it clean. Uncomplicated it fit well in the tight underpinnings of her finely tuned body. Tea was the drink of the aware, of the body-oriented. It never, even in a strong brew, confounded the senses or created an uncomfortable edge.

There was no anxiety and nothing to pick her up.

It simply made her aware of herself. Of her strength and body, of her inner balance.

And that was the key to Agnes.

The balance.

It was the only thing she could control. In fact, she imagined that was why the mystics and the prophets favored tea. It had none of the modern ticks, foibles and symptoms of coffee. Your heart didn't race. You didn't sweat. Tea was always calm.

Agnes laughed then, and set the teacup down.

Where's your balance now, girl? Why are you having bad dreams?

Indeed, the squad POO Dr. Cavalle had told Agnes that the depression she felt after Parkerville was natural. It was normal for human beings to react that way, and squad records showed that it was especially normal for squad captains back in the day.

But Agnes already knew that.

She had been around back in the day. She'd seen strong male and female captains weep like babies and drop to their knees after bloodbaths.

If you're a veteran, you should be ready for this.

But she hadn't been a captain for long back in the day. They'd boosted her rank just as the Variant Effect had been on the wane. She'd seen major combat as a baggie, and fight specialist; but all of that was on the decline when she got her bars.

She'd never had time to shift her inner balance to figure in the responsibility for those under her command. As a baggie, she'd been a fighter, an eager dog protecting her squad.

And even that was different. Something had happened to her in the decades between.

The truth was, she'd been depressed since Parkerville and her old stress relievers of diet, fitness and fight training had failed to bring her out of it. Cavalle had finally, reluctantly, suggested an antidepressant, but Agnes couldn't do that. Not after watching the world go crazy on Varion. Not now that it might be going crazy again.

She could never take a drug for that.

So Cavalle had told her to look for her inner balance by starting at the beginning.

And that was why Aggie was looking at fashion and clothes.

She'd started out a girl. She'd been foolish at times, but good and hopeful of heart.

Before she was a warrior.

She'd spent days building dreams of a normal life: a husband, perhaps a home. A family...

She tapped the touch-screen and started searching the net for news.

After blinking past a flurry of unread headlines she set the device aside to study her teacup. A worn gold band circled the top, and a green scrollwork of leaves and vines arched over the rim. The organic swirl was mirrored on the saucer.

The last of a kind.

It was her mother's. Part of a set her father's family had given as a wedding present. Nothing fancy or grand, just four place settings for tea. And now only one cup and saucer remained, like her parents, the last survivors of a set brought from Africa.

They had made it to the Spanish refugee camps in one piece where Agnes was born amid the squalor. Most of their group had died on the way, or of sickness upon arrival.

Her mother had struggled with illness too, but managed to keep her daughter alive.

Agnes imagined their desperate voyage from Africa, the ungraceful landing and scramble for safety on the Spanish shores.

Despite the heroic actions, settlement stateside, and promise of the American Dream, Agnes ended up with a teacup and saucer.

That was all.

Her parents were lucky. Instead of a horrible end with the Variant Effect, they just grew old and died. The rest of her family was drowned in the Mediterranean Sea.

And now Agnes had grown too old to start anew. There was the dream—it didn't matter if it was American or not, it was certainly human.

She set the somber thoughts aside and glanced at her palm-com for the time.

Her shift started at noon.

She washed the cup and saucer and put them away in the cupboard before she showered.

CHAPTER 6

9:20 a.m.

Borland growled as the crowd flowed around him. He used his bulk to push back against the flood of terrified people. Screams echoed around the Eatery, and shoes trampled across the concrete pad by the fast food joints. In the distance, buses rumbled and roared.

He wasn't going to make his transfer.

The crowd surged.

Borland struggled to keep his focus against the onslaught.

He couldn't lose sight of...

The old woman in the blue leisure suit was making it easy.

Everybody else was clearing out.

But she sprinted across the grass away from the crowd, speeding toward the wading pool. Her face was a grinning mask of fury and terror as she pulled the youngest of her companions, a boy, by the arm. She dragged him effortlessly as he screamed. He was a small child; his round, white face was frozen with fear.

The old woman lifted him suddenly, and charged across the grass.

And she leapt up onto one of the brass fish. The strength and agility required for the feat would have been impossible for an Olympic athlete.

But this was something else. It was an old wives' tale that Borland had lived through, and that the others in the terrified crowd were reluctant to believe.

The old woman hooked the sculpture's dorsal fin with one hand, got her footing and then scrambled higher as a couple of young men and a woman gave chase, shouting their outrage—still too angry to plead for the hostage's safety.

The old woman hissed, easily flipped the child up onto her shoulder as she jumped for the brass bear's outstretched paw. Her crooked fingers caught at the sculpture, and she swung herself up onto the animal's back—now a good 20 feet over the heads of those in pursuit.

Borland trundled closer, half a jumbo hotdog still clutched in one hand, a .38 caliber pistol in the other.

Goddamn.

Clots of people broke against Borland's bulk—fell to either side as he stumped forward. Some noticed his weapon wide-eyed and added that fact to the shrill of their terror.

Why are you doing this?

He was a Variant Squad captain past his prime, but it was his duty.

Duty, don't you mean an easy kill?

It was true. This was no dark tunnel full of shadows and death. The old woman had presented as a Biter out in broad daylight, center to the Eatery's open space.

It was a shooting gallery.

Perched up there on the brass bear's back, she had nowhere to hide. The frightened boy struggled in her grip. He'd seen the set of his granny's features.

She wasn't going to read him any bedtime story.

And his nightmares had never prepared him for this.

Borland already had a clear shot, but he moved closer to make it count.

The people who were trying to help were turned away from him. Couldn't see his approach. They had gathered under the statuary in the wading pool with water up to their knees pleading with the old woman to be careful with the boy.

Please won't you let him go?

And true to form, the Biter answered their polite regard by shifting the boy in its arms and biting his neck. There was a ripping sound, and a great cry of dismay came up from the people in the pool. The old lady Biter tore a strip of skin off the kid.

A collective gasp came from behind.

Borland glanced back and saw that while half of the crowd had disappeared inside the terminal and restaurants, a good number had hesitated by the doors, drawn into the drama.

They held their little palm-coms up, videos and cameras whining.

Perhaps they'd seen Borland and his gun, and assumed that everything would soon be under control. Or it was something else he'd seen before.

Technology protected them from the reality. Made them dumber, more remote or less human, collecting images they could resell, or send to friends. It was all happening on the other side of the camera.

They were safe and had the leisure for the snide remark—the sneering laugh. The gang could gather around their work computers and chuckle at someone else's nightmare.

Watch and learn and laugh.

The new form of Variant had only just set its teeth into the population. The outbreak was underway, but most of the hard stuff had been edited down by Brass' media people into insubstantial news flashes or wrapped in plastic by the squads as small presentations occurred throughout Metro. There were even the early terrifying indications shared by foreign law enforcement that it had already spread overseas.

But all that information was controlled, dialed down to protect the public from its own fears, or shaped into reassuring cables for competing embassy offices.

So the idiots with their cameras had not seen the worst yet. The older among them might remember the day, but memories faded.

Especially the bad stuff.

And the rest had only heard how bad things got.

As Borland moved to within 20 yards of the wading pool and statuary; he took another bite of his hotdog.

The people in the water were still pleading, begging the old woman to let the boy go.

The kid had lost consciousness after the Biter had taken a second strip of skin. His blood seeped over the brass bear's fur, dripped down into the water.

"All right everyone!" Borland shouted, raising the .38 in his scarred right hand. "Stay calm."

He fired a shot that glanced off the Biter's shoulder. The slippery footing on the bloody brass sculpture forced the creature to drop the boy to maintain its position.

Borland watched him fall into the water. The men and woman hurried to him. They picked the boy up and carried him away from the pool.

They don't understand yet.

The Biter's old eyes glared down at Borland and it *hissed*. Long strips of bloody skin dangled from its lower jaw like a beard.

Borland fired off another shot, but the bullet rang against the brass.

Then it moved.

The Biter was fast. It leapt to one of the brass fish.

He fired again. In a flash, the Biter slipped behind the fish and the bullet hit metal.

Borland stuffed the last of his jumbo hotdog between his teeth and gripped the pistol in both hands to search for a target.

But the Biter was nowhere to be seen.

There are no easy kills.

"SSSKIN!" the thing hissed as it jumped from behind the brass fish, then hopped closer, from the back of one to another as Borland fired and missed again.

The creature sprang easily from the nearest fish and hissing, landed on the grass at the edge of the wading pool, just yards away from Borland's feet.

"Jesus!" Borland grunted, as the Biter charged at him on all fours.

His next shot burned along the creature's spine, left a red rip in the pale blue jacket.

The Biter screamed: "Ssskin!" and jumped.

Borland growled as it hurtled toward him, as its teeth snapped.

And his last bullet hit the Biter between the eyes.

The old woman collapsed on the ground at his feet.

No time. No time!

He dug into his pocket for his speed loader, watching the thing in the grass shudder and lay still.

But he knew it might not be over...

The worst is yet to come.

The onlookers were coming forward quickly. Their faces full of worry, fear and rage. They glanced back and forth between Borland and the old woman's body on the grass.

He shook the empty cartridges out and reloaded his weapon.

"Stay back, stay back," he ordered, left hand digging for his wallet. "I'm Captain Joe Borland of the Variant Squads."

The onlookers had stopped moving forward, were glaring at the dead woman, Borland's gun, and the clear panel in his wallet that held his squad I.D.

"It's the *Variant Effect*... The danger might not be over!" He looked around, started moving along the front of the crowd. "That boy has to be *ziplocked!*"

Then he recognized the boy's rescuers huddled over where they'd set him on a picnic table.

He scowled and snarled, "Nobody touch the old woman's body!"

Borland put his wallet away and pulled out his palm-com. He hit the speed dial, and was talking to dispatch.

"I need a squad," he said, and told them where.

He walked over to the people who were gathered around the young victim.

"Get away from the boy," he said, and was met with looks of undisguised anger.

"I mean it," he grated, hefting his pistol.

Two men, and a woman were supplying aid, another kid stood nearby crying.

All of them had blood on their hands.

The injured boy had lost skin on his neck, and a long strip was torn from his chest. The wound disappeared into his shirt.

"Get back, all of you," Borland growled, with a wave of his gun. "Sit on the grass over there."

"Now just a minute!" the woman shouted. She had pretty eyes, and very red lips.

"Just shut up, lady," Borland snarled, "and sit on the grass. This is the Variant Effect. I'm a squad captain taking charge of this scene."

"What are you talking about?" one of the men asked. He was big and looked like he might have a mean streak.

"Just sit on the grass," Borland ordered again, now pushing the closest man away from the picnic table. The woman drew the other kid away.

Someone in the crowd behind Borland shouted in outrage. Another scolded.

But Borland got the boy's rescuers sitting or kneeling in a line.

And they glared up at him.

He was just about to explain himself, when a sharp hiss came from behind him.

CHAPTER 7

10 a.m.

"BUS TERMINAL HORROR!"

The headline burned across the flat-screen with glowing hot text. Behind it, the image: a building, buses parked in front of it, and animated flames rolling up to the molten sky.

It looked like the end of the world.

The headline pulsed hot orange as an announcer's voice echoed: "Bus Terminal Horror!"

Hyde barely looked up from his e-board. He'd been around too long to be easily dragged into the news-feed theatrics. Like most of the populace he had become desensitized to horror.

But he did know how to multitask so kept a subtle ear cocked to the report as it played out on the big flat-screen he'd had mounted over his desk to the left of his main computer console.

"At 9:30 this morning, two people died in what witnesses are calling a Variant Effect attack. Authorities are on the scene, but refuse to confirm or deny the rumor pending the completion of their investigation."

Hyde looked up.

The announcer was in his early thirties, and was dressed in the latest fashion trend. A look of disbelief and mild panic clenched his chiseled features. His representation of unflappable authority clashed with the garish graphic behind him.

He's old enough for Kinderkid status...

Hyde knew it was a common legacy of the Variant Effect. After nine months in a Varion-soaked womb a newborn looked healthy and normal. *But it could take years for parents to find the prize inside.*

"Metronews-1 thanks People-Watch Reporter Kim Phan for sending in a palm-com recording of the event."

The reporter's face sobered: "The following video is graphic. Viewer discretion is advised."

Hyde angled back in his wheelchair to watch.

The news-feed flashed as it cut to the video. It was hard to make out at first as the image bobbed, and the palm-com shuddered, as the operator moved.

Sounds came over the shaky blur of images.

Many voices: frightened, screaming and panicked. The sound was ramped up and then dialed way down.

Then the image stabilized. There were many people crowded close, their heads facing away. Smoggy morning light glowed around them. They were looking over an expanse of concrete and asphalt that abutted a broad span of dark green grass. Farther on was statuary mounted in a pool of water.

A brass bear standing on wooden posts? And metal fish shaped to look like they were jumping from the pond.

The video vibrated, blurred as the auto-function zoomed in.

Hyde gripped the arms of his chair and pulled himself forward.

An old woman was crouching on top of the bear.

A sudden blurry zoom in on her face.

The video shook, and wavered.

But Hyde could see it.

The old woman's teeth were exposed in a distorted grimace. Her lips were pulled back over her gums.

The eyes were mad orbs of white.

She held a child in her arms.

But her mouth was moving...

Rhythmic, almost spastic, the jaws and lips worked over a word. The teeth snapped, repeated it.

Hyde's heart raced.

It's one of them...

And the video lurched. Swung down to blur across the back of a female spectator's head, and then the camera popped up to focus on a man. He was heavysset in sports jacket and pants. He was walking across the grass away from the camera. There was a gun in his hand.

The fool!

He raised it and fired.

At the first *thud*, the crowd let out a sudden frightened roar and rushed backward pushing the palm-com and its owner in a stream of garbled noise.

The video lurched up at the sky as the palm-com was lifted over the crowd for a second—just long enough to catch the old lady dropping the boy.

The crowd pushed back again screaming.

There were more *thuds*.

The video became an incomprehensible blur.

The images vibrated again...

Suddenly resolved on the old lady as she jumped off the statue and hit the grass, moved forward...

The big man held his pistol in both hands.

The crowd pushed again and the video gyrated and shook.

Angry voices cursing while in the background more *thuds* as a gun was fired.

The screams rose in intensity.

And the video went dark.

The announcer returned, the graphic title blazing behind him.

“Metronews-1 again thanks People-Watch Reporter Kim Phan for sending in a palm-com recording of this tragic event that happened only minutes ago at the Metro Westland Bus Terminal Complex.”

The announcer turned to a camera on his right to keep the news-feed moving. The graphic titling swung around to burn over his shoulder.

“Metronews-1 reporters have been dispatched to the scene and will...”

The announcer paused, lifted his right hand up to his ear-prompt. He looked off camera and then nodded his head.

“There is a new development.” He looked to the left of the camera and started to read: “Metronews-1 would like to thank People-Watch Reporter Jim Carmichael for this video upload of events as they have progressed. Again we warn that the following video-capture is graphic in nature. Viewer discretion is advised.”

A crowd of people stood in a half circle around the heavysset man.

He still held his gun in his hand, and he had it pointed at four people that he had forced to sit or kneel on the grass: two men, a woman and a boy. He was talking to

them—shouting something. The crowd of witnesses was angry, frightened. Their fear drowned out the man’s words, only picked up his tone.

Hyde gasped.

Oh my god.

It was Borland.

This new People-Watch Reporter had a steadier hand, or the crowd had become less agitated, because the video rolled out unimpeded.

There was an unconscious boy on a picnic table behind Borland. He was wounded. There was blood all over him.

The old woman had the boy on the statue, must have bitten him.

Borland’s gun shook as he spoke. He punctuated his words with the moving barrel, but what he said was muffled.

He stood between the crowd and the boy. His dark eyes kept shifting back to the people on the ground.

Were they prisoners? What the...

Borland had his palm-com out too. There was tension in his broken-down frame, but his expression was nonchalant. Calm? Sedated...

He’d have called it in! Dispatch would send the closest squad. Metro Westland Bus Terminal Complex would be covered by...Stationhouse Four back in the day. But they weren’t up and running yet. Who had that district now?

Borland’s voice was drowned out as the closing crowd shouted angrily for him to desist. The palm-com video continued to shake—the focus dialed in and out.

Borland shouted back at the crowd—warned them, and then turned to the people on the grass.

His prisoners. No! He was trying to institute protocol.

The video shook again as the palm-com was jostled.

But the crowd didn’t understand. This isn’t the Day! They don’t know what he’s doing!

There was a high garbled sound, a *hiss* that jolted the gathering.

Borland calmly turned toward the injured boy off screen.

He raised his pistol...

And fired four rounds.

The video shifted to catch the boy dying. He’d changed positions, was perched atop the picnic table. The bullets tore him apart.

Some people screamed in terror. Others shouted angrily.

The palm-calm video suddenly dialed into Borland’s face as some dim realization broke through his old training, and his indifference.

The video held tight to Borland’s scowl as the crowd surged at him—roaring. He raised his pistol to warn them off, but they were on him.

The video shook, jumped and cut out as the boiling crowd struck Borland like a tsunami.

The announcer returned. The garish graphic behind him brought out the red in his face, made him look feverish: “Authorities are on the scene but have yet to divulge the name of the shooter. Some witnesses who escaped the bus terminal before lockdown said the suspect had declared himself a Variant Squad captain. Metro officials have yet to release a statement.”

Escaped...

Before the announcer moved to another story he said: “Metronews-1 will follow this story and encourages other People-Watch Reporters to keep watching and uploading the news.”

Hyde lifted his right arm, activated the wireless remote to lower the sound.

Then he set his hands in his lap, and studied their palms.

The old woman in the report showed all the signs of a Variant presentation.

Dermatophagia: a skin eater. There was no doubt she’d gone Biter.

A thrill of old terror shook along Hyde’s spine. The squads had already confirmed that it was back, but this little escapade, this video, would already have gone viral by now. It was being downloaded all over the world.

It would travel through the public. The young would remember the stories.

The old would remember the day.

This video would clamor through hearts and minds like a mad ghost.

History would repeat itself.

And Borland...

Hyde remembered the expression on his fellow veteran’s face. The old swagger suddenly changing to realization and then fear as the crowd closed in.

Hyde chuckled under his breath. *The fool!*

Then he scolded himself. Civilians had died. He picked at one of his scarred palms, and then raised his hands over his heart as a remembered *hiss* played in his mind.

That’s Borland’s story. Wherever he went people—*someone*—died.

But Borland always survived.

Then Hyde looked up at the mute flat-screen and thought of the rushing crowd. The angry voices.

How long could his luck hold out?

CHAPTER 8

11 a.m.

“GODDAMN IT, Borland!” Brass roared as he pulled him into the back of the sedan.

Borland flinched, sliding onto the bench seat; still raw from the near lynching he’d received after he shot the boy-Biter.

What did they expect me to do?

His cheeks burned where someone—a hysterical woman—had raked his face with her fingernails. And his guts felt wrenched, like all of the hernia repair work had been sprung when he had to ram and batter his way through the blood-crazed mob.

Their numbers had worked against them in the end—forced them too close. Crowded them too tight to harm him effectively. Their fists were flung over the shoulders and heads of others in the group. The blows had been glancing at best. His shins stung from a hundred kicks, but what was that? All in the line of duty.

But that woman with the nails, she was an in-fighter. She had closed with him and dug in with her fingers like a...

What did they expect? The old lady had presented...

“Are you listening to me?” Brass snapped from the seat beside him.

“Damn...” Brass said finally, relenting, giving Borland the once-over before handing him a light blue packet of moistened bandage strips. “Use these...”

Borland took the pack and tore the blue paper aside, noticing for the first time that his fingers left bloody prints. He paused, looking at his torn knuckles, then pulled a bandage out and started wiping at his face. It came away stained with dirt and blood.

The sterilizing fluid smelled of alcohol and he cocked an eye at Brass thinking...

But Brass’ dark face was stonily regarding him; and there was something behind his brows that suggested conflict.

Borland knew it was too early to ask for a drink without getting a lecture instead, so he dabbed at his ravaged cheeks with the stinging cloth and thought back to the Eatery.

The Metro cops had arrived just as the angry crowd had descended on him. He was planted solidly on his feet as they surged in at him kicking and punching. They never did bring him down, and the cops stepped in before he’d had to...had to...

Before you had to what? Open fire on the public?

Borland had been lucky that there was a good-sized force of cops at the terminal that morning. They always had a presence, but those numbers had been ramped up over the last few months at the Variant Squads’ urging.

Since the new Varion-hybrid had been identified in isolated cases around Metro.

The uniforms had cleared the lynch mob away and rescued Borland before he’d received more than the first violent buffeting.

And then his heroes had taken him to the Golden Wok restaurant for safekeeping.

He’d only been there a minute when his palm-com warbled. It was the bagged-tech Wizard at the stationhouse telling him to stay put. HQ was aware of his situation. He would be extracted.

Borland had a tough time reading the Metro cops’ faces. They had looked at his squad I.D. like it was Adolf Hitler’s baby picture. A pair of them had stayed with him while the others tried to shoo the crowd away from the doors, and help others secure the scene until a Variant Squad arrived.

A couple of the older cops seemed to understand what was going on. They remembered the Variant Effect, and did what they could to get their heads around it, and put Borland somewhere safe and sound.

The young Jack and Jill assigned to guard him must have received the Variant bulletins from HQ, but they’d yet to see it first-hand. They just read the face of it: the headline Borland had written. So they glared at him with disgust.

You shot an old lady and her grandson. What do you expect?

A middle-aged man had approached the Golden Wok’s big glass doors. He pounded on them and shouted murderously. Before the cops pushed the man away, Borland had deciphered the message in his dark glare.

I’m going to kill you...

And Borland had understood the man was somehow connected to the boy—probably the old lady too.

After that, Borland retreated to the bar at the back of the Golden Wok and watched a pair of young ladies putting out place settings. Their uniforms consisted of pink blouses and wine-colored skirts. They wore aprons that were frilly up the front and made Borland think of other times long dead and gone, and *rolling pins*, for some reason.

Finally, the uniforms' radios had burped and buzzed, and Borland was led along a hallway and out an employee exit in the bus terminal basement.

A long black sedan idled down there.

The rear door had opened. Brass's big hand had beckoned.

"Borland?" Brass snarled, snapping him from his reverie. "Did you get hit in the head?"

Borland mopped at his face with a fresh bandage as the sedan raced out of the basement and onto the crowded streets around the terminal. He could hear sirens.

"No," he said, looking over at Brass. "How did you find out about this?"

"How?" Brass released a burst of derisive air. "Everyone in Metro knows about this!" He laughed. "They're probably watching it in *Tunisia* by now."

Borland shook his head and ground his teeth. The muscles on the right side of his jaw burned.

"But *me*?" Brass continued, twisting his lips; he tapped a knuckle on the upholstery covering his door. "I was having brunch with a Bezo suit when the mayor called up to tear me a new one."

"Well, they don't know what it's like," Borland said, shrugging. He used his tongue to fish for small stony fragments he'd just discovered at his gum line.

"They don't know because it's our job to protect them from it!" Brass continued, scowling. "What were you thinking?"

"What did you expect me to do?" Borland grumbled.

"Anything but gun down an old lady in front of fifty witnesses with cameras," Brass growled. "And then shooting her grandson in the face for an encore—*perfect*."

The big man leaned forward to knock open a hatch in the wall that separated the passenger compartment from the driver's. The padded covering folded down to form a shelf. Behind it was a mini-bar.

Brass pulled out a pair of crystal tumblers and a decanter of amber fluid. "Do you know how many people captured the whole thing on video?" He filled a glass and handed it to Borland and then poured one for himself.

He raised his glass and clinked Borland's.

"You've gone *viral*, Borland," he said, smiling without humor. "And there's no vaccine!"

He took a long drink.

Borland did the same, while the big man watched him, a slight sheen of sweat on his chiseled features.

"Okay," Brass said, finally, reaching out to touch Borland's leg with his drink. "I've had my cry." He gestured with his glass. "You're right. We're not being fair. I know you didn't have any choice."

"Not if you wanted me to contain it. The old lady was in full *presentation*—performing *Ritual* right out in broad daylight..." Borland drank the scotch with relish. "And the boy turned on like a light switch. No goddamn picnic for me down there, either. You know this new Variant works fast. And the *Effect* seems almost supercharged."

"I know..." Brass finished his drink and topped up both of their glasses. "But that doesn't mean we're immune to public opinion. It's too early for that kind of exposure. Fine, the day had to come when people got dialed in. The Variant Effect is back. But, we

have to reassure them that those hired to protect them are on their side.” He took a drink. “We’ve got to do some damage control on this.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Borland scowled.

“We have a very complicated relationship with City Hall,” Brass said. “And the mayor wanted you pulled from duty.”

“Pull me from duty!” Borland snapped. “I didn’t want to do this in the first place.”

“I told the mayor you were too important. We need you to meet the new threat,” Brass explained, smiling. “And he finally understood that.”

“Then it’s done?” Borland asked, “Send flowers to the family and we move on?”

“Actually, no,” Brass said, voice dropping. “We have to work with the civilian authorities, and the only way we were given the go-ahead to lead this cleanup was if they had more control of our activities. That’s why some of our new POOs come right out of the civilian medical sector—not police or military.”

“And your point is?” Borland continued to pick away at something in his mouth. A pebble, or a piece of plastic, rolled under his tongue as he tried to capture it. Bone?

“Others, like the mayor, are elected officials who are more worried about their careers. They have to answer to the public, and we have to answer to *them*.” Brass twisted his lips like he found that galling. “They say things got out of hand back in the day because there wasn’t enough oversight. We had to be able to act autonomously to meet individual threats—but mistakes were made, as you know.”

“So how can we do our jobs if we can’t do our jobs?” Borland snarled. “Variant works too fast for second-guessing and committee meetings.”

“I know,” Brass said and grinned. “And the mayor knows it too.” He tapped Borland’s arm. “So we figured a way around it.”

“And what’s that?” Borland stuck a finger in his mouth, then a thumb as he fished for the irritating fragment.

“It means you’ll file a report, and there will be a review of the event and your actions by a board comprised of elected officials, law enforcement and Bezo representatives. Not that different from back in the day, but it’s early, and you’re out there in the spotlight. If or when things get worse, there’ll be a backlog—it’ll get buried in paper,” Brass said, mystified watching Borland dig around in his mouth. “This shouldn’t be a problem for long. You acted accordingly, if a trifle *indelicate*.”

Borland hissed. He nodded, rolled his eyes to encourage Brass to get to the point.

“And in the meantime to show you’re really a great guy, you’ll agree to take part in a sensitivity training program. Just go along with that and things will smooth out. Show them that you get it.” Brass’s voice trailed off as Borland extracted his fingers from his mouth. He asked: “What are you doing?”

Borland wiped excess spittle onto his pants and then held up his prize. Between fingertip and thumb...

“A broken tooth,” Borland grumbled, squinting at a half-inch shard of enamel. “A molar—goddamn...” He frowned and then scowled at Brass, like the big man’s words had just registered. “Sensitivity training?”

“Tinfingers and Dr. Cavalle will talk to you at the stationhouse.” Brass smiled weakly. “You get yourself checked out by the medic...Gordon? Then give your report to them, and they’ll set up the rest. Otherwise, keep to your normal duties.”

Borland slid the piece of tooth into his breast pocket.

“And don’t say a word to the news-feeds,” Brass said, watching the traffic. “I’ll handle that.”

CHAPTER 9

11:30 a.m.

The pneumatic *hiss* of artificial joints announced Hyde’s visitor.

He was unaccustomed to anyone just entering the Horton. Borland was the only one who would dare barge in without an invitation. Of course, Hyde would never invite him, so...

No one else even tried without knocking first.

In the beginning there had been bagged-boys and girls sent on errands, or thinking in error that he required or needed their association: *my father worked with you; your squad saved my grandmother back in the day; or, you’re an inspiration, Captain Hyde.*

He had managed to strangle off the impromptu social visits with his brusque manner and uncommunicative silences. He stopped short of insulting any of the younger baggies, but they soon found his cloaked and hooded presence unsettling and eventually unbearable when he fell into quiet, dark immobility.

Hyde had not been brought back to active duty to massage egos or play out pathetic human dramas.

And the attempts to promote his social integration were coming about 20 years too late. He knew Dr. Cavalle and POO were behind it...

I can get that kind of self-indulgent pap at the home!

Besides, what was the point of having the back of the Horton jammed with computers and communications equipment if he still had to deal with people face to face?

Email me! Text, if you must...

And personal contact presented the real dangers of infection due to his skinless condition. His body was a patchwork of scars and failed grafting operations. He’d spent most of his life in isolation since he’d received the injuries.

And there were the infectious qualities peculiar to human interaction.

Words. Feelings. Who needs them? Dangerous distractions...

But someone had entered the Horton—opened the side door and took the two short steps in.

Another *hiss*, and a *click* of plastic on plastic.

He turned his wheelchair toward the sounds.

“I hope this isn’t too predictable, Eric,” Marisol Romero said, stepping into the vehicle. She carried a tray with a yellow paper bag wedged between coffee cups.

Hyde immediately swung his wheelchair back toward his desk and clutter of flat-screens.

“Marisol?” he rasped, dipping his head so his hood swung forward to hide his skinless face. “I expected you on the com-link.” He gestured at his equipment with a scarred hand.

“You boys and your toys,” she said and laughed. “I need the human touch.” She limped farther into the room, awkwardly balancing the tray of coffee while she worked

her prosthetic legs opposite a single cane. The cane was clipped to the plastic forearm on her left side. She'd lost that limb at the elbow.

Marisol moved to Hyde's desk and held the tray over his e-board where it rested on a foldout shelf. She cleared her throat.

Hyde glanced over and read the situation properly, pulled the e-board out of the way and onto his lap so she could set the tray down.

She balanced herself against the desk and awkwardly tried to take a cup from the socket on the cardboard tray using her right hand. That member had only the index finger and thumb remaining.

Hyde reached out to steady the tray, and she managed to pull the coffee cup free.

"Just got it black..." Marisol set Hyde's coffee on the shelf beside the tray before gesturing to the paper bag. "But there are fixings in with the doughnuts."

"That's fine." Hyde nodded, holding the tray as she got her own cup. She jerked and jostled around in a tight half-circle to lean her butt up against the desk.

"French vanilla for me..." She held up her cup and then hooked her cane to clasps on the prosthetic calf on her left leg. There was a *click* and her artificial left hand came away from the cane.

She used it to open the lid on her coffee.

Hyde looked at his cup, then he picked at the palm of his hand.

"Ah," he said glancing up at his guest, "I don't—uh, I don't usually have company at the—my office."

Marisol took a drink of her French vanilla, set it on a clear spot on the desk and then opened the bag to tease a doughnut out.

Hyde looked into his lap.

"I thought we were going to go over the Pinocchio notes?" she said, followed by the sound of her chewing. She slurped at her French vanilla.

Hyde nodded. Four months before, he'd heard that Marisol Romero had been reinstated to special investigator status. As the squads were being reactivated, Brass and old Midhurst continued to troll the retirement ranks for qualified leadership and informed officers.

Marisol Romero had been one of the best captains that Hyde knew back in the day, and was fearless in a bag-suit. Even after her injuries, she resisted retirement and became an investigator and liaison with the Metro PD.

Marisol had been consulting with the Metro force when Brass called her up. A bit of synchronicity, she had just advanced a theory that the serial killer called Pinocchio might have been Variant Effected.

Not long after that, Marisol had contacted Hyde via com-link to consult on the Variant factor, and since then they'd managed to have more and more frequent discussions about the killer.

Her injuries had seriously impacted her mobility, so she had a tech setup like Hyde's in her apartment.

They had some things in common.

And consultations could be done over the com-link, never...

"Hyde," Marisol said, her voice softening. "I know you don't like visitors, but I feel we're close to understanding something about Pinocchio."

“It’s not that...” Hyde lied, his breath suddenly wheezing with tension. “The com-link allows us to—keeps us—*objective*.”

“Look, Eric,” Marisol said, nudging Hyde’s wheelchair with her artificial right foot. “Playing into your self-perceived deficiencies only encourages me to do the same with my own. And, other than some obvious physical challenges, I’m a perfectly normal human being, which basically means I’m *imperfectly* normal. But I’m fine with that because it’s *normal*.”

Hyde clasped his hands in his lap.

“You let *them* get to you,” she continued, “and *they* start living your life.” Marisol reached down, and set her right palm on his forearm. “But you don’t have to be handicapped for that to happen.” Her voice gained strength. “I didn’t survive all of my troubles to end up a lonely cripple hiding from the world.”

Hyde cleared his voice, made an empty gesture with his hands.

“So to remain *objective* enough to talk about the Pinocchio case *professionally*,” she said, reaching down to lift Hyde’s chin with her remaining index finger. “We’ll try to keep our hands off each other.”

Hyde let out a quiet hiss looking up into Marisol’s face.

A quick tilt of her head suggested to him that she would have winked then, if she’d had two eyes.

He reached out for his coffee, and lifted it. “I take it black.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” she drawled, as she took a drink.

Hyde grumbled and Marisol shook her head.

“You’ll get used to it,” she said, finally, before giving his office space a left and right glance. “It’s going to get crowded in here when my stuff arrives.”

Hyde sputtered, spraying coffee.

CHAPTER 10

11:30 a.m.

Beachboy sat on the bench facing Metro Police Staff Inspector Steven Midhurst’s office. It was situated on the third floor of Metro City Hall at the end of a line of offices that sank in dash and flair, and to some degree—political importance. Midhurst’s was second last, coming just after the Metro Sanitation Officer’s, but before the office of the City Events and Recreation Planner.

It hadn’t surprised Beachboy that the office was so situated as much as it had surprised him that the aging civil servant was still working every day. He didn’t pull any 9 to 5, but he still manned his post.

Borland had called him *Miss Muffet* and told the story that back in the day, the Variant Effect had presented in Midhurst as a debilitating form of arachnophobia, and while he’d survived to tell the tale; he was dependent on beta blockers, yoga and other calming techniques to keep his monstrous fear under control.

He took the beta blockers in mist form that he drew into his lungs via a plastic tube in much the same way you’d inhale smoke from a cigarette.

Borland and his cranking buddies had delighted in provoking Midhurst's phobic attacks by placing plastic spiders and bugs around the stationhouse whenever the staff inspector visited, especially when he was in the company of other officials.

The attacks were so severe that they'd even registered on a fully cranked Borland.

They also called him the Old Man.

Back in the day, Midhurst had been appointed out of the Metro PD ranks to act as liaison between the privately run Variant Squads and civilian law enforcement, and he interfaced with Bezo Pharmaceutical's representative Brass, who *supervised* the squads.

Midhurst's office had been situated at City Hall to keep him close to elected officials, and to separate him from the squads that had acquired many of their number from the Metro police to whom he was fiercely loyal. *The day after*, when the Variant Effect went into decline, he had stayed on to assist in the dismantling of the squads, and return of civilian authority to Metro council and the police department.

Beachboy was impressed by the man's work ethic. He'd just passed his eightieth birthday, and he still held the post and ran his office in a caretaker capacity.

He must have had some pull to stay on the payroll.

And it was testament to how bad things had been back then.

Maybe they were afraid to pull the plug.

Midhurst's skill-set was a unique combination that the municipal politicians could not squander. Since there had never been an official end to the Variant Effect back in the day, the post was left active and Midhurst had been given the task of keeping vigil.

A sentry on the battlements.

But he was running late today.

With the apparent return of the Variant Effect, Midhurst had started to coordinate the reactivation of the squads, and to run oversight on the opening of mothballed stationhouses.

He'd been busy inspecting troops and recalling veterans to active duty. Whatever he'd been doing over the 20 years since "the day," he had certainly risen to this new call to service.

And he'd taken it on with an energy that belied his age.

It could have been the aerosol beta blocker mixture. They often carried stimulants and steroids. And he had been *effected*. While the worst of the Variant Effect had subsided in the years following the Varion drug's ban, there had never been a cure for the population.

The worst of it just went away, but it left a mark.

The Variant Effect enhanced normal and abnormal abilities. There were residual effects...

Staff Inspector Steven Midhurst had decades of loyal service in the Metro PD starting out as a mounted cop back in the dim past.

He still carried a riding crop.

But all that time had made him protective of the police officers with whom he had served, and it was well-documented that he'd opposed the creation of the privately run Variant Squads back in the day. He had lots of political reasons, but chief among his reservations had been the fact that the squads drew their numbers from police ranks along with EMT and the military.

And Midhurst was protective of the ranks.

Beachboy listened to the distant thrum of activity echoing up the broad stairs that opened at the end of the hallway, 40 feet from his bench.

He had worked up a bit of a sweat climbing them, still slowed by a low-grade hangover.

Wizard had kept him up for half the night drinking wine and the other half talking Kama Sutra. He was still looking forward to putting his money where her mouth was.

Wine. Never on a work night.

Red or white, wine hangovers never kept him out of the game, but they left him drained for most of the day.

Still, you're on a mission. He chuckled, before sobering quickly. *What would Dancer call it?*

His interest in Wizard went beyond Oriental sex positions and she'd already given him much: access to T-2's com-links for one thing. She'd also helped him cracking passwords in the Bezo Variant Squad database. They both came from law enforcement and were suckers for a mystery. They managed a foray into the records with a fake B-Level clearance. Wizard kept it short to keep it anonymous

And they found something interesting: B-Level files often referred to *A-Level data*.

Beachboy turned at a sound. The sharp scuff of leather on polished granite, followed by the slow *clop* of feet climbing stairs.

Climbing? Sounds more like staggering.

He'd been told that Staff Inspector Midhurst started his days late, but ended them later.

Beachboy had heard about that. How age robbed you of everything in the end—even the comfort of a good night's sleep.

The steps continued. Shoes scuffed slowly. A wooden banister creaked with someone's full weight.

Beachboy looked away from the top of the stairs as the sound drew nearer. He focused on Midhurst's name where it was painted on the door across from him.

The footsteps ceased.

Someone cleared his throat. The voice behind it still held some strength, though it was distorted by phlegm.

It said: "You're one of Borland's."

Beachboy turned to see Midhurst standing at the top of the stairs. His left hand gripped the dark wooden banister. He swayed slightly. The right fist kept a riding crop tight up under his armpit.

He wore black gloves. The sleeves of his dark blue uniform were bound tight to his wrists with thick elastic bands. His pant cuffs were similarly wrapped around his high-topped black boots and held in place by electrical tape. He was bent forward slightly, displaying the golden epaulettes on his shoulders.

Midhurst wore a glossy peaked cap over his thick-framed glasses. His face was a clutch of wrinkles that melted down into his stiff martial collar. The tangle of veins on his nose and cheeks aged him further, but the eyes behind the thick lenses flashed with intelligence.

He started forward at a slow shuffle.

"I was *with* Borland at Parkerville," Beachboy corrected, getting to his feet.

“*Feisty!*” Midhurst grunted, drawing near. He looked Beachboy over, studied his face until a smile twisted his old features and he said: “I suppose that fits. Are you *with* him now?”

A blush came up under the young man’s all-American features.

“I *belong* to the squads,” he said, quickly. “I’m proud to serve with *them.*”

“You emphasize the lines between the lines, young man,” Midhurst drawled, coming to a halt and looking at Beachboy even closer. “A team player, then; yet, something brought you here to talk to me all by yourself. A secret that distresses you, it is plain to me.”

Beachboy watched as the old man drew a Beta Blocker Applicator out of his coat pocket. He popped the cap off, placed it in his mouth and drew in.

It made a bubbling sound, and Midhurst smirked.

“Your squad did excellent work at Parkerville,” Midhurst said. The beta blocker applicator bubbled when he set it between his teeth for another dose. “And the losses were considerable, though commendable when taking into account the lack of training and the leadership at that time. It was a heroic effort.”

“I’m proud of the squad, sir,” Beachboy said, ears growing hot and red. “You can’t buy the kind of loyalty they demonstrated. And I’d follow Captain Dambe into Hell.”

“Agnes Dambe, yes. She’s one of a kind,” Midhurst said thoughtfully. “And I must say the combination of Hyde and Borland was surprisingly effective as well.” He used the tip of his beta blocker applicator to pick at the elastic that bound his sleeve at the wrist. “Of course, that combination could have been toxic...*more toxic.* It was a risk that Brass decided to take, but he was always comfortable with such risks.” Midhurst smiled. “It’s easy to gamble with another man’s money—or life.”

“Yes, sir,” Beachboy answered, for the first time realizing he’d snapped to attention unaware.

Midhurst noticed it too, and smiled. “At ease, young man.” He gestured to his office. “Or at least, that is to say, I hope I can provide some *ease.*”

He started toward the office.

Beachboy was a half-step behind.

“For that is why you are here, is it not?” Midhurst flashed a look from the corner of his bright eye as he spoke over his shoulder. “I expected, no—perhaps I *hoped*—someone would come.”

“I just had some questions about the squads back in the day, sir,” Beachboy said, as Midhurst fumbled for a set of keys and opened his office door.

“We all do, son,” Midhurst answered, pausing in the doorway.

“I’ve been researching,” Beachboy continued.

“And what did you find?” Midhurst asked.

“Something...” Beachboy moved in close to whisper: “What is *Centipede?*”

The Old Man’s eyes grew big and round behind his glasses as utter shock distorted his features. His gloved hand came up and he puffed on his beta blocker. The bubbling noise seemed to calm him, because after inhaling once more he slowly relaxed, his face melting as his eyes slipped down to Beachboy’s boots.

A cautious smile grew.

“Oh, my boy: *something* indeed!” he said, looking along the hallway for witnesses, then his eyes returned to Beachboy’s. “I hope you haven’t just killed us both.”

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