

FEEDBACK: A NOVEL

By

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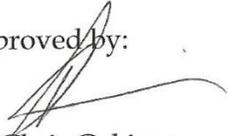
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Abstract

This novel was written to fulfill the Honors College requirements for a bachelor of arts in creative writing. As a writer primarily of speculative fiction, I determined the best way for me to showcase my skills was to write a science fiction novel.

Worldbuilding for this began in the summer of 2013, and most of the draft written in November of that same year.

The story itself focuses on an alarming murder investigation in a city founded by human colonists from Earth. Involved with the investigation is an underground security contractor named Raphael "Raph" Callahan. Callahan is in hiding from the corporation that once employed him, but due to his expertise in the sort of sabotage the corporations of the city perform on a regular basis joins the investigation. This leads him to being recaptured by his corporation, who want him back for unknown motives.

The net began spreading before her, the flashes of dataflow firing like impulses in a massive mechanical brain. As she could before, she could feel each burst, taste the thought behind it; but unlike before, she was another signal among the rest.

And she was *alive*. That was a surprise.

Accessing her own memory was difficult, but she wasn't too concerned over it. There were other things to be worried about than the past, though it could threaten at any waking moment. Freedom came with a price; that cost was one she had to remain wary of.

Slide out from her base point, take stock. This datasector of the city was the most active, transmissions flashing like advert holo-signs and making her senses ache. But she had gotten better at tuning out the filler, the mundane and over-familiar. Not of interest or use. The filters burned out most of the overflow, and with a few nanoseconds of consideration she examined the other signals. Encryptions were woven through with organic ease, another positive effect from the past. One of the few.

Check the information against what she *knew* to beware. Most were clean, typical corporate backbiting and trying to find ways to dodge the competition and the ruling council. But those were the easy ones, more of the mundane that hadn't been blocked by the filter. She'd have to keep an eye on them though. Things didn't look right from this end of it, and it could mean danger. Death. Enslavement.

Never again.

She finished with the basic codes and picked her way into the more dangerous ones. Again slithered through the firewalls, meshed against the encryption and slid into the things they didn't want to become public. This was what she'd been looking for; battle plans, schedules. She traced them back, froze on the threshold of a network she knew too well. A maze that could have been a death trap waited for her.

It was about to begin. He had to be ready.

Escape back to home base. Prep the routines she'd created nearly ten years ago.

Initiate.

Callahan

“Mister Callahan the water pressure you have requested is beyond the recommended level,” the apartment’s computer grouses at me. Ten-fifteen in the morning and the thing thinks it needs a spine. “I have reset the water pressure to the recommended levels.”

“Like hell you will,” I grumble, putting a hand next to the computer screen in the wall. I’m standing outside my shower in my bathroom, and if I’m going to be on time to my first client I need to get in the shower now. Takes only an instant to roll my eyes up towards the ceiling and transmit into the building’s network, my floor. I check the profiles for my immediate neighbors and notice one of them has a recommended pressure close to what I want, or at least within a ‘healthy’ range. He must have had a spinal tap and had the feeling deadened while the disk implant got sorted. I copy the code that clears him for that pressure and jack into my preferences, transfer the code. The pressure jumps back up and I come back into reality. Breathe. Center myself back into my body. I hit the button to get the water running and a heavy torrent pummels the far wall.

For someone that wasn’t me and didn’t have an enhanced back, the poor sap would get crushed against the wall. I step inside and let the water crash into my shoulders and back. Muscles tense under the pressure, then relax as the heat sinks easily through my skin and into the fibers underneath. I lean my head into the wall and sigh comfortably, water starting up my neck and into my thick dark hair. Keeps cascading over my jaw and cheeks, close my eyes to savor the feeling. Normalcy. Or at least as close as someone like me can get to it, whatever ‘it’ happens to be.

I finish my shower another fifteen minutes later, mostly dry but water still runs down my back from my hair. There’s another near-argument with the computer running my place over the closet, but I get it open anyway and get on a shirt, pants, boots. If it weren’t for the soft whirl of the metal prosthetic of my left arm while I button the shirt and roll the sleeves over my elbow, the creaking of a stubborn knee joint in the replacement right leg as I pull a sock over the square-toed foot, this could be normal, too. Normal for other people, at least.

“Window polarization, twenty percent, full house,” I order. The computer doesn’t get after me, just does the job, and the full-wall window in front of me begins to brighten. The sun’s only just come up over the horizon, the orange-yellow light coming to my place in shafts between other superscraper towers. Outside my bedroom, the living room and kitchen area windows reveal the straits near which the city was built, the other districts connected by multiple bridges, maglev and pedestrian and aircar.

I sigh as I pull out my black leather jacket from the closet. Tug on my boots. Pick up my chest holster from a chair and finally leave my bedroom. Another day running free in the city of Cadarn. There was nothing better that I could possibly think of.

Breakfast isn't complicated, fried egg and some toast and an apple for some variety. I turn on the main computer in the dinette counter to scan the news, in case there was anything I needed to be aware of. The date itself tells me what I need to worry about: 30 Yul. Tonight was the turning point of Luthien's two-season cycle, from the warm summer to crisp winter. Great. I put the egg between two slices of toast and bite down with a frown. Meant tonight was going to be problematic when I went down into Central to check on those clients, unless I was lucky and got done before sundown and the parties really got started.

My routine checking of native news is interrupted by an unexpected knock. I start a little, and fighting instinct takes over. I'm not in my own apartment, my own territory; I'm an invader that can't be found, pretending to belong. Reach into the holster and pull out the heavy pistol, the only thing I can call mine from the past. It's loaded, bullet in the chamber. Even with my leg I cross the space from kitchen to front door smoothly, silently. No video intercom here like the other places; just audio. I keep the gun in my right hand while the left reaches to press the talk key. The whole maneuver reorients me into the present. Exhale. This *is* my territory, and it *is* defensible.

"Raph Callahan, who's callin'?" I ask into the wall mike gruffly, then release the button. Had I been found? Were they coming to take me back? Not alive, they weren't. Left hand comes back down to hold the pistol two-handed; guaranteed hit that way, lethal or not. Seconds feel like hours, days, before the reply finally comes.

"Dammit, Raff, you know it's me, now open up or I'll find some way to open this door myself!"

Woman, impertinent and impatient. Only one person uses that mispronunciation of my name. I sigh and manage to release the tension in my arms, though the knocking begins again, a steady pulse each passing second I'm not answering the door. I shake my head and head back to the counter to set the gun down. Double back to the door, though I wait until half a second after the next knock to open the door and look down at my mostly-unwelcome early morning guest.

Jessia Locke's closed fist comes down on my chest, not quite realizing the door is open now. The impact doesn't jar me, though it does jar some strands of red-gold hair from the low bun she's scraped her hair into. She starts wincing as she pulls her hand back, and I use it as an opportunity to gently take her shoulder and wheel her inside. Didn't need her causing a scene; good thing I did, too.

"Wow, either I got you really nervous or you're just having a bad day, ow," Jez complains as she starts shaking out her hand. I shake my head at her and get her settled on the sofa. "What, you forgot I was coming by?"

"I got up only forty-five minutes ago, Jez," I growl at her as I head for the dinette counter and make sure I get the bullet out of the chamber of my gun and back into the clip. "You usually give me an hour to at least finish breakfast."

"Well sorry," she informs me crisply. I hear something heavy hit the floor; Jez had brought her toys to keep her company. "It's not like I can tell traffic when to go slower or faster when I make a house call."

"Can't I finish eating first?"

"Nope, now get your cyber butt over here so we can get started."

I glare at her evenly but abandon my sandwich. Cyber, the North Cadarn slang for any cyborg in general. I don't care for the labels, and even I use them for ease of discussion, but Jez knows it annoys me when she applies it to me. Her smile is innocent and forgivable, so I let it slide like I always have. It's not like I can hate Jez for it, not after she stitched me back together and kept refusing payment for these checkups she gives me each solstice and equinox.

She's already up and opening up the bag she brought along while I flatten the back of the sofa into a bed. The spinal clamp comes out from the seam, and I exhale heavily as I stretch out against it, shirt off and pants hefted up over my knees. Jez has her usual scanners and recording equipment laid out, needles and all, and I swallow down my unease before fixing my gaze to the ceiling. The clamp engages smoothly, without a bite, and the electrical connections between my brain and my muscles disengage. Limbs are slack, I'm still breathing and my heart's still going but nearly every other muscle group is effectively dead.

"Okay, syncing my basic scan to the clamp," Jez tells me, though it's the same procedure every year. She plugs her basic reader into the adaptor on the side of the futon, letting it run through the deactivated systems. Then comes the more specific scanners, needle probes into my right arm and abs and left leg. She'll get details for the systems in my head, chest, and lower body and look them over when she has spare time throughout the day. Later, when I head to her clinic to tune up the security system I made for her place, she'll have specially-designed upgrades and tune-ups for me. A cyber as complex as me needs a lot of maintenance to keep things running nice.

"So you know what tonight is, right?" Jez asks brightly as she works. I could speak, but I just give her a look that hopefully got my reply across. "Well, okay, sure, but if you're busy I wouldn't mind having someone to go with me into East and getting some non-tech fun in."

"No," I tell her flatly. Just that. Jez pouts but I give her a look to solidify that answer.

“Okay, fine, wow, you’re that antisocial,” she sighs, shaking her head. “I’ll have to figure out a way to talk you out of that.”

“You won’t,” I tell her as the needles start coming out. Even if I never felt them, I hate seeing them in me. Bad memories that I try not to think about. The clamp disengages, and I slowly start flexing my fingers, rolling my feet in circles to make sure the connections were secure. “I should be around at about nineteen hundred, if things go all right everywhere else.”

“At least you leave the best place for last, huh?” Jez asks; her smile is back, but I have a feeling she’s already trying to figure out how to talk me into going to the celebrations tonight.

“Yeah, yeah, guess I do,” I reply, which brightens Jez’s smile considerably. “So get goin’, you’ll have that line starting to go around your sector if you stick around here much longer.”

“Just remember you’ll have to wait your turn if there is one!” Jez tells me as she packs her bag up again, starting to turn businesslike.

“I always do, Jez,” I tell her as I pull my shirt back on, still moving slowly so nothing cramps up. Jez pauses her packing and looks up at that, and I can feel her eyes settling on my chest. It’s not something that hasn’t happened before, but something in her gaze doesn’t seem like normal for Jez. But it’s barely a moment, she looks away quickly and I get the buttons on my shirt done up a little faster to avoid making her uncomfortable.

“Nineteen hundred, I’m holding you to that, Raff,” she teases one last time as she heads for the door. I shake my head and wave her off, but the shaking hides the faint tug of a smile on my face. Jez is the only person I trust enough to show my emotion so openly, and even then I keep it understated.

“Just get moving, we both have work to do,” I tell her, and Jez shoots me one last gleaming smile before she opens the door and leaves a lot more quietly than she came in. I look at the door for a few moments, making sure she’s gone, before I slowly head back to the dinette. The news isn’t quite so interesting anymore after Jez’s visit. I bring up my schedule and download it for access later. Turn off the computer, finish off the sandwich. I roll my shirtsleeves back down. Holster settles across my back, under my arms, and the jacket goes on top, hiding my weapon in case some security agents try to cross me or, worse, turn up on a raid while I was there working. Always useful to show them who was actually in charge of a situation when it arose.

That was how I had been trained and conditioned. That was how I was going to stay.

Life as a security contractor in Cadarn is a pretty lucrative trade. Sure, someone could buy into security from one of the corporations that dominated North Cadarn, but if you wanted the corps out of your business you went looking for someone independent. I had a good number of clients, checked on daily from around eleven-thirty to as late as six at night. It was enough to pay the rent on my apartment, buy food, cover supplies and still have some set away in a nest egg for whatever retirement I wanted to have, if any.

I covered less the larger places that could afford the corporate security and more the places that couldn't in more than one sense. A healthy black market was alive in the city for cybernetic parts and pieces; the corps protected their property fiercely and viciously punished anyone found with stolen goods. But while some places were nothing more than hubs for tech junkies and real criminals, others were safe houses for people who needed those parts and couldn't afford the prices one of the corps would quote without going into servitude.

One of these places is a garage in North, one of my first for the day. The place is only just opening up when I stroll up, and I come up behind the owner with my usual quiet stride. As usual, he notices my reflection in his window and nearly jumps out of his skin. He at least laughs before adjusting the wide-brimmed hat on his head.

"Damn, Callahan, you're bound t'kill me of a heart attack one'f these days," the garage's owner, Tex, drawls at me. "Walk as quiet as you do, even when I know you're comin'."

"Just the way I am, is all, Tex," I reply. "Everything looking good around here?"

"Well no one's tried cuttin' the gate again," Tex tells me while he finishes raising said gate. It's a flexible piece of titanium carbide that made a sizable dent in my accounts for five months. Like I do with most clients, I provided all the system and physical security requirements Tex had wanted out of my own pocket. Not easy starting off, but I hadn't been trained in product recovery for nothing. Tex continues once the gate is up, "And the computer itself ain't had no problems from hackers and the like."

"I should still make sure," I tell him. "Part of the package, after all."

Tex just grins at me while I get to work. First order of business is circling the property; Tex's garage happened to be sitting in one of the few suburb-grade lots in North, meaning there might be residential places nearby but he actually had a lot of space to himself. No one in North liked owning a big house if you were going to be targeted and racketeered by one of the corps. Tex's lot made it easy to look for any recent activity around the building. There were vibration tracks from a truck that had probably delivered a shipment of parts during the night that went up into the back

dock, some footprints from people trudging home after working in the factories that are hidden among the 'scrapers in North. Nothing out of the ordinary, as far as I could tell.

I lower the front grate after one of Tex's two workmen comes to clock in for the day, looking over the heavy metal construct. As Tex had said, no signs of tampering; forced entry wasn't easy with security grating made of some of the hardest stuff available in Cadarn in your face. I still make sure there's no warps or dings in the metal, something easy to cut through and get in. Once that inspection is satisfied, I check the windows, which have defensive laser systems that trigger the alerts of a break-in to Tex, me, and Amddiffynwyr y Cadarn, the only non-corporate law enforcement agency in the city. Whether or not AmCad was able to get into North in time to deal with a problem wasn't one of my main concerns, though.

"Wanna lookit the system before you get on with the day?" Tex asks when I come in after checking the outer layers of protection. The garage itself is a legitimate shop where you'd come in to get your aircar or bike serviced; the backrooms are where the fancier pieces are kept.

"Just gonna do a quick check, nothin' serious," I tell him. "You don't get the kind of trouble that happens in Central; so long as it hasn't cut out it should be all right."

"Sure enough, Callahan, make your check," Tex agrees before shuffling off into the back. I shake my head at him before I look up at the ceiling and transmit into the garage mainframe. The security system was solid, deflecting a lot of the more serious attacks that a small-time garage like this tends to pick up. Ground myself and find Tex next to me with a box in his gnarled hands. I look from it to him a few times.

"You're not due to pay for a month yet," I tell him firmly. Tex gives me a level look before twisting his lips wryly.

"Got my hands on summat you might like," he says by way of excuse. "Ain't no need to credit it towards my account or nothin'. Just noticed you gotta limp in a bad way sometimes, figured this'd be handy in treatin' it."

That catches my attention. Sometimes the industrial leg Jez had grafted onto my hip didn't respond right to my neural connections, making me limp uncomfortably for the better part of a day. I take the box and carefully open the lid, staring openly at the chip mounted in pristine white memory gel. It was exactly what I needed, specially-crafted to regulate the shifting pulses between my leg and the rest of me. But I look at the interior of the lid. Cold sinks into my bones.

Romarei Consolidated.

"Hard enough to get my hands on that tech, no mistake," Tex tells me as I close the box as quick as I can. He doesn't know what I am, or who made me that way. It's an

amazing gift, I know, and I want to take it. But if they found out who he gave this chip to, which wouldn't be difficult, everything I'd built would be done for.

"Don't think it'll work with what I have," I tell Tex, though the surprise and mild disappointment on his face hurt. "But I'm glad you're lookin' out for me, Tex, really. Get that thing to someone who'll really need it, and fast."

"No need to tell me twice, Callahan," he says nonchalantly, taking the box back when I offer it. "Still, hate seein' a man like you in pain every other day. I'll keep an ear to the ground for ya."

I give him a nod as he tucks the box away into his toolbelt, and with that I tell him his system is solid and I'd be back around tomorrow. Tex just slaps me hard on the back and tells me I was always welcome, and if I ever needed anything to let him know. It's hard to leave him, knowing he's in danger until someone buys that tech from him and gets it installed, but he's not my only client. I have to keep moving, keep checking the other systems. It's how I stay aware of what the corps are up to, who is striking where and if they're getting close to me. Otherwise I was as good as dead.

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The last place I visit on my daily security run is, of course, Jez's clinic. Her place, like the latter half of my schedule, is in the lower levels of Central Cadarn. This is the more dangerous location compared to North Cadarn, mostly because Central is split into two vertical areas. Above the water line near the mouth of the strait is the surface part of Central: half dedicated to the Senate and Council that govern the city, and half given over to corporate headquarters. It's the HQ towers that are the problem, especially if they're smart and keep a garrison of security agents in-house. That's how the corps will hunt down the clinics and shops that, more often than not, will get their supplies from an R&D department. Sometimes the spies take the product into North, to get adapted with something that's come off the assembly line. But most will take an untested prototype and go subsurface. Under the headquarters and government buildings are where you'll find the most desperate of the people in Cadarn. A lot of them are good people, too, just trying to make ends meet with whatever work they can get. Like Jez. But they're not rich. If they got sick and needed an implant or enhancement to treat or repair the problem the corps would sign them into a work contract. It's how they get cheap labor for the factories.

So the stuff comes down here and meets the techs of Central. It's tested, modified, repaired, and used by all sorts, not just folks like Jez trying to help people live their lives in the slums. That's where you get the tech junkies, the cyber rats who are actually corp agents and report the movements of product in the lower levels. If something is big, if it makes waves, that's when the corp strikes. They'll send a team, or one "prototype" cyber, to take the stolen property back. It's not just reclamation. Wherever the original prototype is stashed, that place goes down in ruins. Anyone

inside is dead. And people know that within a week that miracle find isn't theirs anymore. Their hope drops another ten levels.

That was what I used to do. Now I make sure they keep what they need.

By the time I get to Jez's, I'm actually pretty well tired. Sometimes while I'm checking a system down here, a corp strike will come on the offensive. Of course they never pay attention to their intel brief and run into me. Tonight that happened at least five times. Timed with the thinking owners will close up early today, to get ready for the celebrations that'll start in East and spread into Central and North eventually. I made them reconsider. Doesn't mean I don't get a couple bruises for my trouble, though I'm pretty sure they're more hurt than I am.

Jez's clinic has a lucky situation compared to most of the rest of Central. Since people live below the main level, massive airshafts plunge down, from the constructed courtyard to about five hundred feet below sea level. Most of the slums are focused around these shafts; so any address in Central for the below-levels will start with an airshaft number. The clinic's front faces out from the west side of shaft eleven, but I knew from experience that some of Jez's best exam rooms and her own living quarters have a view into the shaft. She can watch rain falling, the sun shining down; she even built a little garden to make the place seem more alive than it actually is. Sometimes I'm a little jealous. Jez lives down here, content with what she has, and I'm up in North constantly alert of someone figuring out what I am, what I did before breaking out.

I don't even bother with a walkaround, not for Jez's place. Her best security deterrent is actually taped into her front window. Most corps will try to cover what's clearly arson by saying the place wasn't licensed by the company. If a corp ever tried that on Jez's clinic they'd have a bad time, because Jez has an unofficial license from QuanTek Unlimited prominently displayed, right in front. She even asked me to get the grating she closes over the front stenciled with the QuanTek logo when I was putting together her system. It's not that the license is legit - because it isn't - but Jez has a quiet deal with some design friends working there to send her canned prototype designs. She makes them work, builds them as needed, and sends the working version back up. No one ever asks. I don't think Jez ever really stopped working for QuanTek, but I think I can understand why she doesn't go back to get a six-figure salary and a luxury apartment all-expenses-paid.

It's eighteen-thirty when I slide into the clinic's waiting room. Even with it close to Jez's closing time, the place is packed. Most of them are families, one person actually needing help while surrounded by loved ones. I check in with the harried receptionist, who looks up at me and nods in recognition.

"How busy have you guys been today?" I ask him; Nico, if I remember his name right. He shrugs at me, pushing a lock of vivid turquoise hair out of his face, if only for a black one to fall in its place.

“Couple dozen, min,” Nico tells me, sinking into an underground slang I can understand but not speak clearly. “We gots a junkie in now, had OD for a sed to up him processors, couple gennies on carry issues, an’ Jez is pluggin’ a valve reg-tor inna busted art-heart. Give her ten an’ she be out.”

Translation.

Four out of six exam rooms were currently operating. One patient was a tech junkie with neural implants that ran best while he was sedated. He overdosed, and now had to get treated for that. Two of the rooms were trying to rectify a trait-passing issue with the patients’ genetic grafts; if you’re not careful about how the genetics work, some gennie’s kid might be born with something really strange. Jez herself was in an operation, repairing a valve regulator in her patient’s artificial heart. All in all, it sounded like the usual plate of work for Jez and her small, unpaid staff of medical and biomimetic doctors.

“I’m now down for her until closing,” I tell Nico, “nothing serious. Just going to check the online security and wait for her to get done.”

“Cool, bro, no prob,” Nico replied, bobbing his head smoothly. “Walls’re tight, man, don’ think there’s no prob.”

“Let the security man worry, Nico!” Jez says as she appears on the other side of Nico’s desk. Although her hands are clean, the surgical gown she has on is a macabre splatter of red and black on pale yellow. She’s walking an elderly man, whose shirt is open to reveal the plating that covers the inner workings of his mechanical heart, towards the waiting room. Jez gives me a nod and a tiny flash of a smile; I return the nod before retreating to let Jez deliver her patient to his family.

My usual corner seat is open, and I sink down into it slowly, carefully, making sure my weight gets distributed evenly. Didn’t want to break the chair on accident. Once I settle and watch Jez meet a young woman with a net jack in the base of her skull I roll my eyes up to the ceiling and transmit. There’s no trail of attacks I can see, which is a relief. Maybe her company friends were keeping her tracks covered better than I’d expected.

It still makes me uneasy, though, when I double back to check on my own system. I can see that something got activated in some part of my internal nets, but I can’t check. Downside of being access-capable. But there’s nothing wrong with Jez’s firewalls and computer system, so I come back into my head and bring myself back into reality. Getting grounded was a necessity; I’d heard of and knew people who’d gone brain-dead because they couldn’t get anchored in reality. Their minds would drift off into cyber-reality and dissipate. That’s why no one’s ever tried to make “cold storage” for memories, or at least not a system that worked on a large scale.

The waiting room starts emptying over the next half hour; Jez only took back one patient after the guy with the fixed valve regulator, but the other docs are outright speedy with their patients. Not surprised if they want to get done before sunset to join in the celebrations. I stay in my seat as the time moved closer to nineteen hundred, coming down to being the last man in. Nico offers me a salute when he clocks out, then the other doctors and their attendants trickle out. Most of them already look like they're asleep while walking, but none of them notice me. One last man shuffles out, dragging a heavy mechanical leg after him as he walks, and I sigh heavily and dare to slump in my seat a bit. There's only one warning creak before it breaks under me.

"Y'know you really gotta stop breakin' my chairs, Raph," Jez tells me matter-of-factly from the other side of the receptionist's desk, filling out some last paperwork. "But you can pay it back by closing the front for me, hm?"

"What, not worried I got hurt?" I grumble from the floor, though in all honesty nothing's hurt except for my pride.

"I'll find out soon enough, that's for sure. Come on back when the gate's down, huh?"

I pick myself up and watch her go, unsure what to make of her. Maybe she's just tired. I don't worry about it and head outside to start dragging the grating down, finishing from the inside of the door so I'm not locked out. Let the door close, lock it, and then I step through the door between the waiting room and the hallway leading to the exam rooms. I pass them all and head for Jez's lab and apartment, the whole back side of her clinic.

I'm definitely not expected back here; it's obvious when I trip on something covered by a discarded blanket pile. The rest of Jez's apartment is in a similar state of disarray, but this is normal. I'm not worried when Jez leaves her place a sty when I'm getting one of my checkups. I step carefully around the mess, towards the lab she's built up for me over the past two years we've known each other. This is where she's pattering around, pulling things away from over the top of the computers and the custom-built exam bed.

I take a moment to stop, look out her windows. The glass is frosted over and grated, but the soft greenish glow of light filtering through the plants' leaves makes it through. The light from the setting sun is already staining the far side of the shaft orange and gold, reflected from the windows across the yawning gap. Maybe I don't tell Jez this, but she has a hell of a place. I feel safer here than I do in my apartment in North, maybe because Jez rebuilt me here, maybe because it was the first place of any kind of safety I'd ever known. That made this place more special, dearer, to me than anything else. This place was why I went into the contracting business.

“Okay, all set, let’s get you looked over and tuned up!” Jez declares, jarring me from my reverie. I pull myself into the present, anchor myself there, and start shedding my jacket and shirt again.

“Don’t think there’ll be anythin’ better or worse this time, Jez,” I tell her before I settle on the bed. Can’t help a tight grip on the sides as the clamp bites down all the way from my neck to just above the waist of my pants. Hurt like hell. “Need to upgrade the clamp in here.”

“I can’t get a deep scan with something like what you have in your place,” Jez replies briskly, tapping a few keys firmly before moving around into my line of sight. She starts turning the controls for the bed, getting me mostly-vertical and turned so I could look at the scans and watch her work. It was how she began earning my trust, letting me watch what she was doing to me. “Okay, base scans starting *now*.”

I grunt a wince as the probes in my spine crackle. In front of me, a holographic copy of my spine begins to form. Jez can’t edit the false-color program easily; that’s why the image resolves to form a deeply-curved silver backbone. More metallic pieces of my internal structure form from there. Titanium-carbide bones. Steel alloy muscle strands. A few pinkish flickers, for stomach, liver, heart, all dotted with metal to help compensate for their protective cage. The program stops short of imaging my skin, and I sigh slowly as I stare at the thing I am under my otherwise-normal appearance. Just human enough to be considered alive. Just robotic enough to be considered inhuman.

“Well overall scans show no problems, system checks starting now,” Jez reports, stepping away to pour a cup of something. Coffee, likely. We’ve both had long days. “Let me know if anything makes you uncomfortable, all right? I might be able to upgrade these scanners soon, get better readings.”

“Great, Jez,” I mutter, swallowing down another uncomfortable grunt. I knew Jez would get into more trouble than she deserved if she actively hunted for things to put into this setup to make me more comfortable. “Let’s just get it done so I can go home.”

“You’re no fun,” she retorts before taking an annoying slurp of coffee. “Synapse net good. Neural net gettin’ eyed now.”

I can tell because a hard pulsing headache hits me between the eyes. I close my eyes and try not to jump into cyberspace. I hear Jez taking another slurp, a startled shuffle as she looks at something. Suddenly, the ache is gone, and I blink my eyes open. That’s not normal. That means Jez found something.

“What’s it? Virus?”

“No,” Jez replies darkly, gaze fixed on her screens. “I picked up some protocols I don’t recognize as normal for you, stopped the scans to get a closer look. Wanna shift out for me, maybe you can get a look and tell me what’s going on.”

I don’t need to be told twice. I look up and transmit directly into Jez’s equipment, backtracking into her analysis data. The protocols she’s looking at are definitely not something that belong to me; they’re far more complex than any of my normal sets, and that makes me wary. At least I’m the one in more danger than Jez is right now.

Link in and find an origin, I relay to her. It would be faster than re-grounding myself, then jumping back in. I can track it from there, figure out what it is. Might not be pretty, so be ready to pull the plug if something goes wrong.

I sense the double-tap of agreement Jez types into her computer, and I stay close to her command input. The protocols flash forward, expanding and filling the immediate expanse of awareness. While Jez traces one side, I run over the other side, expanding the codelines and hunting for an ident code of some kind. If someone had somehow hacked me, installed these, I was in a hell of a lot of trouble. But there was no ident code, and that made me uneasy. No ident meant the protocols had kicked in from my own processors.

Internal uplink access, can’t get a read.

Time stretches for what feels like infinity before Jez’s typed reply reaches me.

[[I don’t see anything, either. Best guess, I need to trigger one of them, try and make it go live. That okay by you?]]

I can’t access it myself, so take it easy, I warn her. Another double tap, and I hunker my sense down to wait. Jez is scanning them again, probably looking for one that seems mostly-harmless. I watch the strands light up, then darken as she jumps between them. She settles on one, and I manage to make her stop long enough for me to try and read it through. The coding’s too far beyond me to read, but I send my own double-tap to confirm the codeline. I pull out from Jez’s setup but keep myself adrift, braced for the impact.

It came as a simple *shift*. I try to brace for the loop but I’m dragged down into it, all sense of the present wiped away.

“All right, Miss Kovolov, this is what’s going to happen,” I say while I check over the system one more time. It was going to work, I knew it would. “There’s going to be a bit of a sting in the back of your neck; the processor. I’m sure your abilities will let you graft it in seamlessly.”

“I have a reading on it right now,” the woman on the test bed tells me. She has black hair and exceptionally dark eyes, her usual flowing clothes replaced with an

interface suit that would let me monitor her vitals. Making sure she survived this was part of the project. "But I can't promise I'll make it work right away."

"So long as it goes in, it'll work," I insist, looking up and adjusting my glasses. The nose pads are slipping, I'm nervous but reasonably so. "And once that's in, you should be able to seamlessly integrate into cyberspace at will. A natural extension of your capabilities."

"I hope you're correct, Jack," Kovolov - no, Mariya - replies, managing a small smile. I return it and offer her a thumbs-up. It would work. I know it would work, and Mariya's technopathic powers would carry it through.

I make the intro for my superiors, I flip the switch, the chip goes in but something goes wrong once Mariya accepts it, sparks are flying everywhere, I have to get her out -

Grounded. I jolt myself out of the loop, pulling on the restraints. My back is trying to arch against the clamp. My muscles had overridden the shutdown program for the clamp. I'm breathing hard but manage to calm down. I notice I'm flat on my back, not vertical, and Jez is gripping my shoulder; she must have been trying to snap me out of the loop for a while. Hell.

"...how long was I looping?" I asked once I felt calmer, more anchored.

"Only fifteen minutes," Jez replies, shaken. Her grip hasn't loosened on me yet. "But I've never seen a loop that vivid before, and whatever that was..."

She hits something out of my sight, and the clamp disengages so I can sit up, regain my bearings. The memory the loop had recalled was definitely not something I knew; looping itself, not so much. I'd been plagued by a lot of feedback loops immediately before and immediately after I got away from the corp that had made me. Recall memories that were triggered by déjà vu, circumstances repeating themselves. I was lucky not to be bothered by them as much as I was. But it made the loop more vivid and real when I did loop. Wasn't pleasant if it was a particularly active loop. This wasn't one of those.

"Did you figure out where those protocols came from while I was looped?" I ask once I feel back in control, centered in the present. Jez leans on a support for one of the machines, cradling her chin thoughtfully.

"Definitely an internal source, for sure," she says. "From what I could tell, it seemed like some kind of AI functionality; a regulator program of some kind. I was able to glimpse some of its code, but it was fast. I didn't get a great scan."

"Show me," I tell her as I ease to my feet. Jez doesn't bother trying to argue with me; I'm one of her patients, she's worried for me. She gets in front of the keyboard and

clatters away, soon bringing up a recall transmission, recreating whatever was going on in cyberspace while I was in her systems. I can see where my own consciousness is in the feedback loop: a dark greenish-bluish smatter of light with white linear flashes cutting through it. But the “loop lights” aren’t randomly generated; I can trace them back to a fragment of a larger cyber-entity, nearly pure white. I stare at it for a few moments, realizing what it was.

As far as I knew, no corporation had ever been able to generate and launch an advanced AI. The so-called artificial intelligences that you found in an aircar, your apartment shower, even recommending clothing styles in the fancy department stores, were nothing more than computers with advanced response programming. Just creative enough to carry on a simple conversation, take a couple orders, done. I’d seen them in cyberspace, little gray matrices of if-then conditionals. They were simple, not worth time or effort.

But this white thing was nothing like that. It was vivid, alive, reaching out towards me but already having to escape. As if it knew Jez had been watching and was trying to run.

“I – I think it’s an AI,” Jez stammers weakly, “but I’ve never seen one like that. And I’d know if there was a real AI out there, I know everyone in the AI fields...”

“And it’s in my head,” I grumble. “How comforting. Like I need a target painted on my back as well as my front.”

“Well I can’t pick it up now,” Jez tries to assure me, turning to offer a beaming smile. “Maybe it’s just a cyber-defense mechanism that went live, nothing serious. If it was malware I’d be able to tell.”

I don’t think it’s a self-generated firewall, but I’ll let Jez think that.

“You wanna finish the checkup?” I ask, starting to head back for the bed. “Might even let you go huntin’ for that thing if you work quick.”

“If you do, will you come with me to the *calan awst* competitions in East tonight?” Jez asks, eyes widening to plead. I look back at her and frown. “One of the houses is even opening up for cyborg events! Freestyle unarmed, sharpshooting, and all the traditional events! And I won’t make you sign up for one, though I think you’d be amazing in the unarmed fighting –”

“And get revealed and end up on the radar?” I growl warningly, which makes Jez raise her hands warily, both to keep me calm and signal immediate surrender.

“I said I wouldn’t make you enter anything, *bastard amheus*,” Jez grumbles, cursing my suspicion. I turn my frown a short ways in reverse, if only because it’s rare to hear Jez curse anyone, much less in Welsh when she means it. “Just meet me in the

East transport hub and we can at least go watch! Then you can point and laugh at the other cybers and feel good about being ten times better despite being four times as old.”

The weak twitch in my lips is the closest Jez can get me to a smile. Maybe it’s flattery, but it’s also true. It would be fun to look at the metal men and skins that come out and know I could pound all of them into the ground if I had a mind to it. Jez spots my smile and beams victoriously.

“Three hundred hours so we can look nice, okay?” she asks. “Besides, we gotta finish your stuff, so get your super-fancy cyber butt back on that bed, mister!”

“Don’t call me cyber,” I tell her, but I comply anyway. Either way, this night was going to be interesting.

Moneaux

The soft whispers of other minds in hers flow quietly, a small stream that babbles along. Her eyes are closed, drifting along the current but not latching to any one voice as the stream widens slowly as she stretches her feeling out, outside all physical confines, reaching...reaching...

“Alayna?”

Alayna Moneaux jolted out of the drifting wanderings of her mind, blinking as she reoriented herself in her own mind, into her body. She was kneeling on a carefully-woven, thick-piled rug which she used for her meditations, but she wasn't alone as she had been half an hour before. Her adoptive mother was kneeling beside her, despite her thick silver braid and the fine wrinkles appearing around her eyes and mouth. Etain Moneaux offered her a small smile before reaching to take her hand warmly.

“You were wandering very far in a very short time,” she said, making a warm spot in Alayna's heart glow proudly. “You've made great progress in these two years.”

“Only so I can serve the city better,” Alayna insisted. Her telepathic and telekinetic skills had served her well in AmCad, despite the persistent problems that came from having to fight for jurisdiction against the corporate security thugs.

“But you have duties other than those with the protectors,” Etain pressed, and Alayna had to turn away. “It is *calan awst*. You have a duty to begin the celebrations, to stand at Lord Robert's side.”

“And that's exactly why I asked to be on-duty tonight,” Alayna argued, standing up smoothly and pacing towards the wide window. Beyond the trellised glass, she could look out across the other roof of the Macey compound, across the water to North Cadarn. It had only been nine years ago when she had looked out there knowing he was there, safe. Now it made her bitter, angry. He hadn't been safe there after all.

She heard Etain stand up slowly, but was glad she didn't come after her, to try and comfort her. There was no comfort when it was impossible to let it go.

“...he's been dead for nearly ten years, dear one,” Etain finally murmured. “His spirit cannot rest if you cling to him.”

“You don't know that he's dead,” Alayna argued, turning back to meet Etain's gaze. “Just because Romarei told us he was dead...I would know if he was dead.”

“Better than I?” Etain asked, and Alayna forced herself to stop her tongue. She knew better than most that Etain's gift of prophecy and communing with the dead made her far more powerful and worthy of respect than most other druids in Cadarn. Alayna lowered her eyes towards the floor, but Etain closed the distance between them.

She placed one hand on her shoulder, her other hand raising Alayna's chin so they could look at each other.

"...I did not feel his spirit pass on, no," Etain told her, and Alayna's throat tightened. "But I tried to gaze into his future and found nothing, when he was hired on."

"...what do you mean, nothing?" Alayna asked shakily. If he wasn't truly dead, something must have happened to prevent his return. "If he is not dead -"

"He is," Etain insisted. "But something of his spirit has endured. That much I believe. That is why there was nothing in his future when I glanced."

It was more than Etain had ever disclosed to her before, and some part of Alayna was grateful for it. She made herself smile softly, which was returned by Etain and met with a warm embrace. Despite all of Alayna's self-discipline and her lofty goals, she was doing everything she had done for him, for his sake and their father's.

The thought of her adopted father jerked Alayna's head up from Etain's shoulder, and within those few seconds Lord Robert Macey appeared in her doorway. Despite being dressed in ceremonial military style, his typically-hard and unreadable face was softly smiling at them. Alayna pulled away from Etain and bowed smoothly to him.

"Alayna, there's no need for that, and you know it full well," he scolded gently, blue eyes sparkling softly as his smile stretched. The phrase was enough for Alayna to cross her quarters quickly, embracing him tightly and ignoring the cool layers of metal for his ceremonial honors. Lord Robert warmly returned her hold, his cheek pressed against her hair.

"Even if you were dressed in rags I'd bow," Alayna told him, earning a soft chuckle as he turned her loose.

"Perhaps I should try it one day," Lord Robert teased her. "But you yourself aren't dressed for the evening, no matter how short a time you'll be there."

Alayna frowned a little, though she glanced down at her simple AmCad shirt and exercise pants with some mild distaste. Compared to her adopted parents, she was exceptionally understated.

"I'm on duty at one hundred," she told him, and Alayna hated to see Lord Robert's cheerful expression falter. "I should be leaving as soon as the sun sets."

"...you've not been to *calan awst* for eight years," he noted carefully, but Alayna could sense his own subtle grief behind the strength of his mind and persona. "I know it was your favorite time to be with Jack, but working all the night long does nothing to honor him."

It was what Etain had been saying, and Alayna sighed a little before pulling anxiously at her dark braid. Disappointing them was nearly as painful as the things she did to try and push away her own grief for Jack. It had been eight years, but it was still a raw wound in her spirit. She also wasn't the only one who had grieved for him, the only one who still did. Jack had been Lord Robert's only son, his only reminder of his first wife. Etain had been Jack's surrogate mother after his own mother had died. Holding so tightly to his memory was almost selfish.

"...when will the ceremony officially start?" Alayna asked, looking up to her father. Lord Robert's expression lightened again, and she could sense his memories of Jack being pressed away, back into the past. It was how he kept himself from despair.

"Half an hour after sunset," he told her with a gentle squeeze around the shoulders. "I'm sure Detective Ramstein will understand if you're late by a little while."

"...I guess I'll dress and go in with full regalia," Alayna sighed, and managed to return the bright smile that her father gave her. He stepped out after another firm embrace, and Etain offered her a kiss on the forehead before Alayna was alone again. All it truly took was a brief wave towards her bed in the next room, and her AmCad uniform flew raggedly from atop her blankets into a corner.

"Damn."

It was easier once she was inside her room, and with some effort Alayna tested her telekinetic skill as she drew out her full robes and jerkin, the uniform of a house druid. The main tunic was soft sky blue, which made her deeply-tanned skin seem softer than it actually was. Over it went the tabards in dark forest green, bearing a single silver stripe down each length. The entire outfit was secured in place by the black leather jerkin, which was more of a coat than anything else. Still, Alayna couldn't help admiring herself in the mirror once she donned the entire outfit, the fabric and leather swirling around her and lending her an air of mystery that she rarely ascribed to herself. But at the very least she would be present for the beginning of the opening ceremonies, and then she would still be able to report in for her eight-hour shift through the early night.

Once Alayna was dressed, she found her *llunffon* and typed in AmCad's non-emergency contact number. Before the automated machine asked, she plugged in Ramstein's private extension and waited for the connection to be made. It didn't take much longer than ten seconds before the small videoscreen lit up, and soon Detective Mark Ramstein's broad face appeared in her view. Although being well over sixty years old, indicated by the lines that marked his face and the slight sagging of skin along his jaw, Ramstein was still indisputably the best investigator in AmCad's history. Alayna drew herself up a little straighter, as if she were standing in Ramstein's office in person, and even despite his heavy dark glasses she felt his gaze scanning her up and down.

“...y’know you can just say you’re gettin’ pulled into doin’ house shit for the first half hour of your shift,” he barked at her, some of his impatience flaring even though Alayna was at least ten miles from AmCad headquarters and his office. “Don’t just stand there like some *idiot mud* and say so already.”

“Sorry, sir, yes, sir, I’m going to be late for my shift tonight,” Alayna replied quickly, though she could track Ramstein’s occasional flares of temper easily. “My father needs me to be present for the ceremonies, and then I’ll take my leave as soon as it’s over.”

“Damn straight you will,” Ramstein insisted. “You’re not my best backup for nothin’, with upper levels too busy with their *duw*-damned *dyheadau gwleidyddol* and not protectin’ this city.”

“*Fy athro, yn cael ei chynhyrfu,*” Alayna told him, even raising her hands to help calm him down. She understood his frustrations with his peers and superiors, always trying to play into house politics to get into better positions. That was primarily why he was the only ‘real’ detective in AmCad, and Alayna’s constant exposure to him very rapidly played up her own distaste with political maneuvering. At least her words did calm Ramstein, and he sighed heavily before rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “At least it should be a quiet night. I’ll make sure to bring you a bottle of whiskey as a gift from my father. He won’t say no, after everything you’ve done for me and him.”

“Aw, hell, kid, I gotta whole case of damn fine whiskey from him,” Ramstein chuckled, smiling softly. “Just get over here at oh-one-thirty and I’ll let you pick the bottle, all right?”

“Agreed, sir,” Alayna replied before he closed the call. Lord Robert may have helped to raise her, but her three years working with AmCad and Ramstein made him as much of a father to her as anyone could be. Alayna would always be grateful for his willingness to drag a twenty-two-year-old druid, with only fragmentary memories of the kind of living she had had in the slums of Central Cadarn before Etain had found her, all the way into a chem bust and the arrests of thirteen corporate goons, all of whom were contracted felons. He hadn’t been afraid to throw her head-first into the deepest, darkest cesspit just to see if she could swim in it. Thankfully for her, she had survived that ordeal.

She left her rooms with a satchel containing her travel passes, ident card, and AmCad officer’s badge before hurrying through the wide arches of the Macey estate, into the central courtyard. Despite being a council house now, House Macey could only boast four trained druids, herself included. It was paltry compared to House Kristoff’s twelve trained druids and seven about to pass their final tests. But Alayna was certain Lady Kristoff’s agents hardly knew each other as well as she knew Etain, Cormack, and Kaitlen. All of them were waiting for her, while the servants and Lord Robert were settled around the edges of the courtyard. Etain was directly across from her, indicating

the highest and lowest ranks of the house druids, respectively. Her own robes were far more intricate and woven of finer materials, and heavy bronze adorned her wrists and ankles. Atop her fine brown hair sat a handsome golden headdress, a small fanlike crest perched at the back of her head and fine chains woven into the locks of her hair. Etain offered her a small smile as Alayna took her place in the quadrangle, and she looked up to find Cormack waving at her right. Cormack Aaron and his sister, Kaitlen, were the children of House Aaron, who were clients of House Macey and very minor overall. But Cormack and Kaitlen, unlike most druids, held complimentary talents. Alone, Cormack could summon gusts of wind, and Kaitlen could draw up the water surrounding the city and, in tighter circumstances, could draw out moisture from the atmosphere for a wide variety of uses. But Alayna had seen them, in practices, combine their gifts to generate clouds and, with some time, massive storms that were completely self-contained. Considering the scars across Luthien, where potential township sites had been obliterated nearly a hundred years ago, bringing water to such places could repair those wounds, help spread out the population. Alayna knew it was one of many of her father's dreams, and they were the key to helping accomplish it. Cormack and Kaitlen were in robes more like her own than Etain's, but instead of black leather they were wrapped in brown, and Alayna noted that Cormack was proudly wearing the green and gray tartan of his family.

Once Alayna had settled in her place, she closed her eyes and expanded her awareness among the four of them, carrying their thoughts together to synchronize the ceremony. It wasn't much more than a plea to the ancient gods of Earth's Celts, in praise for the coming harvest and the strength of the city's defenders, but somehow the recitation of long poetic Welsh, the combined working of their druidic talents, led to something much deeper than a simple harvest prayer. Even now, at the very start, Alayna could feel something stirring among them.

"Dod, gaeaf, gyda gwyntoedd oer," Etain intoned, but in their connected minds Alayna listened to the welcoming of winter's coldness in English. The chief druidess continued, "We gather to pray for your patience, as we gather in the food we planted in spring, which in its time has ripened for our use. May any dangers that befall us be swiftly averted, by the hands of the warriors within our great fortress-city."

Alayna knew Etain was continuing, offering blessings to House Macey and their allies, but she was drawn away from the present, into the growing energies she sensed in Etain. The blanket connections protected Etain from any sudden visions, but the downside was that she, Cormack, and Kaitlen all saw fragments of one vision; prophecy, after all, was Etain's gift, not their own. Alayna could momentarily feel the siblings' presence near her own as the vision grew strength, but it didn't take long for the vision to consume her.

She stood on a cliff overlooking Cadarn, looking towards the city, from the north. For a moment Alayna thought it would be a vision of the present, simply dislocated,

but as she began moving she saw that East Cadarn was swathed in flames. Smoke rose up into the otherwise-clear sky, and Alayna would have screamed if a hand hadn't found itself on her shoulder, heavy but firm. She didn't turn of her own will, looking up to find a man's face looking down at her, unfamiliar to her but he seemed to know her.

The future. Within her lifetime East Cadarn would be destroyed. Would this man save her life?

He was speaking to her, but Alayna couldn't hear him, which gave her a chance to absorb his features as best she could. His scalp was mostly-bare, only a fine bristle of what seemed to be dark brown, which offset the bright blue of his eyes. Alayna noticed with some unease that his gaze seemed to contain something other than the surface concern, something darker and almost wild. But from the expressions in those eyes Alayna could sense that he was protecting her, perhaps even telling her they had to go if she was going to stay safe. Some emotional thread of Etain's future-sight flashed at her warningly: unease, distrust. This man would start as an enemy to her, then become an ally, she hoped.

The vision of the man began dissipating, and Alayna's sense of time returned to the present. She was rather surprised to find herself curled on the smooth stones of the courtyard, shivering from the effects of the echo of Etain's prophecy. Thankfully she was able to move smoothly, compared to other times when the four of them had been similarly connected when Etain suddenly had a vision. On her left Kaitlen was sitting up, tears rolling down her face and obviously shaken by what she had seen, while Cormack had her gathered into his arms, trying to soothe her despite the haunted gaze he cast into space. Alayna managed to get to her knees before looking up at Etain, who was at least on her feet though she was obviously weak. Lord Robert was there, holding her steady, speaking to her quietly. Her motion caught his eye, and he turned to quickly cross the courtyard to her, even kneeling down to her level and embracing her tightly.

"What did you see?" he asked quietly after rocking her for a few moments. Alayna had hardly felt the tears coming down her cheeks until the tracks were rubbed away by the breast of her ceremonial jacket. "Cormack said there was fire, destruction, and Kaitlen's hardly said a word..."

"...East Cadarn," Alayna managed to stammer out weakly. "East Cadarn was razed. I was out of the city; someone was with me."

"Who?"

"...I don't know," she admitted uneasily. "But I think he had helped me escape. The vision seemed to focus on...on him, and not the city."

Alayna looked up at him, only to find Lord Robert's expression long distant and processing the information. Were this any other day, he and Etain would have gone into private quarters, to discuss the implications of the vision, to prepare for whatever was

coming. Sometimes the visions were true, and they weathered the event without great damage. But other times Etain's visions never came true, and the preparations seemed for nothing. She would have to wait to find out what her adoptive father would do to prepare for the coming catastrophe.

Eventually Lord Robert turned her loose, helping her stand before returning to Etain so they could go into conference, and both Cormack and Kaitlen were gone by the time Alayna thought to ask them in more detail what they had seen. Likely they wouldn't want to discuss it for a long while, if ever. She took a few deep breaths to center herself, to focus. Only time would prove whether or not what they had seen would come to pass, and hopefully it would be a long way into the future. Right now, she had to worry about the present, to fulfill part of Etain's prayers for the coming winter and stand firm as one of Cadarn's protectors.

Alayna still had a feeling those eyes she had seen were going to haunt her for a long time.

Callahan

After finishing up at Jez's clinic, I head home, first finding an elevator to get up to the surface level of Central. Even though the sky was still glowing with the last traces of light people were hurrying towards the transit stations, piling into the maglev trains into North and East. They would spend at least an hour either preparing for the parties that would start in East and invariably spread into the other sectors of the city, or they were going to get an early start in their own private celebrations in the pubs and bars and clubs and simply wander around Cadarn to spread warm drunken wishes for a safe winter to anyone they came across. For my part, I was going to go home, find some kind of dinner, and then set back out to meet Jez.

Typically, I'd go home after a regular day and stay there. It wasn't as if I was interested in a social life; my previous line of work didn't promote having a lot of close friends to go out drinking with. Also considering my precarious circumstance as a free-roaming cyborg, I had to be careful who I made friends with. So I stayed in, typically watching a movie or working out a little bit before going to bed early. With Jez, it was either go out with her and at least try to enjoy it, or have to deal with a pouty lip and hurt feelings for up to two days. Since it was *calan awst*, it would likely last a week.

So I take the time to shower again, this time without the AI minder getting in a twist over the water pressure. I'm glad Jez decided not to take notice of the bruises I'd earned today; five of the shops I'd checked over had been raided while I was there, and it had taken a lot of effort to avoid getting shot by the teams I'd ambushed. I do wince when the hot water sluices over a graze just under my armpit. Damn. I was getting lazy. Tomorrow after my rounds I'd have to actually do some serious reflex exercises.

After showering I get my clothes back on, not bothering to change into something nicer for the event. Most people would be in some kind of cultural outfit, though to be honest most people in Cadarn, for adopting Welsh culture when the colony was founded, were really ignorant about how the Welsh probably dressed all those thousands of years ago. Better for me to go casual than make an idiot of myself.

It's two hundred hours when I finally leave my place, coming out onto the main street. The sun's been down for a while now, and the moon is just barely visible between the towers of the Caernarvon neighborhood where I was standing right now. I don't see a lot of other people on the street, but I figure when I get to the maglev station and find the trains packed full walking's the underrated but preferred option. Thankfully the line at this hub into East has a walkway next to it, so I can watch the trains pass me, humming softly.

There's a few other walkers out, and I look at them on occasion. Most have figured out their cultural finery. Men with their work shirts on under the plaids crossing their chests, some of them trying the kilt thing but most others tying the plaid off into a sash around their waists. I know by morning they'll have those shirts off, but

they're at least trying to preserve some sense of modesty before they get to drinking. The colors follow fashion, not family, but at least there's no strange clash of, say, stormcloud gray and bright fuchsia.

The women are a much more interesting sight. Some of the ones that have shed their pantsuits and stilettos are in long ground-sweeping dresses of pale pastels, framed with tabards in coordinating flashes of bold colors. To show off their stylish figures and keep the draping scarves from flying off, they're either wearing bodices or corsets or wrapped in leather straps that look more authentic, if not aesthetic. A few of them, though, had kept their ultra-hip miniskirts and fluorescent hair strands, though I knew some of those would be gone by the time they got home, for one reason or another. Overall, though, I liked the dresses more. Maybe Jez would surprise me and turn up in something as close as she could manage; she was clever enough to do that.

But I emerge from the tunnel as one of the trains coughs out its passengers, and I start looking for Jez despite getting bumped and brushed around by the new arrivals. Some of them are still in factory coveralls, but I'm not surprised. Some of the manufacturing shifts are brutal and these poor saps undoubtedly had to bribe and lie their way out tonight. I can tell from a few glances that most of them are lifers; people who went to a corp for an enhancement to fix a problem, but they can't repay the company monetarily. So they work off the debt, and for most it's for life. Almost like what happened to me. Almost.

I spot Jez and end up rightfully floored. She did dress for the night, but with her own Jez-styled flair. I see her a few yards ahead of me, in a pure white dress that only hangs to just below her knees. Instead of wearing the thick tabards she has a light scarf in a pale silver-green coiled around her neck. I recognize the thick bronzed leather belt that's buckled tightly around her waist, and the belt's complimented by the same color of soft-soled boots that come halfway up her calf. It's a weird mix of the traditional styles I'd seen in the tunnel and what I'm more used to seeing Jez wear. She spots me while I'm taking in her outfit and she shoots me a brilliant smile before pushing through the crowds to me. Yeah, that was Jez.

"What, you didn't dress up for the big event?" she asked before easing her hand through my arm. The close, familiar action made me pause a moment, and I did my best not to seem uneasy with her holding me like that. "Even I managed to scrape something together."

"Yeah, well, that's you, Jez," I tell her before she starts leading me into East Cadarn. Unlike North, with concerted urban sprawl, or Central, which was almost entirely made up of superscrapers and carefully-kept park areas, East Cadarn was almost a step in reverse. Instead of steel and glass, the buildings here were made with stone and iron, despite being constructed by machines and not human hands. Some of the residential areas towards the south held some more modern looks, but where Jez was taking me it was all traditional stonework and works of architectural art that didn't

fit with what I saw in my daily life. I did my best to keep my analyzing gaze in check and not stop and absorb everything I was seeing to process later, once I was home. "So why are we here and headed for some noble's public party?"

"Because one of those houses is going to have cyborgs compete in events," Jez reminds me brightly, and I get a sinking feeling in my gut. Jez would want me to enter so she can see my combat skills. Part of me knew I needed the practice. The rest of me wasn't going to risk getting found out and shipped back into service. Jez is pressing on, "I mean, in case you wanted to see what some corps have been up to without you deep in the thick of it, y'know, and if you *really* wanna show what an eight-year-old cyber like you can do against the latest and greatest, well, I wouldn't say no to that."

I try not to groan. I knew it. But Jez squeezes my arm reassuringly.

"But you don't have to go fight if you don't want to," she insists. "Maybe you can just tell me what's good and bad in them, no fuss over you going in and kicking ass like I totally know you can."

"Don't make this about me, Jez."

"Two years I've known you, Raph Callahan, and I've never seen you do what those people you hate so much made you for," Jez states firmly, and I hold down my fuming. "Sure yeah you get some chances to throw punches, but come on. I've been checking up on your systems for how long now?"

"Two years exactly as of next month," I grumble.

"Raph, you not in some kind of fighting situation as often as you used to is locking up your reflexes and advanced motor skills," Jez states barefaced. I nearly stop in my tracks before looking down at her in shock.

"And you didn't tell me?"

"Because I didn't think you were maybe designed as a combat model," Jez insists. "Not advanced security. Full-out combat."

"...so this's your diagnosis to see if that's right," I state. I know it's not a question. The graze I'd gotten in one of the shakedowns I'd stopped was my definite confirmation. Jez nods firmly before smirking at me.

"Besides, don't think of it as a treatment! Think of it as exercise that you seriously need."

She has no idea how accurate that statement is.

I don't outright reply but let my silence come over as confirmation for her, and Jez's beaming smile returns. She even hums some traditional tune she must be

expecting to hear was we walk through the nobles' waterfront district. It's an interesting place just to look, walking past the big estates belonging to the longtime Council houses like Kristoff, Graile, Avant. Jez isn't stopping there, which is good. They're the bigger houses with the bigger celebrations, but they're exclusive, invites-only, and if Jez and I tried to walk in we'd be thrown out without a lot of notice. Instead we head down along the massive boulevard, which is quickly filling with people finding places to go for the start of the night's events. I feel Jez drawing me along as we follow the wide street, and soon there's more cyborgs, and I know we're close. I look through the growing crowds and I spot their destination, and likely ours: a low, modest-looking villa, with large welcoming braziers outside a long tent striped in green and blue, silver pennants flashing in the air.

"Macey?" I ask. I don't know how I recognized the colors or patterns, but I let it slide. Maybe I'd had to get introduced to the main noble players and had that information subconsciously recalled while being here. Memory triggers were normal, so long as they didn't trigger feedback loops. Jez bobbed her head next to me.

"Yup. Weird, I know, but I guess they're trying to play nice in case the corps decide they want to have their own little police state. Which they can't."

"Not if they want funding into research the houses are going to want," I agree.

We start sliding into the crowds, and eventually settle under the tent. It's set up as a staging area for anyone interested in the events House Macey is sponsoring, watching or competing. If I crane my head enough, I can see into the estate courtyard where a combat ring is being set up. But that's not the real thing to see here. The real show for anyone to see is the cyborgs that've been released to fight. I know without looking at them closely that they're not lifers in the usual sense. They're like the tech junkies in the lower levels of North and Central, except they have the money or guts to keep getting improved, abilities expanded. They're the kind of lifer I used to be, before I got enough sense to want to get out of my square walls and see outside them.

Most of them are metal men; cyborgs who, like me, have had most of their internal parts removed and replaced with advanced tech to the point they're definitely more machine than human. They tower over me and easily outweigh me from sheer size and width. But metal men all have their weaknesses, and I was lucky to only have two. I look closer and can pick out a couple of skins from the crowd, mostly from their unnatural stiffness, their blank-eyed expressions. Skins were androids, all metal under the hood and coated with skin grafts. Skins were popular with bigwigs since they were great personal assistants and, if programmed enough, some pretty deadly bodyguards. But they could be predictable, which was their downfall. I look even closer and can pick out one or two normal lifers, with a replaced limb or electronic eyes or a plate over their chest to show reconstructive work that they could barely afford. Maybe they'd bargained victory for freedom, and I hoped to any gods that really did exist one of them had the luck to pull it off.

“...they’re so big,” Jez murmurs after a few moments of looking over the competition. “I mean, showy. Half of those things I could have shrunk down and subdermal with my eyes shut.”

“So nice to see your competitive edge showin’,” I offer, and Jez smacks me in the arm hard enough for me to feel it but thankfully not hurt herself.

“It’s not funny, though,” Jez insists, lowering her voice. “Some of these guys are built up really solid. Sure, you’re solid, but you’re nearly ancient in the corps’ eyes.”

“I didn’t notice, thanks, Jez,” I grumble. “Look, you get comfy somewhere, I’ll get signed in and we’ll see what shakes out.”

“Don’t you dare get in with some of those poor folks trying to get free,” Jez snaps in farewell, but I know she knows I know better. It’s a way for her to say be careful. I roll my shoulders back, make sure my leg’s responding well, and ease through the crowd to get to the registration table. There’s a shortish line and at least three registrars, and I’m lucky enough to get called up by the guy who actually isn’t afraid of the monsters he’s seeing. In fact, he nearly doesn’t look at me as I sidle up.

“Lifer number one-oh-two, tell me your corp name and get outta the way,” he growls at me, and I’m ready to growl right back.

“You put me in with the lifers and we’ll have dead bodies,” I retort, and his gaze snaps up to me before he raps hard on the table. A scanner flashes up, and I meet his gaze unflinchingly as I hold my hand over the scanner. It only takes it two second before screeching, and the registrar blinks first, startled by the high reading and smacking the thing into silence.

“The hell, cyber, you’re a *duw*-damned skin and got that kinda response in your metal chiphead?” he gruffs, and I have to fight hard to hold in my temper.

“I ain’t a skin. Now sign. Me. In. Asshole.”

The registrar snorts and grumbles something under his breath, probably some slur about cybers getting too human, but I don’t bother trying to listen to him.

“Designation.”

“Name is Raphael Callahan.”

The registrar looks up at me, and I think for a second there’s a smirk on his face. Support or amusement. I wasn’t another half-wit stooge for the corps to look good, or at least I had more of a brain than most of the other cybers he’d seen. But he puts his gaze back down to the table and types my name into the screen.

“Don’t think you’ll tell me your corp.”

“Sure as hell won’t.”

“You gotta mechanic friend to be your designer?”

“Jessia Locke.”

“And you’ll get in brackets with the metal-men,” he says decisively while the table spits out a tag. “You’re number six-eight, skins are fighting out first. Metal-men probably get started at oh-three-thirty.”

I take the tag and check my link. It’s coming up on three-fifteen now; must not be a lot of skins fighting.

“There’s a prep area got put together for the fights,” my registrar continues, pointing over towards the other side of the tent, where I can make out another, smaller pavilion just over one of the walls. “There’s temporary lockers to stash any clothes you should probably not wear – like that shirt and jacket. Lord Macey’s also decided any man wants to, cyber or no, he can get marked for whatever. Paints’re in the lockers, your tag opens the matchin’ locker.”

I thank him and slide away, headed for the prep area. Jez was going to like seeing me shirtless, but if it kept me from either losing my shirt, jacket, or life I’d leave them off. I’m considering getting rid of my boots as I get under the tent. There’s not as many cyborgs here, mostly the registered lifers who’re shaking but trying to put on a brave face. Some of them are gathered in small groups, applying the paint the registrar mentioned to their skin. I see the corporate logos on their backs, shoulders, chests. I’m nearly sick to my stomach, seeing how cowed they were. So afraid. Maybe I’d show them a reason not to be afraid.

I find locker sixty-eight and wave the tag in front of the locking mechanism. There’s a click of recognition before the small door swings open. I clip the tab to my pants before pulling away my jacket and tossing it into the small space. Some of the lifers around me have stopped, obviously transfixed by the sight of my arm. Whatever they have, I know my arm’s not like it. Jez had worked hard to make sure the replacement arm looked and acted like the original limb, though she couldn’t find enough steel fibers to carry the same power capacity and had to use a rather smooth hydraulic system to make up the difference. The actual construct was sheathed in a ceramic alloy that wasn’t close enough to skintone to pass notice, but enough for a cursory inspection. My shirt follows my jacket and I sit on a bench placed nearby to unstrap my boots. It’s a bit of a wrestling match to get the clunky metal foot out of the boot, but once it’s on the ground I know it’ll be more of a problem to get it back in. Jez hadn’t spent as much time with my replacement leg as my arm, so under my pant leg it was mostly hydraulics and metal supports; sturdy, but not necessarily the greatest prosthetic. She did keep tinkering at it, though, so it got better with time.

I place my boots into the locker and would close it if I didn't see the jars of paint on a shelf at the locker's top. Something comes over me, a wash of déjà vu, and things seem to shift.

I reach up to take the blue jar – with my left hand. It's not metal and ceramic; it's flesh and blood. I can feel my own pulse as I take the jar and sit back on the bench. Smoothly; my leg is connected to my hip, and it's flesh, too.

This is from before, I realize as the loop carries forward, working to complete the action from the past.

I open the jar and balance it in my left palm. I straighten and exhale a little as two of my fingers dip into the paint. I can feel the paint, cool and sticky, both in the loop and reality. I can't pull myself out of it until the act is done. I start tracing out a simple pattern of straight lines on my chest, and I can hear my voice murmuring in Welsh as my fingers draw lines on my shoulders and stomach.

"Rhoi cryfder a sgiliau i mi," I say; grant me strength and skill. I know I'm going to need it.

The shift tugs at my stomach, and I shake my head as the loop cuts off, breathing raggedly. I set the jar aside and look down my front. Sure enough, I've acted out the loop; the blue lines bisect my chest and run down my shoulders, though the paint is already smearing on the ceramic. I brace myself on the bench, gripping the edge of my seat and anchoring myself in the present as the wood starts groaning. I wasn't going to loop. Not now, not again. Being loose from one of the corporations meant certain things could not be allowed to happen, and feedback loops – flashbacks and replayed data – were at the top of that list. Not to mention I was soon going to be fighting the biggest, best metal men the corps could build, and I held no illusions most of them would kill me in a single blow if I wasn't smart and alert.

"No loops," I murmur to myself. *"Nothing gets in the way of now."*

Rhoi cryfder a sgiliau i mi, indeed.

I take the time to put the jar of paint away and close the locker. Would start stretching but a sudden thunder of drums fills the air in the courtyard. That's why none of the competition is here to prep yet; they're watching the skins. I decide to follow suit, though I find a side entrance to the courtyard that gives me a better vantage point than trying to get through the crowds.

Ahead of me, two skins are circling each other in the ring. Behind and above them are two men in leather tunics cinched with a blue-green-gray tartan around each of their waists. Massive kettle drums are in front of them and they're hammering out a beat meant for war. Of course the drums won't work on the skins, but my adrenaline's spiking already. I can dimly hear the drums at other estates starting up, but the Macey

drummers are drowning them out. The skins themselves seem to be confused; that's why they haven't launched an attack yet, either of them. Idiots.

Both skins are outwardly female, one fiercely platinum blonde while the other is a vivid red-gold. Whoever designed their outward appearance did a great job of making them drop-dead gorgeous, but it's obvious there's nothing behind those pretty eyes. After one rotation, though, the blonde surprises me. She kicks out at the redhead, and, more surprisingly, connects at Redhead's neck. It's a feat of amazing flexibility when Redhead backbends into the dirt of the ring and retaliates with a two-footed kick that drives Platinum back from the solar plexus out. Redhead finishes the backflip and turns in time to catch an amazing recovery by Platinum, a punch that would have sent any normal person reeling with a cracked skull. Even though they're probably evenly matched, I can see Redhead has the creative edge over Platinum.

They trade blows back and forth for five minutes, dancing across the dirt. I'm not surprised when Platinum tries to charge Redhead and ends up body-slammed into the ground. The drums slam to a stop as Redhead moves back and Platinum is definitely out cold; I can smell something leaking, probably coolant or liquid grease. I see the gazes of the crowd turn to my right, probably where Lord Macey just got to witness the entire fight up close and personal. It doesn't take long before an authoritative voice echoes down my corridor.

"The android Lara is the victor of the first bout!" the voice declares; I assume Lord Macey. "The android Sascha has fallen, but honor to her for striking the first blow."

I watch Redhead - Lara - bow smoothly before stepping out of the ring. Platinum-Sascha has managed to stagger to her feet, though there's a definite welt on her forehead smeared in something green. She also offers a bow before staggering towards her minders. I had to admit those two could take and give damage.

Another skin duo take to the ring, one in a hot pink bob and the other with a long black braid that doubled as a surprise weapon. Their fight takes ten minutes, rather than the five between Lara and Sascha, and again despite their even abilities I can tell that Pink - Ukio - will pull it out. And she does, even with Black's braid trying to crush her neck at least twice. I know Ukio and Lara will be fighting soon, but I still need to stretch. It was likely the only thing I could do to even try and get back to the full capabilities I knew I had.

The drums start with a steady pulse that I use to time my movements. I start with my legs, even stretching my replacement. My left leg, though, feels it much better than the right one; the steel fibers that make up those muscles clench with enough tension to break normal bones. When those fibers relax, almost my entire lower body feels looser. I work my way up from there, abdominals and pectorals and deltoids, shoulders, and arms. When I start rolling my head, cracking my neck slowly as the

connections snap and reform, I feel better than I have in a long time. I used to stretch every day just like this. I had to get back to that. Outside, Lara and Ukio are locked into a mutual submission hold; even though I haven't been watching their fight I can tell it'll be a draw. I turn away to return to the prep area.

More of the metal men have appeared, and the lifers have cleared out. Most of the metal men are in partial shutdown while their techs run through final checks and sneak in a few last-minute upgrades, just to make sure. But a few aren't being watched over, and it doesn't take long before at least one of them spot me.

He's close to seven feet tall; his lower body has been sectioned off and replaced with heavy metal legs ending in claws. Mismatched plates make his torso a patchwork of where he got flesh cut away and replaced with tech. The only human bits of him left are his head, which only boasts one targeting lens on his face and a breathing purifier in his nose, and his arms, which are reinforced by exoskeletal hydraulics. Although I have to look up into his watery greenish eyes, I'm not intimidated.

"And ye must think ye're *real* important, eh, *dyn bach*?" he growls, offering a predatory little smirk. "Y'think just 'cause ye've lost yer literal arm'n leg, ye'll cut it 'gainst a strappin' man like me?"

The metal man guffaws loudly, as if there was something funny in his attempted speech. Probably the arm-and-leg thing. I don't move, just hold my ground. He doesn't seem to like my lack of response.

"Oh, d'ye have yer little *cyfrifiannell* in yer skull tryin' ta figure out what I been sayin'?" he starts up again, eyes narrowing. Good. "Then figure this, *dyn bach: byddwch yn marw heno*. Whaddya say t' that, eh?"

"Then we got a problem," I retort, keeping my voice level. "I don't plan on dying. Not tonight, anyway."

"Ooh, it *does* talk," another metal man drawls, though he's nowhere near as impressive as his pal. "Y'think it can do tricks, too?"

"We'll find out soon enough, won't we?" the first metal man answers, his fists closing. My own fists begin to close, ready to lash out, but the drums are going again.

"Hey, you two, save it fer the ring!" my registrar from earlier snaps; he must have a secondary job of making sure any attempts at ripping apart the competition before the fight don't happen. "We got twelve of you, there'll be plenty of fightin' to go around! First round is six-two and five-seven, the rest'f ya follow me so's you can watch!"

The metal man who'd gotten up in my face backed off and stalked over to the side passage I'd come out from, along with another metal man who eyed me like I, too,

was an idiot outsider who was probably going to get killed. But they had no idea who, or what, I was, and that was going to cost them. I fall in with the other metal men who weren't the two upcoming combatants. At least I'd get to watch my competition.

The registrar leads us through the entry pavilion, then into the courtyard towards the very front of the viewing area. Right across from us was a raised platform where Lord Macey and his chief druid watched the fighting. I was jostled into a row close to the front and settled in, trying not to look up at Macey. I could almost sense a coming loop if I did, but I wasn't going to go into a loop now. I had to focus.

Since there were twelve registered metal men, there were six bouts in the first round. Most of the victors, like my 'new friend', won out on strength and brutality; a couple others managed on speed, outmaneuvering their opponents. Those who were defeated ended up with torn limbs, torn-open plates, and were bound to either die or get more tech fitted to repair the damage. I was, ironically, in the last fight of the first round.

"To close the first round, combatants number sixty-eight and sixty!" a youngish man in a green-gray tartan and brown leather announces from a screen he was carrying; it undoubtedly had the registration data from the table. "Combatant sixty, Messier-two-five of DynSeq Global!"

I raise my head warily as Messier-25 climbs over the railing. He still has a human face, but his skull and spine are metal replacements. Exoskeletal spars fold around his arms and hands, and I can tell from how heavily he fell he was probably close to my own weight, which wasn't easy. At least we had a similar construct, then. Except he was bound to have movement issues, if he'd been outfitted like he had within the last two years.

"Combatant sixty-eight, Raphael Callahan, designed by Jessie Locke!"

I swear I hear Jez squeal in delight as I vault lightly over the railing, but other than her voice the crowd seems surprised. I hear mocking laughter from the *phoendod* that won his first bout by wrenching his opponent's neck. Messier seems surprised, too, though it's only a flicker in his eyes. I stalk easily across the field from him, and Messier turns before we bow, in sync, to Lord Macey. When we turn to face each other the drums are starting to rumble again.

"You can...yield before...we begin," Messier warns me. His speech is labored, fragmentary, but still clear. "I would not...want to cause...your untimely death."

"I won't yield," I tell him, "but thanks for offering."

Messier is confused by my reply, but the time for words is over. The low rumble turns into a tremendous roar, and it's with a well-timed one-two strike I know the fight's begun.

Messier launches himself at me, the spars giving him incredible speed. I wait until he's within arm's reach before I duck under his grasp, and launch myself forward into his gut. There's enough speed to my lunge that I catch Messier in the solar plexus, arresting his momentum. I get a good grip on the spars around his rib cage and twist around to throw him across my body, down to the ground. I make sure to let go before he can grapple for me, and I take two steps back defensively, fists raised. Messier is curled in a fetal position, gasping for air, but he claws at the ground, trying to drag himself up to his feet.

I feel the eyes of every person in the ring watching me.

Messier crawls upright, breath regained, but he's definitely more wary now that he's had a taste of what I can do. He begins stepping to my right, and in reply I pad left, circling. Waiting for the moment to strike. My gaze is already analyzing Messier's motions. Those spars gave him his strength and speed, but they gave me a grappling advantage if he tried to tackle me again. Obviously his spinal replacement was a sure weakness, but I didn't doubt it would be reinforced somehow. Solution? I had to make him yield. I wasn't going to tear him apart to prove I was the better build. That made me no better than the others that had won.

I decide to strike first this time.

I let Messier draw closer to me in our circling maneuver, but as he started moving to enter striking range I backstepped. Messier withdrew warily, trying to anticipate my move. It wasn't enough. I drag my left leg back under me before I deliver a snap-kick into Messier's sternum. Again he went sprawling, and I stop when I hear intense wheezing. I must have cracked his ribcage.

"*Cynnrrch!*" he coughs out weakly, and I do my best to relax. The fight had taken less than five minutes. "I yield to Mister Callahan!"

"The yield is recognized; get your injuries tended to," Macey's voice intones from behind me. "Mister Callahan, you are the victor. I note your precision and skill, they do you great credit."

I turn away from Messier smoothly to offer another quick bow, and when I hear Messier's techs scrambling to get him out of the ring I turn back.

"Lemme help, he's heavy," I say while I kneel down in the dirt with them. I ignore any protests and get my arms under Messier's torso and lift him up off the ground easily. He's still sensible, though, and he lifts his head to look at me in wonder.

"...what are you?" he breathes softly, just low enough for me to hear.

"Different," is all I dare reply.

Messier gets taken out of my arms by a stretcher, which is undoubtedly bound to take him back to North Cadarn for a lot of body work. His techs head out after him, but a couple of them stop to thank me for the assist. I shrug it off before climbing back in with the other metal men watching the competition. They all shift away from me warily, giving me space enough to settle in and get a clear view of the field from now on. At least I hadn't had to completely struggle to get it done; spending all my strength in one go wasn't a great plan.

The second round is set up for two fights of three. My luck runs out because my two opponents were none other than *phoendod* one and two. The announcer calls them by designation again: 77-Jacinto was the claw-footed *butain-mab* that had tried to start the fight, and his *butain-mab* crony was Zemke. Jacinto's earlier smirk was back, and all the more fierce.

"Well well, ye've got more'n just a fancy set'a replacements," Jacinto goads. Not again. "Maybe I'll skin ye and find out how ye got that sparred bloke hackin' like a dead man."

"If you'd stop talkin' and get to findin' out, Jack, ye'd not be such an arsehole," Zemke grumbles. The drums were still low, waiting to see if one of us would forfeit the match. Compared to Jacinto, Zemke was slighter, had his own legs, but some of his enhancements looked like they'd come from Jacinto; not unexpected if they were from the same company.

"Then get a hold on 'im!" Jacinto orders, and the drums rise for the beginning of combat. I know Zemke knew better than to lunge at me, but he starts forward enough to put me in range of his fists, which are heavy black constructs meant to crush metal. I dodge his blows but end up losing ground, enough for Jacinto to move in on my left. One of his claw-feet swings up to grab my leg - which would be bad - but I turned the momentum from Zemke's incoming swing into that foot, and I scramble to the right as Jacinto howls in rage. Zemke's fist had completely crushed that foot, and I heard Jacinto fall, still howling, as he lost his balance. Zemke pulls his fist away, stunned to find his partner on the ground thanks to him.

"So much for getting a hold on me," I mouth off, and Zemke forgets what I did to Messier. He bellows and charges me, his head burying into my stomach and hands grabbing at my waist. He doesn't realize his head puts his neck - sensitive place for anyone, cyborg or no - right in line with my knees. So as I'm being shoved off my feet, I tuck my knees up. Kneecaps slam into Zemke's neck, and he gags in horror. I get a firm grip on his shoulders and flip over his head. My back collides with his, sending him to the ground. One down, one to go.

Jacinto's managed to stand awkwardly, the talons of his remaining foot dug into the dirt of the ring as best as he could. He can't move, and I'm not going to attack a crippled man.

"You better say it or we're standin' here all night," I tell him. I wonder how deep Jacinto's pride goes, if he'll insist on finishing this to the end. But Zemke's down, hardly moving after the beating I gave him, and if Jacinto tried to jump me he'd be the one to go down.

"Fuck you, Callahan," he snarls.

"Not what I meant."

Jacinto growls again, and he tries to take a step towards me. He seems to have forgotten he's missing a foot, and he falls on his face. But he's not giving up; I see his face come up, carved in rage, and his hands are digging into the ground to drag his body closer to me. I think he'd rather die than let me win.

"Mister Jacinto," Macey's voice cracks sharply. "You will yield to your opponent. You've been bested, and continuing in this manner is humiliating."

"I'll kill him first," Jacinto snarls, gaze fixed on me as he keeps dragging forward.

"This is your final warning, Mister Jacinto. Yield to Mister Callahan. Now."

"*Byth*," Jacinto spits. He's within two strides of me, but striking at him now would be a waste and a shame.

"Mister Callahan, would you care to settle the matter yourself?" Macey asks me.

"I don't strike a man already on the ground," I tell him, and an approving murmur sweeps some of the crowd. Jacinto glares at me, ready to kill, but before either of us can move there's sudden roar of wind. It tugs at my hair and sweeps over the crowd. More surprising, it sweeps Jacinto off the ground, over the heads of the crowd, and drops him out near the entrance. I see his techs running out to rescue him and restrain a laugh. I ignore, though, the fact that the young announcer's face looked red from exertion; the druid wasn't my concern, though it was better to be wary of them than not.

As with Messier, I help Zemke's team get him out of the ring. As I climb back into the watching area for the rest of the metal men, the three that hadn't yet fought actually give me respectful nods. I return them before leaning back into one of the chairs that had been brought up for the last contenders. I was exhausted, but in the good way. Maybe the last three would take their time, so I could get my breath back.

I didn't expect all three, on entering the ring, to immediately drop to one knee, all together, in front of Macey.

"What is this?" Macey asks incredulously, but I can hear he's dimly amused. "All three of you don't wish to compete against your peers?"

"M'lord, sir, it ain't that," one of them speaks up. He raises his head, and I see he's in the center, with a barrel-like chest that's undoubtedly reinforced several times over. "Whichever'f us wins here'll fight Callahan, aye?"

"Aye, this is how the competition works," Macey agrees. I straighten slowly, surprised and keeping my gaze on the trio. They're not yielding to each other. They're yielding to me.

"M'lord, none'f us are his equal," the central man, obviously their elected spokesman, continues. "So here we're gonna give in. All respect t'him, but we don't stand a chance."

I feel the gaze of the crowd turning to me, where I'm sitting. I wish I could shrink. I even feel Macey's gaze on me, the threat of the loop.

"Do you accept their surrender, Mister Callahan?" his voice calls out to me. "We've seen your skill, and despite all outward appearances you are clearly the superior of all comers."

"I noticed," I reply, and for some reason the crowd thinks I'm being funny. This was what I was afraid of. Drawing attention to myself. Becoming, no matter how briefly, a public figure. Recognizable. But if I insist they fight, whoever won would do just forfeit the fight with me. Either way I won.

Either way I lost.

I get up out of my chair and climb back into the ring, pacing around in front of the three cybers who were willing to risk trouble with their corps to avoid fighting me. It's hard to believe. They're more advanced in every physical way I know, they're 'younger' and tougher than me, and yet they can't beat me. Can't beat eight years of experience and living. I exhale slowly. Damn me, but either way I got noticed.

I put my right hand on each of their left shoulders, one at a time, to make them stand. That way I can look each of them in the eye, see their fear, their determination. They know I've got no leash, no company ready to drag me home and celebrate my victory in their name. It was a freedom they wanted, too. I can see it in their gazes, the way they stand in front of me, a mix of shame and pride. They won't care what I decide. Either way they faced punishment, like I did in my way.

"...I accept your surrender," I tell them, "but I'm no victor. The victory is yours."

A cheer jumps up from the crowd, and the center cyber smiles at me before embracing me gratefully. I get slaps on my back from the other two, and once the one cyber lets me go Jez is attacking my arm, jumping up and down excitedly. A hand comes down on my bare shoulder, and I turn.

Bright blue eyes look down at me from a rugged face. Brown hair just beginning to gray falls across his forehead. A small, crooked smile greets me, congratulates me.

My frame freezes. I feel the loop trying to take me but I fight it. The more I fight, the more rigid I get. Those warm eyes become concerned, and I can distantly hear Jez trying to snap me out of it, to bring me into the present again. I try to break gazes with him, roll my eyes up and escape into cyberspace, but I'm locked down. I feel the pinging errors in my neural net, feel the AI reaching out with the loop meant to trap me. I fight it.

Shutdown eats me whole.

Jadin

She shouldn't have left her little castle. Instead of being safe behind the thick stone walls she was in all kinds of danger and was going to die. It seemed she knew it, too. Didn't matter. Had to make Macey pay for calling out the agents, for finding **him**.

Rage bubbles in his chest, and he makes sure the little druid's arms are still tied around his chest as the bike screams across the strait, from East Cadarn into North. It would be easy to get rid of her here. Kidnapping and disappearance would fill the order nicely, make Macey whirl around blindly, make him think twice about trying to play nice toward the low-grade cybers.

Cybers like **him**. More rage. More hate.

He guns the bike faster, easily hitting a couple hundred miles per hour as he and his guest drop off the bridge, down into the rest of traffic. He doesn't slow down. She's coming around, whimpering softly, and he jabs his elbow back into her solar plexus gently. Gently drives the air out of her, bruises her side, and makes her shut up.

"An' don't even think about cryin'," he tells her when he hears a sob. Stupid kid. Definitely a better first target over the other young girl. "I'll kill you sooner if you cry."

She likely doesn't hear him, and her forehead presses against his back. Probably she's crying. Dumb kid. *Hurtyn bachennes*. Had to practice. Handlers said remembering languages shouldn't be a problem. Assholes. There wasn't a word for that in Welsh. He tried to remember the curses; they were the most useful.

He could have dumped the girl in the water off the bridge, but Macey had opened his doors to the low-end cybers in the city. Somehow he'd drawn out **the one**, and that meant Macey was in more trouble. Giving low-enders some free rein was one thing. Nearly giving the victory call to **that one** was another matter entirely. So Macey would pay for it with one of his druids. And the rest would follow if he kept helping the low-enders. Sooner if **that one** appeared in Macey's compound again.

The garage is locked up tight, and he seethes, remembering scouting this place out a week ago. **He** had been there, just like he'd been there today. The little piece of bait others had left had gone untouched. Otherwise none of this would be happening. But at least he got to punish everyone he hated.

He kills the bike's engine and unwraps the girl from around him. Her fancy outfit is dirty and torn in a few places from their little ride; a twisted sort of elation mingles with the hate as he cuts her wrists free. They're red where they've chafed the skin into hot red welts. That makes him smile darkly.

"Come on, kid, come an' see what your big good patron does for nice people who get in our way," he tells her viciously. It makes her sob.

“Please, I don’t know what you’re talking about, if you’re kidnapping me Lord Macey –”

He backhands her, and he feels the bones in her jaw and cheek give way as she falls, crying softly and coughing blood.

“I told you to shut up. *Bod arafa*. Next time you start talkin’ you’re dead.”

He takes her arm and drags her towards the back of the garage. There’s a loading dock here, and for a certain window of time the security system goes down so deliveries can be brought in. He can’t help but smile. Lazy for **him** to not check if his program had gotten a little adjustment without his being made alert for it. A longer blink so he can check the time. Oh-three-five-eight. Two minutes and he was inside.

The druid girl tugs weakly against his grip, but a warning squeeze – fracturing her wrist – makes her stop. In other circumstances she was actually fairly handsome, with her brown hair a little golden in the right light. But that wasn’t part of tonight’s work. Maybe with the other druid girl, the one with the masklike face. *Y ferch meddyglar*. Thoughtful. He smiles imagining her face cracking into horror and unwilling pleasure. Soon. One day soon. Maybe he’d get something out of this one before killing her.

He checks the system and finds the back door system deactivated. One-handed, he lifts the delivery door and tosses her inside first. She goes staggering inside, clutching her arm against her chest, the broken side of her face starting to swell. Not so pretty now. Shouldn’t have broken her face.

“Stay there,” he snaps at her softly as he climbs in, then closes the door quietly behind him. He was sure the place’s owner was here. Quick check of the cameras. Yes, owner, both workmen. Perfect. Make **him** guilty for their deaths. System couldn’t save them, oh no.

She sinks down onto the floor miserably, not arguing. He nods in satisfaction before heading for the back. It’s not hard to find the white case. He opens it, looking down at the electrical chip, charge regulator. Handlers would find a way to stick it in **him**. Drag **him** back like the dog he was. Make **him** give up **his** little specialty. *Rhodd anhysbys*. See how **he** liked being weak. He closes the box and stuffs it deep into his jacket. They’d find a way. They always did.

Good thing this place is a legit mechanical shop, though. He finds the gas tanks – *tanciau nwy*, had to keep practicing – and starts drizzling the place. Spread it around to keep the fumes from becoming thick and noticeable to the sleepers. They weren’t going to wake up anytime soon if he was careful. He focuses on the back rooms, though. Make a warning for this sector. Anyone with **his** security wasn’t safe.

He finishes with the gas and turns back to his final victim. She’s been crying, but instead of being repulsed he’s drawn to her. He’d told her not to cry. Stupid girl. He

kneels down next to her to swipe the tears from her cheeks, making sure to be careful with the broken one. Her gaze is on him, though he doesn't quite care.

"...*eich bod yn diafol*," she breathes. It takes him a moment to figure out what she's calling him: a devil. "*Rwy'n gobeithio y byddwch yn llosgi yn uffern*."

His brows fold, trying to comprehend that one.

"...I hope you burn in hell," she translates, and he's close to breaking the other half of her face. But he has a better idea.

"You'll burn there first," he tells her before straddling her hips. "At least lemme give you a going-away present."

He was out of there by oh-four-thirty, the garage going up in smoke and flame. Life was good. Let AmCad try to figure out who had done it. Let them call in **that one**. They wouldn't get far.

By the time they figured out it would be too late and he'd be long gone, out of their reach. He already was.

-

The bike takes him back to HQ in Central, gliding smoothly into its spot with a soft-but-throaty growl. Kill the engine, swipe his badge at the elevator, and fly up to the three hundredth floor for debrief. Information went so fast these days that there were already live images of the burning garage there to meet him. The handlers were seated at a table, all the chairs filled, watching the images. He stands behind them, and none of them turn. Normal. To be expected.

"Interesting means of handling your objective, Jadin," one of them says. Their voices are all disguised by synthesizers, so they all sound the same. He shrugs, knowing they can see him despite being behind them. "However, we asked for you to avoid creating a scene."

"No one can say that's arson," he replies. "Gas leak, someone leaves a hot pan on an active stove too long, boom."

Speaking of, there's a lovely explosion that fills the livestream videos.

"Removing a Macey druid did not entail destroying an unlicensed distribution center," a handler snaps at him. "Taking her and pushing her off the bridge at the two-fifty you were clocking would have handled the situation better."

"Subtlety's not my strong suit," he retorts. "Callahan was at the Macey place. The garage was covered by him. It's a message to Macey *and* Callahan."

“You’re drawing AmCad into this,” the same handler – he thinks – adds. “Undoubtedly this will fall to Ramstein to investigate. Miserable mutant dog that he is, he will find the truth. He will find us.”

“He won’t,” a different handler steps in. “There’s only one person responsible for this. Callahan will become involved, and he will track the perpetrator here.”

He senses their gazes on him and can’t help a fierce smile. His gamble had paid off nicely.

“You’ve earned some freedom, Jadin,” a handler decides. “You have three days to yourself. Amuse yourself however you wish. On the fourth day, you will take Macey’s boy druid.”

“Understood, sir,” he asserts, and steps out. Three days of sweet freedom was a real gift. Spending it in one of his rave bars sounded like the perfect end to an excellent mission. The smile he allowed himself returns. Also a nice prelude to destroying Callahan thoroughly.

He fingers the chip’s case and chuckles softly as he heads into the underworld of Cadarn. It was time to celebrate *calan awst* in style.

She hadn't meant to hurt him. She had been surprised by the appearance of Jack's father, struggled to keep the memory from seeping out. He had fought the loop, *bendithia ef*, but it was bad that his emergency shutdown had engaged. Terrible timing.

His disengaged consciousness floated in front of her, and it was carefully that she inserted a probe, withdrew it. She remembered the physical sensation; a poke. She tried it again, and there was a flicker of life there. Oh good. He wasn't dead. Another poke, and some of his cyber-presence began to crackle with awareness. She picked up an external access – Jessica was waking him up, of course she would – and retreated warily, trying to remain small, insignificant. Drifted up 'above' his presence as he woke. She saw flickers of conversation she couldn't hear lighting up his awareness of the outside.

The external access gained some ground as Jessica opened up into the neural network, and she tried harder to make her presence smaller, unnoticeable. He switched from internal to external, and she remains braced as they opened up the protocols she had initiated. His sense drifts closer, right under her as he examines. He tended to see cyber-reality in two dimensions, so perhaps they wouldn't notice –

He has a thought, the same thought picked up from her. She's frozen as his probe turns up towards her own presence. He could see her. He *saw* her.

She tried to separate, disappear, but he's much faster. Suddenly his probe has breached her base code, and she only barely manages to snare him, trying to connect to his sense and explain, somehow.... The easiest way would be simply have him see her, in reality, face to face. While he struggled, panicking, she reached to him and found the visualization threads, the ones that let him shift between cyberspace and the physical world easily. Carefully wove one for her to follow, tightened it as he unconsciously accepted the upgrade, like he'd unconsciously accepted her emergency protocols. He had to know, Jessica too, what could be coming. It was the least she could do after he had spent eight years keeping her safe.

With the visualization string added, she quickly returned him to his physical senses. She could sense the horror and pain she'd accidentally inflicted on him and wanted desperately to reassure him. She attempted to follow the strand directly through him, projecting from his eyes into the physical world. But the connection hitched; she knew he saw her, heard him call out in terrified surprise. *Ysbryd*, he said. Ghost. Well, close enough, she mused.

Jessica's equipment was still connected to him, though. She picked her way out of her corner of his netspace and into the analysis systems, which were far roomier and less restrictive. With a few deft commands, the holoprojector responded to her image, beginning to form her. She followed it, and then, for the first time in eight years she was

free. She was standing – or approximately standing – before her defender, Raphael Callahan now, and his ally. Both were staring at her, Raphael stiff as a board on the examination bed and eyes wide and Jessia still next to him. With some trepidation she raised her hands, trying to remember how to speak with words and not thoughts. The projector would compensate for what she physically lacked.

“Cysylltwch peidiwch a bod yn ofn!” she pleaded, surprised by the strange language that flowed out of her. Quick internal reference: Welsh, *please do not be afraid*. Oh. Well that was good. But what if they didn’t understand that? Hell. “Please, I – I didn’t mean to scare you. I was scared, too.”

“...n-no ‘fense, but I think you scared us more,” Jessia stammered out. From her defensive stance near Raphael, she must have been trying to draw him out of cyberspace physically. Raphael himself had recovered from his fear and was now eyeing her warily. She knew that look well from sensing the response behind it: suspicion, wariness, distrust.

“I’m not surprised,” she admitted, lowering her hands now that she was mostly certain neither of them would try to attack her. “It’s only been recently I’ve...woken up.”

“What the hell are you?” Raphael growled at her, and she couldn’t help a flinch as his distrust flared brightly in her distant awareness. “Some kind of hacker’s dataghast? AI probe from a corp? What?”

“I – I’m not sure,” she replied, doing her best to remain calm and not let his anger affect her. Jessia had straightened up and watching her attentively, though. “I do have a designation, so I guess the handle from that can serve as a...name.”

“So what’s your name?” Jessia asked kindly, obviously trying to defuse Raphael’s unease and comfort her at the same time. “I bet it’s pretty, if your self-proj is any sign.”

The compliment was a surprise, and she couldn’t help the emotional readout from being reflected in the projection.

“My full designation is Multi-Array Simulation of Human Awareness,” she recited. “The acronym is M-A-S-H-A, so I guess my handle – or name – is Masha.”

“I knew it was pretty!” Jessia declared brightly, and the earlier emotional readout repeated in response. Raphael, though, did not seem to have the same appreciation for a name to match her projected face.

“That doesn’t answer my question, Masha,” he insisted darkly, and she flinched as the lash of his distrust flickered through her awareness again. “What are you?”

"I - I told you, I'm not sure," she repeated anxiously. "I only woke up yesterday, because there were some signals I picked up and I initiated those protocols -"

"Those were you?" Jessica interrupted. "What do they do, I mean, I can hardly read them, they're so complex -"

"Jez, don't make me make you disengage this damn bed and find duct tape," Raphael retorted. Even though his head hadn't moved, his gaze had flashed to Jessica and given her a warning look that was meant to prevent her from interrupting again. Jessica rolled her eyes and mouthed *beth am siarad yn hwyrach*. The translation was more automatic this time: let's talk later. She nodded once before returning her focus to Raphael. "Right. Now, tell me what the hell you are, exactly, as best you can. Go."

"I am a - a form of artificial intelligence," she said carefully, probing her identity code as she did so. "However, I possess strands that are not possible to replicate...so perhaps your calling me a ghost was more accurate than you thought, Raphael."

"What do you mean by strands you can't replicate?" Jessica asked, but this time Raphael didn't make her fall silent. "I mean, as an AI, there's a limit to complexity, and if you're beyond those then -"

"The strands exist," she tried to elaborate. "But I cannot show you the particular code they originate from."

"So what do those strands control?" Jessica pressed eagerly. Her curiosity was a marvel, and she wasn't afraid to try and help Jessica understand the puzzle of her code.

"I believe they control emotional output of a sort," she explained. "There are other strands, some connected to those protocols. I must have designed them before going into relative hibernation when Raphael came online, and programmed a command to myself to initiate them when I woke."

"If you want I can look into those strands, try and figure out origin and purpose," Jessica insisted with a bobbing nod. "And you can even establish a permanent hook up here at my place, if you being awake might mess with Raph, right, huh?"

"No kidding I don't wanna go crazy with some weird hyper-advanced AI in my skull," Raphael grumbled in agreement. She would have offered a reply but a sudden buzzing stopped her. Her awareness twitched towards the signal incoming to the communication device in Raphael's wristwatch, even as Jessica disengaged the bed so he might answer.

"Security breach, North Cadarn," she reported even before Raphael could reestablish his muscular connectivity. "Address, sixteen-seventy Ffordd Ruen, Amddiffynwyr y Cadarn have already received notice and are prepping fire teams and investigators."

"Tex," Raphael breathed as he pressed a button combination on the watch. The holographic message, including a map of the location, projected up to his eye level. "I need a car now."

"Here, take mine," Jessie insisted, turning to rummage at a nearby desk and finding a control key. "Some friends up topside got it for me, but I hardly ever use it."

She lobbed the key to Raphael, and he nodded once before looking over at her projection again.

"You're still in my head, correct?"

"Yes, but if you wish I can retain my active consciousness here," she replied quickly. "That will limit the number of memory loops that try to activate, but if there are any I will try to find the codes triggering them and edit them."

"Aw, see, she's bein' nice, Raff!" Jessie teased. Raphael ignored her attempt to lighten his mood.

"Good, so long as you don't try to say things in my head or do things to me, we'll get along fine," he told her, and she refused to waver. It was a situation that would have to suffice for the time being. "Jez, start looking into her code, I'm gonna catch up with AmCad and see what the hell happened at Tex's."

"I can send you preliminary reports as you go," she offered.

"Thanks. I think."

Raphael stormed out quickly, and she retained a sense of him even as, for the first time in eight years, she was physically separated from him. It was a strange feeling.

"You think it's gonna be okay?" Jessie asked once he was long gone. "I mean, if it's a place he's covering, it's gotta be okay, right?"

"I do not know," she replied. "And, truthfully, I do not want to."

Moneaux

The crush of anxious thoughts nearly slammed Alayna out of her own awareness. It didn't help that the wailing alert sirens in AmCad headquarters in Central Cadarn were enough to do that themselves.

Explosive arson in North, Wrexham neighborhood hell not North the corps will be wiping the place clean before we get there turn those fucking sirens off don't have time for this it's equinox why in hell did I sign on for night duty tonight of all nights ALAYNA.

A powerful hand took her forearm, jerking Alayna back to the present. She had trance-walked from her office right into the thick of rushing agents and officers. It took a moment to try and block out their thoughts before looking up to find Captain Roderic Atley at her side, his yellow-brown eyes looking down at her anxiously.

"You all right there, Miss Moneaux?" he asked in his thick accent. "Seemed to be tranced out; Cat's-eye wants you on site with him and me, if you're back t'yourself."

"I'm fine now, Ric, thank you," Alayna sighed, and Atley nodded in relief before letting her go. Even for the average man he was tall and broad-shouldered, shaggy black hair falling into his face just barely within regulation cut for the typical law enforcement officers. The most impressive part of him, though, was the thick black scales that covered his back, just barely visible under the shirt and flak jacket he wore almost constantly, as a SWAT team captain. Atley, like Ramstein himself, was part of the small population of people who, thanks to genetic therapies used by their parents, were born with a strange physical difference that made them naturally reviled by most people in Cadarn. Thankfully, both Atley and Ramstein had worked hard to make themselves more than their genetic dissimilarities, and Alayna understood them better because they didn't make a fuss over their little individual strangeness.

"Cat's-eye's already en route, wants to look over the place while things are hot," Atley told her as they fell into the small stream of investigators that were also heading to the site.

"He won't blind himself?"

"So long as no one lights the scene while he's lookin'."

"Fill me in, then," Alayna sighed as they ended up in the lift to the rooftop motorpool. "I picked up a fire in North, Wrexham side."

"Looking like a gas explosion," Atley confirmed, scratching at a couple of scales peeking out from his shirt collar. "Car and bike shop, probably did some black-market tech trading on the side. Security system provided by a private contractor didn't report anything wrong until the fire."

"Is the contractor en route?"

“The data team caught a signal from the system to his personal number, so we can assume that he’s heading for the site.”

“How likely is it that this was a corp punishment run?”

“My guess, forty percent chance.”

Alayna could understand why he wanted it to be that low. AmCad had had multiple fights over jurisdiction with the various corporations over the three years she’d been active, and even before then. Since the corporations handled their own security in particular sectors of North, they were more likely to respond to any criminal activity. If it was bad enough for AmCad to get involved, they would sweep away any useful evidence and effectively bind their hands. Hence the rapid activity once the elevator reached floor four-fifty and the entire car disgorged the officers within. Alayna had to take a moment to center herself against a sweep of anxiety, but she let Atley lead her along again, packing into an aircar cruiser and taking off at the head of a convoy.

Alayna got herself into the driver’s seat, while Atley pulled himself in next to her and pulled the scanner headset over his head. Thankfully the driving computer let Alayna gather her wits and keep alert. If this was a mechanical problem, there was really no need to go all-out like this. There had to be something to this that merited all the attention, all the necessity for the call-outs.

“Cat’s-eye got bodies,” Atley reported as the aircar swung along its assigned lane to head for the scene. “Four dead, three together and one kinda in the middle of the garage.”

“*Cachu*,” Alayna swore. “Postmortem team there?”

“Checking over them now,” Atley confirmed. “He’s also seein’ definite burn trails, so we at least got arson and homicide.”

“*Ffucio*.”

“Didn’t know you had that kinda language, ma’am,” Atley commented, and Alayna allowed herself a smile when she sensed his thoughts of her shifting slightly.

“Three years in your company, Ric, has become a bad influence.”

“*Fy fai*, then,” he laughed. Alayna’s smile stretched slightly at his apology, but it vanished when they made a turn. Smoke was rising into the dark sky, even blotting out the full moon of this particular night. The car began its descent and Alayna’s gaze filled with the sight of the smoldering remains of the garage. Thankfully there was no sign of a corporate security team yet, so landing caused no problems, for once.

“Help set up the perimeter, I’m going to go find Ramstein and get appraised,” she told Atley as she snapped her badge into the black leather jerkin of her traditional garb. He stalked off to fortify their position, and Alayna paced carefully into the ruins.

Another downside to having her advanced telepathic abilities filtered uneasily into her awareness. Although Etain could draw up the spirits of the dead and speak to them face-to-face, Alayna could sense their final thoughts, the final impressions as they died. It never got better, and, in this case, Alayna felt this as worse than before. She sensed the fear, surprise, of the people that died here tonight, and her stomach turned as she walked deeper into the site. A few small fires were still burning, giving enough light for Alayna to see by as she headed for what must have been the center of the garage, enough to make out a blackened metal security grate, twisted metal tools half-melted by the heat. The smell of gasoline, burned meat and metal, on top of the death-impressions nearly made her stomach churn. Thankfully she was saved by finding a living presence, and Alayna picked her way along to the side of Detective Ramstein, who was crouched by a twisted, well-charred skeleton. His heavy dark glasses were off, and as Alayna bent down next to him his brilliant blue eyes, slit-pupils widening slightly to take in her heat signature and visual outline.

“Good, you’re here,” Ramstein sighed before pulling his glasses back on. His mutated eyes could process light beyond the visual range, but pure bright light that was bound to be coming on soon could damage his sight irreparably. “You’re still getting death-impressions, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Alayna agreed. “Atley’s establishing a perimeter, and the contractor in charge of security for the place has been alerted, undoubtedly en route.”

“Good, and we ain’t had to fight a *duw*-damned corp security team yet,” Ramstein noted relatively-cheerfully. “I need you to do a read on the dead. Postmortem said the three off that way probably suffocated, then burned up in the fire.”

He waved off to the right, and Alayna glanced over to find scene photographers recording images. Alayna looked back at him, brow rising fractionally.

“And this one?” she asked, nodding down towards the body Ramstein had been examining. He sighed heavily, scratching the back of his neck.

“That’s the weird one. She was definitely alive when the fire started. Suffered severe trauma to her midsection, fractured wrist and pelvis, before she got toasted. Probably tried to stop the flames somehow before she died.”

Alayna frowned, but nodded slowly, thinking out a potential situation.

“Kidnapped and abused, brought here to be killed,” she suggested. “How were the fractures done, you think?”

“Wrist is definitely circular pressure; bones are pressed inward, instead of sideways,” Ramstein noted. “Pelvis was vertical pressure. Hell, you think she mighta been raped by someone heavy? How big would the guy have to be?”

“Wouldn’t be hard if he was a cyborg,” a new voice called out, and Alayna looked up in surprise. Atley was standing just behind a tall, well-muscled man with dark hair and eyes. Those were the only distinct features Alayna could make out in the darkened crime scene, but she was more concerned by the lack of telepathic presence. Either he had a very strong mind or something in his brain limited his mental presence. Ramstein stood, and Alayna could sense his suspicion and temper flashing up.

“And who in hell are you? Atley, the hell is a civilian cyborg doin’ on my crime scene?”

“Says he’s the contractor, sir,” Atley replied, dropping his favorite nickname for Ramstein quickly, to avoid getting reprimanded. “Figured if he was you’d wanna talk to him, sir.”

“Means your Mister Raphael Callahan, huh?” Ramstein asked before stepping away to make sure the newcomer was who he said he was. Alayna, though, frowned as she tried to focus on Callahan. Cyborg would explain why she hadn’t sensed him, but she refused to trust him. Ever since Jack’s death all those years ago, she had never once dared to trust the corporations or their technologically enhanced products. Certainly it was difficult to try and read him, but she would rather know his intent than allow him free rein in this scene.

It was easy to focus the probe towards him, blocking out Ramstein and Atley and plunging straight for Callahan. The difficulty came in pushing past the crystal-mirror sense of his metallic brain. All she had to do was push deep enough, into the actual organic brain -

“Hey!” Callahan’s voice suddenly barked, and Alayna’s probe was hurled out of her mind, making her wince against the whiplash. Thankfully she didn’t fall over, and Atley’s firm grip pulled her to her feet to keep her steady. Alayna was able to recover her focus enough to hear Callahan growl, “What’s a telepath druid doin’ here?”

“Agent Moneaux’s a volunteer from an initiative her house sponsors,” Ramstein answered coolly. “She helps in investigations. Mind readers are pretty handy, especially when we’ve got four dead people in a garage you were contracted to secure.”

“Four?” Callahan asked, brows folding together. Something in that expression, Alayna realized, seemed eerily familiar. “Tex only had two guys working for him, they go home after closing up.”

"Delivery pickup?" Ramstein suggested firmly. Alayna was pleased to find he was putting Callahan on the defensive. "Maybe they had a workaround to your system to take night pickups."

"Then why'd it happen while they were in their break room?" Callahan pressed back, unintimidated. "If they made a workaround to accept night deliveries, how come they weren't up to take that delivery?"

A tense silence fell over the scene, and Alayna wondered who would break it first. No one had to, because a small, accepting smile appeared on Ramstein's face, and Alayna felt her stomach clench as he gave Callahan a firm clap on the shoulder. Apparently the assessment was accepted and Callahan removed from Ramstein's suspect list. He wasn't gone from Alayna's.

"So a girl and her abusive boyfriend bust in here while the security program's in night delivery mode," Ramstein began, but Callahan shook his head, frowning darkly as his arms – one a prosthetic, Alayna could see now – crossed over his chest. "You have another idea, Mister Callahan?"

"Abusive boyfriend and cyborg don't fit in the same scenario," Callahan explained. "My guess, it's a corporate punishment run, and the girl was a potential witness."

"It doesn't explain why your cyborg had to kill her," Alayna retorted. "I thought witnesses were left alone."

"Not if they're investigating the place and looking to get the drop on the strike team," Callahan answered, his dark eyes fixing on hers. The sense of familiarity was stronger then, and something in Callahan's gaze flickered. He recognized her, too, undoubtedly. "Would a...death impression tell you why she was here?"

"Perhaps," Alayna had to concede. *Chyfrgolla ei.*

"Atley, show Mister Callahan the rest of the area, get down what he sees and if he's got an idea how we proceed," Ramstein ordered. "Sure that and a small interview at HQ wouldn't be a problem, Mister Callahan?"

"Depends on when the interview is," Callahan replied. Alayna turned away from them and eased away from Ramstein. Atley stayed close to her; she almost didn't need to sense him to know he was concerned about her.

"Sure you're all right, Alayna?" Atley asked as she knelt next to the skeleton.

"Sooner I get the impression, the faster we can move this investigation forward," Alayna answered. "Keep an eye on that cyborg for me. I don't like him."

"Pretty sure he doesn't like you, either," Atley noted, but he left her alone to carry out his orders. Alayna exhaled slowly before closing her eyes, reaching for the fading impressions of the dead victim before her. She didn't expect the blaze of recognition as the fading emotions and thoughts screamed out in pain.

Kaitlen. Kaitlen was dead.

Alayna couldn't keep a hold on herself as Kaitlen's death impression folded around her, fear and pain and confusion. She had been captured, dragged here, hurt and raped and left to die. When the fires grew hot, Kaitlen had struggled to draw in the remaining moisture, to put out the flames though the gas only made the flames burn hotter, vaporizing the water. Her death was an agonizing wail of pain as the flames consumed her robes and skin. Alayna only barely managed to pull herself away, struggling to breathe and not cry. A hand suddenly touched her shoulder, and she whirled around, expecting Atley. Callahan stood there instead. Although she couldn't sense him, she saw, in those dark eyes, understanding, sympathy.

"...you knew her," he told her quietly, no question. Alayna had to swallow down the stone that had appeared in her throat as she nodded. "Druid for your house?"

"...yeah," Alayna forced herself to reply. She felt another hand secure around her elbow, lifting her up out of the dirt. The support from an unfeeling, inhuman machine-man was unexpected, strange. She ignored it, pulling away from the semi-embrace he had her in. "She...she was a water manipulator. Tried to extinguish the fire but the water was vaporized before she could do anything."

"Sorry," he told her, sincerely. Alayna thought he would leave it at that, but instead Callahan added, "*Efallai y bydd yn gorffwys yn ddiogel yn nefoedd.*"

"...you didn't know her," Alayna snapped a little. "Why wish her well in death?"

"Cause you knew her," Callahan answered sharply. "Figure you might want her to rest nicely while you hunt down the bastard that did this to her."

Alayna bristled at his insistence. Who was he to tell her what she should and should not do to honor the dead? He was no one, less than no one, and he had no right to tell her such things. But she still had to admit he was right. Kaitlen was dead, murdered, and her killer was out in the city, no doubt protected by a corporate interest. It would have been hard enough to try and hunt down a murderer in North Cadarn without him also being a cyborg. The corporations would cry out about their right to privacy as soon as AmCad appeared, warrants for search present or not.

"...forgive my harsh words," Alayna forced herself to grind out. "You are right. But I still do not trust you."

“Legitimate concern, don’t worry about it,” Callahan told her as Ramstein got Atley’s report about Callahan’s assessment. She must have been down for a good half-hour. “You don’t have to trust me. Just swallow my bein’ around.”

“You’re remaining with the investigation?” Alayna asked, startled.

“I got basic corp intel and three of my clients died because of this *butain-mab* who burned your friend,” Callahan insisted. “You’re not leavin’ me out of this mess.”

“You read my mind, Mister Callahan,” Ramstein agreed as he pulled even with them. Alayna frowned a little, despite sensing Ramstein’s gentle tease as her capabilities. Thoughtless jests were truly not as amusing as some believed. “Alayna, you’ve got this case, and once you get some details about Mister Callahan down he’ll be assistin’ you in a very unofficial capacity. Keep it off AmCad servers, in case corp hackers decide we’re gettin’ a little too close in findin’ some conspiracy.”

“Yes, sir,” Alayna sighed. There was no point in fighting Ramstein over being assigned with the cyborg, despite disliking Callahan as such.

“Mister Callahan, Captain Atley’ll get your personal information, I’ll call you in about half an hour to set up your interview,” Ramstein ordered. “Alayna, we’re leavin’, the corps are startin’ to appear. Seems no one knew what to think but now they’re gettin’ their acts together. DynSeq and Romarei are within striking distance.”

A bright flare of unease caught Alayna’s attention, and as she turned to follow it she saw Callahan walking after Atley, but one of his hands, the prosthetic one, was clenched into a fist. Something had slipped free. Alayna would have followed the emotional flare to improve her reading of him, but Callahan had been able to sense her and drive her out in quick order. She didn’t need to press when the fact was obvious.

She left with Ramstein, the AmCad perimeter meeting the first so-called investigators from the local corporate powers. News outlets were starting to appear, too, and it was a relief that they didn’t try to assault them as Ramstein got her settled into an aircar to take back to HQ. The drive was silent for the first few minutes, Ramstein directing the car manually, before he finally spoke.

“You’re gonna hafta let your dad know one of his druids is dead,” he said as they drifted up into a lane that took them towards Central. “Damn waste.”

“Cormack won’t take it well,” Alayna agreed. She had to wonder, though. They had all had visions, through Etain. Could Kaitlen have foreseen her own death? It must have been too quick for her to try and prevent, and it would explain her dismal silence after the ceremony.

“Two of his kids gone within a decade,” Ramstein added. Alayna caught a sense of his thoughts and frowned.

"This has nothing to do with Jack."

"You sure had your hackles up when Callahan showed up," Ramstein noted. "Seems you always dig your claws into corp men and their business because of what happened to him."

"It's not because of Jack," Alayna snapped. "It was how they treated us after he died. They didn't even give back his body. You can't tell me they weren't up to something with his remains, hiding the evidence of whatever happened."

"Still pretty sure Callahan ain't the guy you should be ready to tear limb from limb, though," he advised, and Alayna forced herself to become as calm as she could. Again, he was right, and she had to keep her personal prejudices out of the case. "So you get to talk to him probably around fourteen hundred hours. Plenty of time for the both of you to cool off."

"My shift ends at seven hundred," Alayna tried to protest.

"Yeah, and you got yourself a case to run," Ramstein retorted. "Your first, so don't make a mess of it. I'd hate to try and explain to Lord Macey why you torched half of North Cadarn just to flush out one guy."

"I wouldn't torch half of North," Alayna countered sourly, but a brief sense showed Ramstein was poking fun at her again. She sighed and forced herself to try and calm down. Despite driving, Ramstein reached over to her and took her hand gently.

"Get home once we're at HQ," he told her firmly. "Break the news, then get some sleep. You're gonna need it, Alayna, and I don't want you drivin' yourself into the ground because of this."

"All right," she sighed, "but I do think I want a profile on Romarei Consolidated when I come in tomorrow."

"Why Romarei?" Ramstein asked, quickly turning to business. He steered them from the lane they were on to the bridge, merging to the left for the more roundabout way to HQ. "Just because they were one of the two corps about to swarm on our crime scene?"

"He reacted to the name," Alayna explained. "Callahan. Read out to me despite him being cyber all the way through."

"Maybe it's his corp, just doesn't wanna jump on their radar," Ramstein mused. "Makes sense; good thing he left when he did. Probably ran as fast as he could after he heard Romarei was on the way."

"So I'll want a profile on them when I come in," Alayna insisted. "Especially their research stuff for the past five to ten years."

“Why that long?”

“If Callahan was involved in a project of theirs and escaped, the company would have a record of it,” Alayna thought aloud. “He can’t have been online more than ten years.”

“Do what I can, but can’t make any promises,” Ramstein warned her as they wove through the corporate towers, back towards AmCad’s main tower. “Especially on research and development stuff.”

“So long as it can give us a lead, I want to have it ready,” Alayna stated firmly. She knew she wasn’t going to be sleeping tonight. If it meant avenging Kaitlen’s death, she’d do whatever it took to bring it around.

Callahan

I had to leave messages with all my clients after getting my appointment with AmCad set for fourteen hundred hours, telling them I was going to be unavailable for an indeterminate amount of time. Some people were still awake when I called them, and they were stunned to hear about Tex's death, how AmCad had asked me to help find his killer. At least they wished me well and offered luck in finding the murderer. But calling Jez was a definite mistake; she was insisting on helping me with the investigation.

"I want you to keep looking at Masha," I try to tell her after filling her in. "If you get involved with this thing, the guys who did it could start hunting for you."

"That's practically saying you think I can't take care of myself!" Jez retorts sharply, and I wince. "Not to mention I did look at Masha's code while you were down there, she's insanely complex and I think she's not naturally cyberspatial."

"That makes no damn sense, Jez," I snap a little. "Look, I'm tired, I have to talk to AmCad when the sun comes up, I'll try to come around tomorrow to get the full explanation."

"You'd better," Jez gripes. "I try to help and you say no, I can do useful stuff too, you know."

"Good night, Jez," I grumble as I cut off the call. That'll annoy her, but as of right now I don't find myself caring. Too much had happened today, and it wasn't over yet. I leave the *llunffon* and shuffle into my bedroom, shedding my jacket and gun and shirt. The paint from the *calan awst* fights is still intact on my chest, and I know I should try to wash it off now, before it cakes on and the dye starts soaking into my skin. I don't.

"Window polarization, one hundred percent, full house," I mumble, and the windows black out. I fall back against my bed, exhaling heavily before the clamp locks into place. Long day. Longer than normal. My eyes were already drifting shut as my muscles disengage, and sleep was within my reach.

The problem was when I was asleep. Cyborgs typically don't dream. Cyborgs also typically don't have extremely-advanced AIs coded into their brains. As I slept, painfully-vivid impressions and images flashed in front of me, information overload but displaced from my own processes. I couldn't do much to block the brief flares of information transfer, but I still wished I could have a normal night's sleep rather than one shared with an AI regaining awareness of the world. If Masha realized the effects of her constant activity on me, she didn't act to stop them. Damned AI.

When I woke in the morning, I could feel my mind aching from exhaustion though my body was completely rested. Showering didn't do much to fix it, and neither did the stretching exercises I put myself through to maintain my active levels, after last

night. I had a feeling I would need it. At eleven hundred, Jez's firm knock nearly surprises me out of my breakfast again, though I didn't fall into combat instinct like yesterday. I still open the door and get her inside; I can tell that she didn't sleep, despite the brightness of her eyes.

"So I think I know how I can help with this murder thing," Jez begins as soon as I close the door behind her. It's hard to focus on a word she was saying, I'm that exhausted. "Masha can sneak into corporate servers and get information that AmCad might not be able to get, and she actually found a file for you in Romarei's servers. I didn't know one of the best companies in all of Cadarn made you!"

"Jez, I didn't tell you for a reason!" I snap, and she flinches at my harsh words. "I didn't get much sleep last night, probably thanks to Masha."

"I am sorry, Raphael," the AI's voice says repentantly, and I notice a crudely-fashioned com-strength wristwatch strapped to Jez's wrist. It looked somewhat like the one I wore on my wrist, but I saw that the speaker was larger and there was a little screen where Masha's semi-realistic self-projection could appear. "I was scanning Romarei for information on us; I will do my best to shield my activities in future."

"So Romarei, huh?" Jez asks. She walks into my kitchen and pulls down two mugs; one gets a tea bag and hot water, the other coffee. "What did they have you doin' that you walked out?"

"Still none of your business, Jez," I grumble at her, watching as she makes herself at home in my kitchen. The coffee she drinks down while the tea brews, and once it's done she pushes the mug at me. "You'll have to forgive me if I don't enjoy talking about it."

"Well you're going to have to tell me some of it," Jez insists. I finger the mug, holding my silence. "Raph, I wanna help. Tex was your friend, and that druid died for almost no reason. Both Romarei and DynSeq have fingers in Wrexham, and you have a connection to Romarei. AmCad'll figure it out and ask you the same thing. They won't be as nice about pushing for answers as I am."

I look up at her, and I see that Jez really is concerned. She's leaning on the dinette counter towards me, her face drawn in a way that is very unlike Jez, for the time I've known her. She's serious. Concerned. She wants to help and wants to know how best she can do it. I hesitate for a moment before I lay a hand on the counter, palm up. She takes it with much less trepidation than I had when offering, and it feels strange to me, her holding my hand. I could crush her hand without a thought. Holding her hand like this I could break her shoulder blade, collarbone, neck, so quickly she'd hardly feel the pain. I was probably one of the most deadly people in Cadarn, and Jez was holding my hand without fear.

“...yeah, they made me,” I tell her, my fingers curling carefully around her hand. “Or re-made me. I know I’m a metal-man, not a skin. I’ve got a pulse.

“Anyway,” I sigh, “I was their big-time tech hunter. Worked to break into tech shops, get stuff back. Once I went into another corp and stole something my handlers wanted right out of the department. Made a couple runs into the wild, old pre-war bases to pick up some relic that had caught their attention. And I was good at it. I loved it. At least for the first five years I was working for them. I was quiet, fast, and if anyone found me...”

I trail off, because I could remember what I did to people who found me in the middle of a theft. Jez can imagine what I did, and she squeezes my hand gently. I try not to think about if I had ever hit QuanTek, if I might have been found by someone she knew. If I’d silenced a friend of hers. Those aren’t nice thoughts.

“So why’d you stop? How did you...fall out of love with it?” Jez asks quietly. I pause to sip at the tea she made me; I had forgotten I’d even had it. It’s some green blend, with mint for a hint of sweetness that helps calm me down. Mint and ginseng, I think. A breakfast tea from down the street.

“I got curious,” I answer eventually. “Wasn’t supposed to. I went into the servers and looked up some of my runs, profiles I’d never gotten to read.”

My voice starts shaking. I feel something in my mind, some gentle calm that’s inside me but isn’t me. Masha. Jez leaves her coffee on the counter to fold my hand in both of hers.

“...you found out you’d been going after civilians,” she guesses. “Clinics and shops trying to make a difference with the things they picked up from the underground.”

I can only nod. I look away from her hands holding mine to the counter, but I don’t see the counter. I see the places I’d mindlessly razed, the people whose necks I had snapped to keep them quiet. All for what? A pat on the head from my handlers, maybe a day to myself filled with more training, more fighting, more prep for the next mission. Emptiness.

“Then I started getting loops,” I manage to continue. “Dreams. I was helping people, I wasn’t killing them. I was helping them live. And that whole year, whenever I went out...I didn’t kill as much. I tried to be better. But even when I was good, I...I always felt like shit when I came back, reported success. They had someone come in behind me to tear the place down.”

“You were guilty,” Masha notes quietly from Jez’s wrist. I dare to look at her and find her projection facing me, brief flickers but clear enough to see the sympathy – no,

empathy. She was in my head. She would have felt it, too. "The man you used to be, the man you still are in some ways, tried to remind you."

"...so do you remember who he was?" Jez asks her, giving me a break from this aching reliving of my past. There was a reason I didn't talk about it. "Before he was good ol' Raff?"

"I'm sorry, Jessica, I don't," Masha sighs. "My pre-cyberspace memories are all a haze to me. The file I accessed on Raphael was more on his specifications and mission summaries, no connection to his original identity."

"Doesn't matter," I insist gruffly. Jez squeezes my hand again.

"Raph, you're kinda dumb sometimes," she prods. I can see the faint little teasing smile when I raise my head to look at her. "Those memories that cause your loops gotta come from somewhere. Maybe knowing who you used to be will get you all fixed up upstairs."

To further her point, Jez lets go of my hand to briefly tap at my forehead. I feel a very faint twitch of my lips when she does that. At least she didn't think I was some kind of monster because of what I used to do.

"So, see, I can be useful," Jez continues, lowering her hand. "You work with AmCad to find out who killed that poor druid girl, and Masha and I can go poking around Romarei for anything else useful. Any leads we can hunt around?"

I sigh, take another sip of tea. My mind is starting to focus again, thanks to the ginseng. I poke through what I could willingly remember from my time at Romarei, from yesterday, any potential connections. The regulator chip Tex had offered me stands out instantly, and I straighten as more old reflexes kick in. Tracking and recovery. Jez and Masha could track it down, maybe find out who had released it and how it had gotten into Tex's hands.

"There was a tech bit Tex tried to offer me yesterday," I tell her, and I see Jez's eyes light up excitedly. "A chip to help with my leg connection problems. It was a Romarei product."

"I can check out Romarei's catalogs, see if it's a public or private construct," Jez insists as she starts to smile. She's nearly bouncing, even though she's still holding my hand in one of hers. "You'll want a release history, and tracking for that particular chip if we can get it, right?"

"Right in one," I agree. "But for my conscience's sake, don't go hunting for it on your own."

“Why not?” Jez asks, her voice turning stubborn. “Are you trying to butt me out of helping you again, Raff? I can handle it! I know more people in the market than you do, and I don’t have to wave a gun in their face to get the information I need.”

“And if they send someone to hunt you down?” I ask sharply. “If it’s a lure for me, and they find you poking around, they’re not going to hesitate in taking you to get to me.”

“Uh, I have the city’s most advanced AI living on my wrist,” Jez reminds me. “An AI that also happens to be in your head. If I start getting into trouble, Masha will not only tell me so but she’ll let you know. So I’ve got a security net at least for keeping you up to date.”

I really wish I could take Jez by the shoulders and shake her around so she’ll realize these people aren’t like other corps, that they’ll gladly kill her and do *duw*-knows-what to her body after. But I know the look on her face, chin slightly raised, smirking with confidence. I can’t talk her out of it. No one could, I don’t doubt it. Not to mention she’s at least right about having Masha let me know if something goes wrong on her side. If I was close enough, I would get to Jez’s side without hesitation, keep her safe. That was what I did. No more killing.

“...all right, but I don’t have to like it,” I concede at last. Jez looks likable to bounce into the ceiling. “Just keep Masha live and playing dumb. If anything goes wrong, you have her tell me and not even hell itself can stop me from getting to you.”

“Aw, that’s sweet,” Jez chuckles at me. Somehow that doesn’t reassure me.

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Despite my messages to my clients, I set out for at least some stops in North before my meeting with the druid agent from last night. They all offer condolences for Tex and his guys, try to keep me from working while they assure me that nothing strange has been going on. The few shops I cover in Romarei’s power centers, like in the Conwy and Mona neighborhoods, I make sure to ask about the chip Tex had found, or any strange influx of Romarei goods. I knew from experience that Romarei’s security was so tight that anything on the black market with their logo was next to priceless. But nothing. None of Tex’s other contacts who had my systems had gotten their hands on anything from Romarei. So much for that angle.

At thirteen-forty-five I was on the surface levels of Central. The immense towers of the corporate side weren’t for the claustrophobic, and even though I disembarked from a maglev train near one of the parks surrounding an airshaft I could only see the sky primarily by looking straight up. Though most of the towers weren’t adorned with their logos, I could recognize them anyway, mostly from the silhouettes I had scaled at night when I was a different sort of person. I began walking east, towards a large rectangular building that sported arched windows and at least five passages filled with

shopping, eateries, and other distractions that were still packed with people celebrating *calan awst*. I ignored the shopping areas and found an unassuming door between the central portal and an intricate decorative arch. Above these plazas, the building was devoted to Amddiffynwyr y Cadarn, the “protectors” of the city.

Inside, the building was almost military-clean, despite some stunning murals depicting the history of humankind on Luthien. The one behind the receptionist’s desk was the most impressive: a cutaway view of Central Cadarn, the base built of from the curved remains of a starship that had carried the first colonists to Luthien. Around the rebuilt city were the blackened wastes left behind from the military shelling and crashing warships that had nearly made the planet uninhabitable. That war had taken place nearly a century ago; the painting was a reminder of how hard the survivors had worked to reclaim their home after nearly losing it. I wouldn’t be surprised if it reminded the AmCad officers coming in here of what they were trying to protect.

“Can I help you, sir?” the smartly-dressed woman seated under the mural asks me. I drag my attention from the painting to her, and I try to return the standard smile she offers me. “Is there someone you’re here to speak with?”

“Yeah, I’ve got an interview appointment; name’s Raph Callahan,” I tell her, and in an instant she’s brushing through an appointment list on her desk. I wonder how much this woman gets paid, if she has some kind of data-tracking software in those glasses she wears. Next to no one wears glasses anymore.

“Yes, here you are, fourteen hundred with Special Agent Moneaux,” the receptionist informs me. A slot in the desk open near my elbow, and a badge slides out for me to take. It’s not a simple plastic thing to be clipped to the lapel of my jacket; it’s an old-style leather attachment that can fasten to my belt or get slid comfortably into my jacket pocket. On the outward-facing side is a dimly-projected replica of the AmCad shield; on the inside is an identification badge with my name and a serial number on it.

“Not a basic visitor’s thing?” I ask in surprise as I examine the badge.

“Detective Ramstein’s given you a temporary assignment as a special investigator,” the receptionist informs me politely. “That means full status in AmCad for the length of the case, and it wouldn’t be difficult if you were interested in joining AmCad part-time afterward.”

It was a recruitment program, I notice. I’d known AmCad had been suffering against the corps’ security teams, but not that it was this bad.

“I’ll think on it,” I tell the receptionist as I slide the badge inside my jacket. “So where’s Agent Moneaux’s office?”

“Floor two-fifty, north side, number three-seventy-two,” she tells me. “Your badge will get you into her section.”

I thank her before turning away to find the elevators. The signs in here, unlike in North, are bilingual, and the Welsh instructions are above the English ones. Sure I can throw down a couple small phrases, but it's difficult to read a tangle of consonants. At least it's not difficult to read *llyft* and find elevator doors. It's still relatively quiet in the lobby area – most of the officers must take their aircars and park elsewhere – as I hit a call button and fold myself into a glassed-in elevator. There's no floor buttons, but the black square of a scanner instead. It didn't take long for me to realize it could probably read my new badge, and I pull the wallet out of my jacket before running it in front of the scanner. The elevator dings at me pleasantly before the computer speaks to me.

“Please state your desired floor, Special Investigator Callahan.”

It takes me a moment to remember the floor number for Moneaux's office, but once I tell the elevator where I want to go it takes off without complaint. The glass walls continue into the shaft itself, and I get to see, in brief flashes, the few hundreds of AmCad's members working on their cases, booking criminals as few as they were. There's a few training areas, shooting ranges and hand-to-hand combat circles, but there's not a lot of people occupying them. But my ascent got me up to the two-hundred-fiftieth floor, and I step off nearly into a rush between the two sides of the building. So this was where all the action was. I take a moment to orient myself and eventually turn to the north side. There's a glass door constantly swinging open and shut as I follow the current. Black paint spells out the section in Welsh first, then English: Special Investigations. Hence my title, it seems. Some of the other investigators flash their badges at a scanner like in the elevator, so I follow suit before I end up walking into the door. Once I get through the entry, some of the mad rush settles. I find an office door and check the number; three-forty-five. I check the next few corridors and soon find the three-seventies on the east wall of the building. Office three-seventy-two has a direct line of sight from the building, across the Senate, into East Cadarn. Moneaux herself is hunched over her desk, not perusing digital files but actual paper pages. I rap on the glass wall gently, and Moneaux's head jerks up from her study. She waves me in while shoving the papers to a corner of the desk. She at least went home, since she's not in obviously-flaring druid robes and instead in a trim green-and-silver AmCad uniform. But her face is drawn, tired; she probably didn't sleep.

“Mister Callahan, sit, please,” Moneaux sighs in greeting once I have the door open. “I've been busy all night, trying to dig into any leads we might have.”

“What about the girl's funeral, your friend?” I ask. Moneaux pauses fractionally, but she's good; she finishes moving her files aside without any other reaction.

“In two days,” Moneaux replies carefully. “I guess since you're involved with the investigation now you could come if you wanted to.”

"Just curious, is all," I tell her with a shrug. Moneaux doesn't seem amused and taps at her desk a couple times, opening up a new file and obviously ready to approximately transcribe our little conversation.

"And curious is something I can say in kind about you, Mister Callahan," Moneaux begins calmly enough. "You don't have much in our records; pretty much just your name and an address in North Cadarn. I'll assume this is your current residence?"

"That'd be right," I answer. No need to try and annoy her.

"Then maybe you'd like to fill in the rest of the blanks."

Moneaux motions to the desk, where she's turned the profile in question so I can read it. I lean forward and swallow a smirk. Sure enough, the only fields filled in were my name and my local address. Date of birth, next-of-kin, everything else that came on a normal city register listing was completely blank.

"Yeah, I was in a bit of a hurry," I remark. Moneaux isn't amused.

"I think we can ignore the date of birth and next-of-kin sections, since you're not exactly the kind of cyborg that would have that information available," Moneaux notes coolly; at least it's the truth. "But I am interested in a few things that do apply to you."

"Such as?"

"Corporate origin, model number, any local mech shop that's been providing cover for you while you stay off the radar," Moneaux recites. Well, at least she'd done her research. Time to take stock. I glance at the stack of papers on her desk, scan quickly for keywords. Definitely Romarei research logs, probably not the accurate ones but at least she'd made an effort to try and find out what they were up to, whatever they could want out of razing Tex's place. Images minimized on her desktop, but still clear enough to see the bodies, the wreckage. Moneaux was going to get a lot of places, working like she did.

"Let's say I trust you enough to tell you that info," I inform her coolly. "What's to stop the corps from hacking AmCad's servers and pulling everything you have on this case? Just to make life hard for you."

"None of this is on AmCad," Moneaux replies. I think that's a trace of a smile she's giving me. "Everything related to this case is locked up on the Macey server, and if you really want to test the firewall, go ahead. Try and get to those files."

Macey backing the investigation isn't much of a surprise, seeing as she was a druid and Macey seemed to be the kind of guy who worked hard to balance out who he supported. Considering him having cybers-only events last night, it's interesting to see how fast he maneuvered pro-cyber but anti-corp. But Moneaux's offering a challenge I can't back down from. I look up and smoothly transmit into AmCad's servers. Their

security is tight, but not as tight as it could be. Dance out of their network and follow the connection from Moneaux's terminal out into East, fewer signals but still present. Thread down towards House Macey.

This is where it could get tricky. Moneaux has a definite access; the easy method would be to latch onto her signal and sneak in that way. So I try it and get a reverberating shock as the transmission deflects my entry. Not getting in that way. Double around to look for weaknesses in the mainframe. Some obvious openings leap to my attention but I turn away. They're obviously lures with some surface probing, but if there are any actual flaws in security I can't find them. Something about the programming seemed so familiar, too. I pulled back and grounded myself firmly before shaking my head at Moneaux.

"Okay, I take your hint," I sigh. "Just tell me who designed that system, I'd swear I've seen something like it before."

Moneaux's face tightened fractionally.

"...Lord Macey's son, John, designed it," she answers me after a few passing moments. "He died nearly a decade ago. I don't see how you could have encountered some design of his before."

I feel the loop grinding in my head, and I force myself to grip the chair I'm sitting in tightly, to anchor myself into the present. I need to start writing down triggers, but that wasn't going to help if Macey was backing this whole damn investigation. Moneaux notices my tension and leans towards me, startled and maybe even unnerved.

"...are you all right, Mister Callahan?" she asks, some of her hostile fire dimming. I force myself to breathe, and it doesn't take long for the loop to start fading.

"Don't think you should talk to me about your house stuff," I manage to reply. "Otherwise I'm not going to be a lot of use to you. Let's just stick to the present. Your cyber-security's tight, and if I can't get through maybe others won't be able to, either."

"Exactly why I never save case data on the local servers," Moneaux agrees. "Now, maybe you should answer my questions. What company made you? Your model design? Anyone that's been helping you along in the city?"

I exhale and loosen my grip on the chair. I think there are dents left where my fingers were holding on.

"You made a hard guess at my corp, that's for sure," I tell her with a nod to the paper files. "Don't think you'll have any of their records on me, but you've got something, which is a good start."

"So Romarei made you," Moneaux murmured, less for confirmation and more to herself. That caught my attention; I'd have to do some research on her history and see

why any druid would have anything to do with a corporation. "Any specific model number?"

"Not off the top of my head," I half-growl. "Some genius thought it was safer to give me a real name than a number."

"We'll have to see if the R-and-D files they deigned to give me have anything," Moneaux insists as she types in the information quickly. "What about your safety net, friends out in the city that've been keeping you safe?"

I hesitate. I know Macey's mainframe might be able to withstand a cyberattack from Romarei. I'm mostly-sure all of this is being recorded, both for AmCad and Macey. Maybe there were already behavioral analysts examining me, testing my body language against my words, tracking truth and falsehood and making sure I wasn't trying to stop Moneaux's questioning. So if I tell them about Jez, in all likelihood someone working intel would break into AmCad, find this tape, and go looking for her. I couldn't do that to her. Especially not with her about to go after that chip, even with Masha looking out for her.

Moneaux notes my unease, and her brows furrow slightly. I can guess she's trying to read my mind, but having a hard time. Maybe having a semi-metallic brain had something to do with it. I pull myself towards the desk and get a window open to scrawl on with a fingertip. I wrote out Jez's name and her location address in Central. I push the window towards Moneaux, and she reoriented the window to read it.

"I hope you don't mind if I go talk to your friend?" she asks after clearing the window. She must have caught or shared my thought of monitors and security. "Nothing obvious, just getting anything that can be offered."

Moneaux was definitely a lot smarter than she looked, or at least thought of possibilities and put preparations to work. I'd have to start giving her a little more respect.

"Just don't wear the uniform, or the robes," I warn her. "Folks in that neighborhood don't like security forces and you'd get mobbed as a druid."

"I'm sure I can think of something," Moneaux replies; the faint hints of a smile are back. "I know how to blend in."

"I'll try not to argue about it," I sigh. "So what else is on your plan?"

"First, I want you to help me go through this *pentwr slwtsh* -"

"English. I'm not that good with Welsh."

"Slush pile."

"...really?"

Moneaux gives me a look and I shut up.

"So. Through these papers, which are the research logs for Romarei Consolidated for the past two years. I wanted the past five to ten but they wanted a warrant."

"You don't have one yet?" I ask as I eye the pile. The two years I had missed outside of their loop stood right there, at least somewhat. It was good intelligence for me to have access to, and sending it to Jez and Masha would keep them apprised of what might be waiting for them.

"It was short notice and the Council's off until tomorrow," Moneaux insists. "*Calan awst*, after all."

"You getting paid overtime for this?"

"Nope."

"Shame."

"Lord Robert should be able to get it signed off, so then Romarei will be sending us more of these," Moneaux continues. "If we get through these I can meet you in Central proper so I can talk to your friend; if not, well, we need to find out where our arsonist might strike next. Corporate hold means they'll have him lie low for a few days before sending him out again. To do what, well, we'll have to find out."

"Sounds like fun," I tell her with a smirk. Moneaux gives me a disbelieving look, but for me this is a lot like my old work. Except it was for the good guys.

Signing on with AmCad permanently was starting to look like a definite option.

It was strange to be working from the stationary computers in Jessica's apartment than operating subtly from Raphael. She was more used to having short bursts of activity while Raphael was asleep, moving quickly and not truly examining the information she came into contact with. Easier, that way, to mask her true presence, in case there were hunters still looking for Raphael and, associatively, her. Now she could operate at her leisure, follow the usual burst activities but idle curiously in the clinic, "watching" the people with avid interest. Watching Jessica herself, even more so. Jessica could help her patients both with the skill of her hands and the creations from her mind. She could easily access files on Jessica, know of her accelerated university career and work in one of the corporations before her departure, but actually seeing her work was a much better marker of who Jessica was.

This caused a minor emotional twinge. Bitterness. She must have had hands once. No matter now.

Having the *gwyllo'r* access point was a further luxury that she took full advantage to enjoy. She could look out from Jessica's wrist and watch her surroundings pass by, survey the equipment she used for a variety of examination and surgery procedures. It was a world that, she was certain, she had been part of once. Before. She was still part of it, in a way, but she could access it differently, unlike her usual runs across the cyberspatial connections that filled Cadarn. It was a new experience, like many things she could now enjoy.

She disengaged from the *gwyllo'r* and crossed Cadarn, into Central, tracing Raphael. Now that she was external from his neural net watching him was far more foreign than watching Jessica. She was used to experiencing his reactions, acting secondary to him if at all. Freed from him, she could watch him from the outside. She could witness Raphael's reactions, his expressions. Sometimes she could tell things that no one else could. His fear, his hope. Or perhaps it was an inaccurate estimation, a faulty means of reading an organic face. She was, after all, only a computer program. Extremely effective and highly advanced, yes, but still only a computer program.

Switch from signal tracking to visual. The closest means was accessing the city's automated traffic and transportation systems. Security cameras at the maglev stations, intersection regulation posts, became her eyes. Watch him from high above, departing Amddiffynwyr y Cadarn headquarters. Someone else left with him, long dark hair pulled away from her face and into an imperfect bun at the base of her skull. Facial scan, database match. Alayna Moneaux, druid of House Macey, agent for Amddiffynwyr y Cadarn's Special Investigations division. Alayna was assigned to the garage burning and associated murders. Of course she would want to speak to Raphael; undoubtedly she would also soon speak to Jessica. Neither, she was certain, would reveal her existence. After all, it was not important to the investigation.

Curiosity drove a thought. Undoubtedly Alayna's search would lead to the company hunting her and Raphael. If there was any means to find information for the druid, to access the company's mainframe and get the records Alayna would want to see, she would do them. But the difficulty would be her return to that mainframe, and keeping her presence there so quiet that not even the security programming would suspect her being there. She had nearly done it before. She could attempt it again.

Disengage from the system, pick along carefully towards the corporate mainframes. Physically not a long distance; cyberspatially difficult. If she wasn't going to be found, she had to mask her presence, shrink to a point, investigate without being found. She slid around carefully, spreading out ghostly threads to throw off seekers, before she delved into the death-maze that was Romarei.

The system wasn't expecting her, but thankfully no traps appeared to swallow her. All the file paths were open, databases semi-exposed except for the ones that would undoubtedly be more interesting. She felt a worried ping from Jessie but brushed it off. Glided deeper into the mainframe, looking for the appropriate database, file path, project name. She found it and paused warily. The firewall was thick, seething with blind awareness. If she attacked head on, she was as good as dead. But the security was tight, tighter than she had expected. There had to be a gap. Otherwise Alayna and Raphael would not get any information of use from the company. They wouldn't give up their secrets easily, or willingly. Someone had to pry them away.

She drifted towards the firewall, circling carefully, examining, avoiding detection. There was some luck, however; someone requested access and the firewall opened enough to allow the access to enter. She latched onto it, blending her signal into the user's access request, and soon slid into the database without detection. Good. She detached from the access and drifted as languidly as possible without drawing attention from any security software that could be scanning for unauthorized access - like she had. Another ping from Jessie. Ignore again. She had to complete her task first.

It was reflexive to find the appropriate file, access the project. The actual title wasn't accurate, of course, but she knew it was the proper one. The file designs she could glance at from outside matched what she recognized from simply being part of Raphael. She waited a few agonizing moments as the access she had ridden into the database closed, and once it was gone she carefully entered the files. She had expected maybe three or four more beyond Raphael's own file entries; instead there were easily twenty such, based from him but each more advanced and less successful than Raphael himself. It made her anxious, uneasy, to see how many lives Romarei had stolen to repeat the so-called success. But this was only a symptom of whatever drove these creations; she had to locate the source. She still made copies of the files, carefully stored in her immediate code. She would upload safely into Jessie's computers when her task was complete.

She tried to dig deeper into the code, to find the source, the reason for this activity, but only found more symptoms in the database. Advanced security concepts expanded into all-out military design and application; systems for crowd control in emergencies were adapted for lethal combat. All of these she copied and stored, always vigilant for any defense software that could attack her and strip her to nothing more than broken code and slender fragments. She caught a dim flash of warning when she copied away files of AmCad's nearly-failed orbital security designs, and without another moment retracted from the database, snaked out from the firewall before it tried to snap at her, and escaped into cyberspace without much reprimand, as far as she could tell.

Actual typed messages waited for her as she approached her new home mainframe, carrying the plans and designs that she had absconded with. She willed them away before settling, and quietly uploaded them before projecting herself into the apartment. Jessica was waiting for her, and the mechanic gasped in worry as she rushed forward.

"Masha, are you okay? You've been gone for so long, I kept trying to call you..." Jessica stammered, but Masha raised her hands to stop her words and keep her calm.

"I was busy; Raphael is bringing an AmCad officer to you, and they need the information I've just stolen," she explained, and Jessica blanched.

"What do you mean, stole?!" Jessica cried out. "Just tell me you didn't get found, right? Please tell me you didn't get found..."

"No, but I don't doubt that they will have noticed my escape and what I took; they're on your computer now."

Jessia rushed back to the monitor station and clattered frantically. She presented the files, simple designs instead of the full listing, and it was obvious to see the shock filling Jessia's eyes. Whether she understood their meaning, she could only guess. Hopefully so. Jessia tapped into a couple of the files, especially the ones from the same project as Raphael, scanning them over and over again.

"Masha, can you tell me how many of these guys like Raph are alive?" Jessia eventually asked, and it was a quick scan across the project files.

"Of twenty-five assembled since Raphael's activation, three are still deemed online. Only one of them is active."

"Okay, and how recent was that guy running around?"

She understood what Jessia was getting at and probed the file closer. Name, Dominik Jadin, activation, Samhai 16 of this year, last operation today 0400.

Today. 0400.

She was too stunned to even tell Jessie herself. Instead she brought the page in question up on screen, let Jessie see for herself. The mechanic read it over and gasped softly, in horror, her eyes widening as she stepped away from the screen.

"...oh my God," Jessie murmured. "Oh, *duw*, so he works for them and...but why would a corporation strike at one of the noble houses, that doesn't make any sense! And what about you and Raph, and there was a chip thing that Tex had...oh, this doesn't make any sense, *damn ei gyd i uffern a chefn!*"

"At the least we should warn Raphael of his target," she insisted quickly, hoping quick action would put Jessie back to herself. "While he and AmCad decide how to deal with this Dominik Jadin, we can go into investigating the technology, find that chip and press towards finding the reason behind all of these militarized designs."

"...Raph's schems are in here," Jessie added, moving back towards the computer. "He was their first. Oh, this is so sad..."

She fell silent, letting Jessie browse the file. She had other thoughts to concern herself with. Undoubtedly Romarei would track her here, and quickly. They would not stop until she was either destroyed or under their control. That would never happen again, not after the six years Raphael had been their slave and she had been hidden within his neural net. But if they traced her here, Jessie would be in danger as well.

"Jessie," she stated firmly, once she was certain Jessie's attention would be drawn to her and remain there. "After Raphael brings the agent from AmCad here, we must leave."

"What?! Why?!"

"They will find out I have accessed these sooner or later," she insisted. "They will track me here, and they will either imprison you or kill you, destroying everything you have built as they go. The sooner we leave, the safer we shall be. I can foil them as long as we are mobile."

"...okay," Jessie breathed, "right, yeah, of course, duh. Okay. So how soon is Raph going to get here?"

Quick shift out to check on Raphael. He was in his apartment, his exercise equipment out, stretching his muscles and regaining his previous levels of flexibility and activity. Shift back.

"Perhaps an hour," she reported. "I could try to check the agent, but she will be more difficult to track and access."

"Okay, don't worry, that's enough time for me to pack and erase things...just need to get these locked up..."

Jessia moved immediately into action, and Masha couldn't help some relief. So long as they were constantly ready for reprisal, they could not be stopped. That was her hope, at least.

Moneaux

Alayna was to meet Callahan at the top of shaft eleven in Central Cadarn. The area around the grated-over airshaft was groomed into an expansive park at the foot of several corporate grounds; Kobol-Minova, Snowden, and InfraIntel headquarters soared above her, proud spires of steel and glass. More people were in the park, and it took some focus to ignore the continuous throb of thoughts all around her. Another downside to being a telepath, despite all her practice and training.

Thankfully no one could have pointed a finger at her and declared her a druid, or an AmCad agent. She had traded in her uniform at home for a tight-fitting heather-gray shirt with a hood that was raised against the brisk wind that whistled through the towers. Her tightly-pressed uniform pants were replaced with baggy black cargo pants; they had belonged to Jack, and thankfully fit her reasonably well. A dim flicker of his presence still lingered, as much a part of the clothing as the fibers that wove it together. Soft-soled black boots, the straps loosened for the bottoms of the pants to stuff into, completed the look, and Alayna was comfortable enough to know she would not stand out in the levels below her.

She cast her gaze across the park once again. Families were taking the daylight hours of *calan awst* here, their children racing across the grass in delight as their parents chased them. Some couples strode along the pathways, arm in arm and blocking out the world except for the other. Alayna envied them their closeness, but dwelling on it would only lead to painful memories. Instead she focused towards the north, watching for Callahan and sharpening her senses for him.

His interview in her office had made her uneasy. Despite his lack of information relating to his construction, the knowledge of his making and the timeframe during which Callahan had been active made Alayna uneasy. She remembered Etain's words before the ceremony, how she hadn't felt Jack's spirit passing on, how she had foreseen no death for him and yet seeing nothing. Could it be that Romarei had withheld Jack's remains because although dead in spirit he wasn't dead in body? Had they taken Jack's body, filled it with metal and software, and created another man in his stead?

Catching the nearly-blank sense of Callahan jarred Alayna out of her own thoughts. It was impossible for Callahan and Jack to be the same man. Callahan was so unlike Jack that even looking at him in the full light of day proved to her that despite the similarities they were different men. But when he finally came into physical view, scowling and limping in pain, Alayna had to make herself believe that. When Callahan spotted her and waved, though his expression didn't lighten, Alayna could have sworn she saw Jack walking towards her, the wind mussing at his short dark hair, so very like his father's, and his mother's dark eyes flaring in annoyance as he tried to deal with some minor issue. But as he got closer, with his blank psychic presence, it was easier to decide he wasn't. Callahan drew even to her and looked her up and down critically.

“Not bad, for a druid,” Callahan finally decided after taking in her outfit and nodding satisfaction. “Doesn’t scream nobility or AmCad. Been down there before?”

“A few times, but not as much as North,” Alayna informed him. Callahan didn’t waste any time turning from the shaft, towards a side street off the plaza. Alayna followed as best she could; even with his limp, he set a rapid pace. “Special Investigations doesn’t go down there so often, for obvious reasons.”

“What, the crime down there isn’t fancy enough?” he snapped. “Not high-profile enough? Get ready for a shocker, kid. Things down here are gonna be nastier than what you’ve seen before.”

Alayna had the odd feeling that she should never leave Callahan and Ramstein in the same room with a bottle of whiskey. She continued to follow him, deciding to ignore his muttered strings of curses while he limped along. It didn’t take long for him to find an elevator shaft, and once the double doors were pried open he waved Alayna inside.

“I could have opened it for you,” she noted as she passed him. Callahan’s frown darkened as he stepped in after her, pulling the interior cage-like door shut after forcing the outer door to do the same. “I’m not only telepathic.”

“Can your head shift nearly half a ton of blast-proof metal?” Callahan grunted at her. Alayna blinked in surprise before looking firmly at the door, reaching her senses to examine it. The weight immediately became apparent with the fragmentary touch, and she had to admit defeat with a shake of her head. “Figured as much. Guess even druids got limits.”

“...guess so,” Alayna agreed, her gaze returning to Callahan and the strange puzzle he presented. The disturbing thing was how often Jack had said the same thing to her, in nearly the same tone. As the lift’s descent began, she couldn’t help but watch Callahan. He was leaned against the wall of the elevator car, rubbing his leg near his hip and wincing gingerly whenever he tried to shift weight onto that leg. “Are you all right?”

“No,” Callahan grumbled, “but when we get to Jez’s I’ll be better.”

Alayna decided he wasn’t about to tell her any specifics and turned away from him. The car, she noticed in surprise, was actually glassed in, and as they continued descending their shaft opened up. All around her immediate field of view was a layer of one and two-story buildings, all of them haphazardly made and swarming with people. Bright neon lights flashed and winked in certain corners, and the sudden seething pulse of collected thoughts and feelings nearly made her dizzy. They passed the first level and at least five more like it before the elevator slowed, then halted. The elevator had brought them fairly deep below the surface of Central Cadarn, and Alayna pushed her hood back a little to discover it was warmer down here, insulated by the

geothermal pipes and buildings built of concrete and iron. Callahan pushed the doors open and stepped out into a throng of people, still limping slightly, and Alayna did her best to follow him despite the relative ease with which it could have been done.

As they walked, Alayna was forced to not scan people as she passed them, instead trying to get a broader sense of this kind of Central that she was unfamiliar with. Despite being crowded together and pulsing, many of the people seemed so insulated and lost. She picked out more than a few cyborgs, though none of them seemed quite as obvious as Callahan to her awareness, and even a few mutants who stood out with spotted skin, or eyes as exotic as Ramstein's but likely not so sensitive. Little businesses sprang out of otherwise-blank facades, and much of the light came from neon signs that had been haphazardly made, the gas tubes twisted and convoluted despite the clamps meant to hold them in place. Some corners they passed were crowded up with food carts of all sorts, not just traditional places with cones of fish and chips but also plates of raw fish arranged on rice with seaweed, or pieces of flatbread piled with steaming meat and vegetables. Callahan stopped at one of the ones with the fish dishes, and Alayna inquisitively watched as one of the cooks behind the counter carefully cut a fillet of *pysgod* into strips, which were laid on a bed of rice with such care and attention Alayna wondered why he didn't have his own restaurant on the surface. Callahan tapped her shoulder a few minutes later, and she was surprised to find a colorful plastic tray covered with an assorted variety of the fish pieces being handed to her.

"Figured you might want somethin' you don't find up there," Callahan said as she took the tray and sniffed at the fish. "I swing down here for lunch, usually. Nice stuff for on-the-go folks that stay down here."

"What is it?" Alayna had to ask before Callahan turned to take another tray; likely his own meal.

"It's called sushi," he told her before pulling her away from the crowds. "Guess some of the folks who came here way back had their own traditions to pass on. There's other places like it down here, but you're not going to find them in North or East."

Callahan started eating his sushi as they walked, and after watching him for a few moments Alayna looked down at her own tray. Carefully selecting a crisp covered in what appeared to be spicy sauces and *cranc*, she bit into it and chewed thoughtfully. The spice was far subtler than she had expected, and the zing of salt and lemon complimented the meat. It was all Alayna could do to not put the rest of the crisp into her mouth, though she sensed Callahan watching her, dimly amused. They continued to eat in silence, Alayna greatly enjoying the culinary experience he had introduced to her and fully determined to pass on the idea to the head chef at home. The cart's owner had seemed to predict her interest and had an ingredient list printed into the bottom of the tray, she was more than happy to note.

Alayna had finished chewing and swallowing the last piece of her meal when she realized Callahan had walked them back to the airshaft where they had been standing half an hour before and perhaps fifty feet above. Looking past the squat-looking building ahead of them, Alayna was able to see that the shaft was surrounded all the way around by similar buildings. Sunlight from the surface was streaming down, and the wind that had been a comfortable breeze above was whistling loudly as it cycled down the shaft. The sight was distraction enough for about a minute, as Callahan headed for the building with the limp that seemed to be worse than before and yet he showed no more discomfort than he had before. Alayna hurried after him, towards the building which she assumed was the clinic of Callahan's friend. It seemed to be as nondescript as the neighboring structures, but Alayna could clearly sense a bright spot of well-meaning and kindness, the hope of the people inside. Callahan pushed the door open, but held it for her.

"Find somewhere to sit, I gotta tell Nico we're here," Callahan told her, his voice low to avoid disturbing the crowds filling the large front room. Alayna nodded quickly, adjusting her hood again, and waited until Callahan had begun walking carefully towards a reception desk manned by a scrawny-looking youth with black and turquoise hair. Only then did Alayna walk quietly towards a corner, finding a collection of unoccupied chairs along a far wall, and sat down. It was an automatic reflex that closed her eyes, and Alayna easily expanded her awareness into the waiting room.

The doctors will have to help they won't ask won't take pay hush sweetie it's all right, mama's gonna make it all right techies gonna hate all the shit goin' down be with you in five the pain's so bad I can hardly breathe take it easy why...do...I...

Alayna's senses sharpened drastically to catch the sudden flicker of thought, from behind the blankness that was Callahan. The small opening was enough, this time, to follow the thought, draw closer despite the difficulties of Callahan's mechanical brain. It didn't take long for Alayna to find herself drifting into the core of his thoughts, the fractured pieces that seemed to flash with thought before dimming down into nothingness. She let the flow pull her closer, deeper.

I know her, one thought burst, I know her but I don't remember why don't I remember fucking dammit all...

The flow was closer, drifting deeper. Fragments flicker weakly, broken images and confused flashes of what could have been memories. She let the stream pull her down, down...

Light and pain and darkness voice hovering inside and out stop controlling me bars and chains I want to be free screams of the dying blocked out only by will I won't do it you can't make me I won't let you.

Shaking fragility, confusion, and suddenly she's too deep, can't back out, and something grabs her shoulder as hard metal slams against her.

Alayna forced her eyes to open, breathing ragged and feeling dazed. Callahan's hands gripped her shoulders in a vice, and when he gaze met hers Alayna couldn't help a flinch of some horror she couldn't describe.

"What the hell are you doing?!" he snarled at her. "I thought you were a telepath, not a psychopath!"

"I - I'm sorry, I - I just...went too far," Alayna stammered, trying to focus her mind again despite the lingering flashes of Callahan's deepest memories. All of them pain and anger and confusion. How could he live with mental scars that deep? Callahan shook her again, and Alayna blinked, shook her head to try and banish the lingering memory. "I - I didn't mean to go so far, I - I'm sorry."

"Don't you ever do it again," Callahan breathed, though he let her go and sat down carefully in the chair next to her. "However you did it, don't. My brain's not your playground."

Alayna wanted to tell him she hadn't meant to even reach into his mind and technically couldn't, but Callahan had turned away, eyes fixed on some point on the ceiling. He stayed in that position, completely unmoving, and Alayna realized he had simply switched his consciousness into cyberspace. Alayna couldn't help but be a little jealous; enhancing herself to do the same, as Jack had once suggested she try to do, would have damaged her druidic capabilities. Added to the rumor that House Colvyn had a client house that had a technopathic druid and Alayna wished she had that gift than the ones she had. An understanding of technology would be much more useful here than reading minds or lifting objects with a thought.

They sat in silence for a good ten minutes, Callahan transmitted into cyberspace and the waiting room seeming to remain at the same population despite the coming and going of patients and their families. Alayna avoided trying to sense the people in the waiting room again, and instead fidgeted with the sushi tray. Callahan came out of his own trance, though, and Alayna followed his gaze as the door to the back of the clinic opened, admitting a cyborg and a woman with red-gold hair tied up and back from her face and neck. The woman was likely one of the doctors, and the bright sense Alayna had sensed before was clearly connected to her. After the doctor escorted her patient towards his waiting family, she turned towards the two of them and waved to them both. Callahan stood from his chair as carefully as he had sat down, and Alayna followed as they went towards the doctor.

"Jez, this's the agent I warned you about," Callahan stated by way of introduction. "Agent Moneaux, Jessia Locke."

“Nice to meetcha, agent,” Jessica Locke answered with a bright, beaming smile that went all the way to her bright blue eyes. Alayna nodded and offered her hand to shake.

“Please, call me Alayna. This is supposed to be relatively informal, after all,” Alayna insisted. Jessica nodded as she shook hands.

“No worries, I would’ve asked myself since Raff here doesn’t like telling me nice things like people’s actual names,” Jessica teased, and Callahan’s face turned stony. “Come on back, we can talk somewhere quiet. Don’t wanna get overheard, I’m sure, right?”

Jessica nearly bounced back through the door, surprisingly bubbly and kind considering her surroundings, but Alayna followed her, Callahan bringing up the rear. Alayna didn’t trouble herself too much with either scanning Jessica or looking around the corridor that connected to exam rooms, most of which were occupied, anyway. The hallway itself was plain and bore resemblance to an actual hospital, until Jessica took them around to a door that opened into a cluttered apartment that was undoubtedly where Jessica actually lived. On entering, Alayna immediately took notice of a lab-like area on the far side of the apartment, stacked with computers, a holoprojector, and a treatment bed with a spinal adaptor installed into it. Jessica settled in a chair near the computer bank, and Callahan leaned against the side of the bed.

“So, whatcha wanna know, Alayna?” Jessica asked brightly. “I know some of the tech stuff about Raph, but I don’t think he’d like me telling you that..”

“No,” Callahan insisted, and Alayna hid a smirk.

“Maybe about yourself; how long you’ve known Callahan, tech expertise.”

“Aw, heck, most of that’s already on your records, I bet,” Jessica insisted. “I’ve known Raph for two years, and he owes me for those two limbs of his.”

“Two limbs?” Alayna asked, turning to glance at Callahan. He shrugged slightly, as if it was something she hadn’t asked about and so hadn’t offered the information.

“Well yeah! When I dragged his cyber ass in here, he was off an arm and a leg,” Jessica explained. “I built him new ones. You can see the arm; Raff, show the woman your leg!”

“No.”

“Oh come on, just because it’s a *darn o cachu* and ugly...”

Callahan didn’t have much choice as Jessica got up and crossed to him, then pulled up his right pant leg. Alayna blinked to find the clunky-looking hydraulic limb,

compared to the sleek lifelike left arm he had in comparison. Callahan shifted uncomfortably, and the pistons in his leg creaked weakly.

“Speaking of, Jez, my hip’s freaking out and has been all day,” Callahan noted.

“Oh, damn, okay, uh, Alayna, you don’t mind if we, uh, work on him?” Jessie stammered, motioning between Callahan and the bed. Alayna quickly moved out of the way, so they could work on the leg. It was fascinating to watch Callahan settle on the bed, and then hear the clamp locking into place on his spine, though Callahan obviously bit back a curse.

“Here, we can still talk while I work on him, and ol’ Raff can still say things, too,” Jessie said, though Alayna had moved back to watch with morbid fascination. This was a part of the city she had never quite seen, nor even cared to recognize existed. “So c’mon, Alayna, get to askin’! Unless this is just weirding you out and you can’t get any words out. I can get that.”

“I’m sure I can think of something,” Alayna managed to reply. She still stood there for a few minutes, watching Jessie pull out a variety of tools and start tuning up something between Callahan’s hip and the mechanical leg. Once she was able to get her thoughts together, Alayna cleared her throat gingerly.

“So I can assume you get your parts and equipment from the black market, right?”

“As long as I won’t get arrested for admitting it!” Jessie huffed. Alayna heard what seemed to be a near-chuckle from Callahan, and was intrigued to look up at him and find a trace of a smile in his eyes. “But since that’s not why you’re here, yes, I get my stuff off the market. Or it’s older stuff that the corps toss out when they get an upgrade to better equipment.”

“Which companies get the most tech down here?”

“That depends on their security,” Callahan answered while Jessie’s face nearly pressed completely against his leg. Whatever tool she had in her hand was scraping gently against the metal. “If a corp has a lot of loose tech, means their security is shit and they can’t stop someone from sneaking things out. Rarer the stuff on the market, the better the corp security.”

“So a company like Romarei sits where on this scale?”

“Unbreachable. Anything Romarei that gets down here, it’s either a plant or a fake.”

Alayna frowned, processing this information. Jessie was still working, but a tickle of a thought from her caught Alayna’s attention. She didn’t dare violate Jessie’s trust, not to mention she wasn’t suspected of anything, so Alayna held back the instinct

to check what was being silently said. Callahan winced but looked down at Jessie; obviously it was meant to catch his attention.

“...we should show her,” Jessie hissed at him, not quite enough to go completely unheard.

“Show me what?” Alayna pressed, and Jessie stiffened before getting up and turning, awkwardly rubbing the back of her head.

“Oh, well, uh, there’s...well, we kinda – Raph and I, I mean – got this mutual friend and –” Jessie began, but she was interrupted when the holoprojector flashed brightly. Alayna started forward as an image formed, frowning warily. The projector offered a woman dressed in what seemed to be white, though her hair was long and dark and, as the image began turning, her eyes were the same bright white as her clothes. The image stopped when it was facing her, and, in a strangely human expression, tilted its head curiously.

“Agent Alayna Moneaux of Amddiffynwyr y Cadarn, correct?” the projection asked, and Alayna frowned a little before looking over at Jessie and Callahan, the latter of which was still affixed to his bed. Jessie tried to take a step forward, but Alayna raised a hand. The wall she projected stopped Jessie on the other side of the projector.

“Who are you and why are you asking?” Alayna questioned in answer.

“She has information, so you’d better be nice to her,” Jessie snapped from where she was forced to stand. The projection seemed to be unaffected by the exchange.

“Jessie’s correct, you know,” the image noted. “I’ve gotten access to Romarei’s development servers – access you’ll never get, warrant or no.”

Alayna’s frown darkened. Who was this person, and how did she have such access? Unless she was a mole working for Callahan, to keep him appraised of happenings back in his home corporation. She could have even coordinated the drop of the security system, letting the murderer get inside that garage with Kaitlen. Callahan could have been on it, too, since it was his system, after all.

Except Callahan wouldn’t have agreed to work with AmCad to uncover whoever this madman was had he been involved. He would have been running to cover his tracks, to cut contact with this woman, if she had coordinated the entire thing. Alayna forced herself to exhale. The wall holding Jessie back vanished, and the mechanic hurried forward.

“Look, Masha just wants to help, too,” Jessie insisted rapidly. “Romarei’s been just as bad to her as they’ve been to Raph, and you’re not gonna get what she has from asking them for it.”

"Jez, shut up," Callahan muttered; even from his place on the bed Alayna knew he was angered by Jessica holding this information. "The hell were you thinking?"

"It was Masha who went and got it!" Jessica informed him. "I didn't tell her to do anything, and I already know I gotta get moving anyway."

"What about these files you have?" Alayna pressed, turning to the projection of Masha. If this person had access to Romarei's secure servers and wasn't likely to be involved, she would be an invaluable resource to the investigation. "If you give them to me, I can probably arrange a safehouse for you and Jessica."

"I've already got them downloaded; you won't find them on these computers," Masha said, motioning over to the bank of computers. "The only hard digital copy is in a flash drive Jessica has. I can forward some to your secure server if need be, for your examination."

"Anything for the past five to ten years would be ideal," Alayna sighed in relief. "Development reports, schematics, anything that could pertain to anything they've been up to."

"But why Romarei?" Jessica asked. She had moved back to the bed and was disengaging the bed for Callahan to step down. "I mean, what lead do you have to suggest them?"

Alayna glanced at Callahan, and his gaze fixed on her warily.

"...at the crime scene, when you heard that Romarei teams were coming in to investigate," Alayna admitted, "I saw you react. Sensed it. Not to mention your familiarity with corporate attack strategies...I put the pieces together."

"But that's only me," Callahan growled warningly. "Outright razing isn't in their MO. It's theft and sabotage."

"Actually," Masha spoke up, "it may be now."

The projection flashed, changing from the woman to a set of files. Alayna stepped closer and raised her hands to activate the holographic reaction system, if there was one. Thankfully there was, and she pulled the front file to the front. It was an activity log, and the most recent entry was last night at four hundred hours. Alayna's eyes widened a little, tapping the entry, and in front of them was a recording of two figures – one clad in druid's robes – approaching a garage. The video accelerated after the figures entered the garage, and at oh-four-thirty one of them stepped out, walking off-screen. The garage caught into flames not long after, and Alayna felt her stomach churning.

"...oh, *duw*," Jessica murmured. "Masha, where did you get this?"

"It was attached to the activity logs under the project relating to this man," Masha's voice replied. The video moved in reverse, and the man who left the scene reappeared. Alayna paused the video herself, drawing a box around the suspect.

"Does this man have a name?" Alayna asked sharply. "What's his connection to Romarei?"

"My question," Callahan added, "is why did he drag a druid into an obvious raid?"

"Agent, I will forward you his profile," Masha replied. "I'm sure it's something your superior will want to see. As for your question, Raphael...I don't know. Maybe you should ask him once you find him."

"Then that's what we'll do," Callahan growled. Alayna nodded firmly and deftly closed the file.

"Better get to investigating."

Jadin

Having a private room at a place like the Crimson Lion – easily the highest-class rave club on the edge of the Wrexham and Caernarvon neighborhoods – was a luxury. Hell, having a private room at all was a luxury. No cameras, no microphones, no wall of sensors monitoring him. Just four plain walls was the height of luxury. Of course it helped that the box formed by those four walls featured a real bed, a selection of any kind of vice he could have wanted, and a friendly working woman – no, *putain*, had to keep working on the stupid Welsh – was there to keep him company for the next five hours. They ran shifts for multi-day bookings.

He was sprawled on the bed, eyes closed as he drifted on a high generated by alcohol, eighty-percent pure meth, and the promise of upcoming sex. Not that he felt high; he knew it existed, and the meth alone would put any normal human out like the dead, if not just killing the idiot. One of the perks of being cyber. One of the perks of being practically invincible.

Not completely. He frowned as his eyes opened slowly. The world spun in insane psychedelia, visual data overcharged thanks to the meth and the booze. He'd been tripping for nearly a day and a half; he got fresh doses about the same time as the girls changed shifts. No, not quite invincible. Not yet. **That one** practically was. All he had to do was access the monitor cams that had been on Macey's estate, the battle circle. Watch **him** practically destroy three cybers, the newest tech torn down by some ancient runaway who should have been dead for two years. He wanted to be there to rip **his** head from **his** neck, crack open **his** skull and find the secret that kept **him** running without being found.

A secret that was promised to him. A secret that would be his soon enough, if he could reach out and take it at just the right time. The handlers wanted **him** back, alive, unharmed. They wanted the same secret but were going to give it to everyone like **him**.

He reached out lazily, fingers brushing the glass of the nearest bottle of liquor. Stretch a little that way, tighten grip, draw it close. He raised his head to check what it was: local whiskey, probably Llew Coch made in the cellar of the club itself. Wasn't hard to prop up on an elbow, take down a few gulps of the whiskey. It burned all the way down, and when he lowered the bottle he sighed heavily, savoring the flavors dancing on his tongue. Sharp, crisp, with some kind of wood layered into it. He'd learned a lot about booze and their taste over the past nine months. Less than three and he would have survived his first year online.

Wasn't much time to enjoy this current night, he mused, especially if he was just lying there on the bed. He sat up better, shifting over to the side of the bed to begin standing. The room started spinning, but he stayed upright, reaching for his sleeveless shirt and pulling it over his head. Open the room's door, put the do not disturb sign out – though it was printed in Welsh, read *nad ydynt yn tarfu* – and walked down the

corridor to the elevator. Rode it up ten levels, the heavy dub-trance getting easier to hear before he stopped at the Lion's main level. Stepped out. Stopped.

Like usual, the club was packed, full of gyrating bodies. Multicolored lights flashed in the blacklit room, the DJ mixing up a beat that put most of the patrons into a drug-induced haze. He had a hard time ignoring the dancing images the light spun before his overstimulated brain. If he got a fresh dose of meth, he just might get high for real. Get lost in the light. He almost was already.

Instead he came down the steps, the first beat ending while the second kept up. DJ was probably trading datadiscs, getting ready for a new mix. The dance floor relaxed, the patrons catching their breath. Made it easier to cross the floor to the bar. Not to drink, but to watch. Sure, the Lion's girls were nice enough, but he knew most of them and not all of them liked him. Didn't like getting in bed with a cyber. Thought he'd break them or worse if they did. Stupid bitches. *Geist dwp*. The curses were starting to stick. Finally. He greeted the bartender with a nod, and after passing some cash over got a shot of tan hylif - a tiny little thing packed with vodka, gin, and a little drizzle of cream liqueur set aflame with a match. He picked up the shot glass, turning to face the dance floor. The quiet pulse had gotten most of the dancers to clear away, which gave him a good vantage of the patronage. He held up the glass, watching the flames, entranced. He threw his head back, downing the shot quickly, before the alcohol all burned off. The fire turned from the literal to the alcoholic, and he sighed as the drink shot heat into his head, feet, fingers. Definitely drunk.

When he lowered his head, blinking back the rush, there was a woman standing in front of him. He surveyed her, leaning back and fingering the shot glass. She was lean, curved almost perfectly. She stood in three-inch platform stilettos, which made her toned legs stand out as much as the neon-green fishnet tights she wore. Her black miniskirt clung to her hips and maybe half an inch to her thighs before flaring out in overstated pleats. The heavy belt that secured to her hips was definitely synthleather, studded with silver grommets and LED lights that matched her tights. From her hips to her bust was clean skin, though when her hips curved as she took a step towards him he could make out the gleam of sweat; she'd likely been dancing before the DJ started changing the mix. A strapless tube top secured her breasts in place, and the vertical black and green stripes made her seem even taller. Her hair was perfectly groomed in a tight black bob with two streaks of matching green to her top. In short, she was your average North-dwelling pretty girl with enough money to burn on clothes, gene treatments, booze, and likely men. He offered her a smirk as a more electronic beat came over the speakers.

"You look kinda lonely, mister," she told him once she was leaning against the bar next to him. Her eyes were a nearly-synthetic blue, electric and gripping. "Seems like you need yourself a dance to let things go. That fire shot won't do much unless you're trippin', too."

“Had a meth hit four hours ago,” he answered, turning to face her. “Wouldn’t mind some fresh.”

Her smile was movie-ready.

“I got somethin’ better than meth,” she teased, reaching into her skirt and pulling out a tiny plastic bag with multicolored strips inside. “I call it *taith*; sure, dumb name, but it packs a punch.”

“How much?”

Her movie smile stretched teasingly as she toyed with the bag. Her hands were perfectly manicured, nails painted the same as her tights. She leaned closer, nearly easing her hips against his.

“First hit’s free. Dance with me and I might let you have some more.”

He set the shot glass on the bar, his other hand reaching out to brush slowly down her side to her hip. She smiled at him still, even as she peeled open the bag and delicately pulled out one of the strips; in the light, it was the same green as she wore. The bag vanished back into her skirt, the hand holding it reaching to stroke his jaw. His own smirk stretched faintly before letting her place the little strip on his tongue.

The first effect was the entire club falling silent. A sharp sour flavor spiked through his brain, flowed down to tighten, then unknot all of his muscles. The silence began abating, only for the deep throbbing pulses the music sent into his feet. The girl’s face glowed neon green as she swallowed a strip herself, and then she took his hand. More of the sour-tasting tingle chased up his arm, and he gasped weakly. A trip, no kidding.

The pulse from his feet got heavier as she led him to an open square of darkness; the dance floor. But there was no one he could see, though as she pulled him towards the center he could feel them, the sour tingle getting stronger with every bare touch. She stopped pulling him, and in her startling radioactive glow she smiled at him. Spoke, though he had to read her lips because he still couldn’t hear.

Dance with me, she was saying.

She began twisting her hips, moving steadily to the beat he could feel from his feet, arms stretched over her head. Arcs of afterglow chased her, sailing out over the silhouettes of the other dancers starting to repopulate the floor as the beat became heavier, pulsing into his legs and hips and chest. He closed the distance between them and swayed with her, hands settling on her hips and spreading his fingers to softly stroke her stomach. She leaned back into his chest, and the sour tingle spread into his shoulders, enough for those muscles to move to the pulse in his feet. He ducked down to nuzzle her jaw and neck, but her hand came up, not to touch, but to offer another

strip. He could smell it, smell deep red and sweetness, and he gently teased it out of her fingers with his tongue. Sounds came back, but they were dim compared to the heady smells that hit his nose. All hers. Clouds of red floated up from her, and as he pulled her closer he breathed it in.

“Oh, baby, you like it, don’t you,” she murmured in his ear. “You’re hooked, aren’t you?”

He could only nod against her shoulder, but she soon turned so they were chest to chest. Her arms wrapped around his neck while his settled around her waist. He could hear some more of the music, but when her hips pressed against his, as he breathed in more of her heady red smell, the music didn’t matter. They rocked back and forth, the sour tingle from the first hit fading and the sweet smell taking its place. Before he could duck down to brush into her neck, another strip was being offered, blue and cool. He swallowed it easily, and cold ice flooded him. Every sense came back, but amplified, overstimulated. Only then did her hands take his face and pressed her lips to his. He kissed back in a daze, reeling as the taith suffused him and the bodies around him pressed in tighter. Didn’t matter. He pulled her closer against him, as they kept pressing into each other and kissing deeply.

The elevator came next, descending. He had her pinned to one of the walls and her hands were under his shirt. She didn’t notice or care that he was so heavy, at least as far as he could tell. Maybe the taith kept her from realizing. Wouldn’t be surprised. Left his shirt in the elevator, her legs around his waist and he carried her down to his room.

Inside. On towards the bed. Stripped down, fall into the sheets, blank out as the meth and the booze and the taith take over.

It hadn’t always been like this. He hadn’t learned how to sneak out, where to go to unwind on his own. If he had been on his own he’d have been stuck in his cell, always training and training and living and breathing his work. First he found the file for the first cyber like him, metal-enforced interior with the same old skin exterior, some inside parts still meat but stronger, better. How he escaped violently, was presumed dead. Had pity on the bastard. Got curious. Then asked his psychiatrist about it. She tried to make him not curious. Distracted him with something else. A lot of somethings else. She smuggled him out, brought him here. Like an idiot he didn’t moderate how much muscle tension he put out. Didn’t mean to do it.

His handlers hadn’t cared. They blamed her for trying to damage his psyche. They made him train more, but two weeks of hard dedicated training earned two days out. Two weeks on, two days off. Then missions. If he did good they gave him hours towards free days. He thought this was what that poor dead bastard wanted, just to get out of the cell and get wasted and laid.

What a lie he'd fed himself.

The intel guys found **him**. **He** wasn't dead. **He** was in the city. **He** wasn't stuck in the back room of a club like he'd been sometimes, before he started getting an allowance for his free days. **He** had an apartment. **He** had a job. **He** dictated his own life and he realized how stupid and naïve he had been all this time. That was why **he** had to die. Then he'd be free, too, he'd understand why **he** had it so much better than he did. **His** great secret would be his and his alone. The handlers wanted **him**, too, for a secret. He assumed it was the same one. Maybe it wasn't. But he wasn't going to let them get it. **His** secrets belonged to him. He'd understand what made **him** so different.

He came out of the haze of substances on his back, a sheet draped over him. The girl was gone, her clothes not scattered among his. The sun was starting to glimmer outside, reflecting into the window from the building across the street. His head was pounding, but he figured that was from the booze. The rest of his body felt recharged, fine-tuned, and some of the heightened awareness was lingering as he raised his hand over his face and could tell in high-definition where his hand was and wasn't. He sat up slowly, rubbing his scalp and frowning at the bristle of hair starting to grow in. Deal with it when he got back to his cell. He stood, picking up his pants and getting his feet back into his boots. Looked back at the bed and saw the plastic bag on her pillow, with a note in lime green.

Nice night and good business, she had written. Remember yellow, pink, blue. All at once for most intense experience. Never take individually or in different orders. Call when you want more.

Except there was no number on the bottom. He fingered the bag, looking at the collection of strips within. He'd have to get a better container, get them sorted into their colors. Although he'd taken a hit last night, his body was begging for another. Except this was the end of his third day. Had to go back, sober up, get ready for the next mission. Afterwards. After the next mission.

If he could hold out that long.

Nearly two days and she had done more than she'd done in the past eight years. After Agent Moneaux and Raphael had taken the information she had stolen from Romarei, Jessie had left her clinic in a mad rush, all her files either erased or preserved on a set of encrypted flash drives. She made sure the files were as well-encoded as she could make them, even breaking apart the individual files for security purposes. If the access password wasn't entered, or if a hack was detected, the data would be erased, gone forever. Best defense against anyone that tried to steal the hard data from Jessie.

While she had done the encoding, Jessie managed to build a headset that would allow her to see what Jessie was seeing. The first one, slightly clunky but perfectly functional, Jessie kept for herself, mostly because it also allowed cyberspace access that Jessie wasn't equipped to have. A second headset went to Raphael, though he had grumbled and groused about having her so close to his neural net. Jessie ensured the firmware was suitable for her, and she was more than comfortable switching between the two of them. However, Jessie needed her more often than Raphael did, not to mention the headset and *gwyllo'r* together practically allowed her to stand and interact with the people Jessie needed to talk to as their investigation began.

Once they had relocated from the clinic to a hotel room that was five levels below the surface of Central Cadarn, she helped Jessie contact a number of black-market contacts that could hopefully direct them. The chip Raphael had mentioned had likely gone back to Romarei after the attack; trying to trace its origin, the hands it had passed through, would be difficult enough lacking any records from the garage. Thankfully Jessie had quite a few tricks up her sleeve.

"So there's three guys I know for sure have handled and sold Romarei tech," Jessie began as the sun was setting through their window. "Two of them are in North, really close to the source, but that's the finished products that everyone else gets."

"Becoming physically close to Romarei may draw their attention to us," she warned. A miniature projector placed her in front of the bed where Jessie was sprawled comfortably. "I am only surprised they haven't tried to launch a probe after me."

"Well maybe you were just that sneaky!" Jessie answered with a smile. She tapped at a screen where her contact information database was displayed, bringing up a profile of a hawkish-looking man. The picture itself was, unsurprisingly, pulled from an AmCad arrest record. "Now, this guy, Garret Wyrick. I've only met him once, but he's a *hen ddyddyn ffaidd*; tried to make a pass at me. But Raph was with me and broke his jaw, so it was okay."

"Why is he different from the other two?" she asked curiously while Jessie opened the profile, letting her scan it and assimilate the data. Wyrick was a well-known supplier of rare and hard-to-find technology, though his own technical skills were

questionable. He also seemed to have an unhealthy interest in women; his arrest records were all related to sexual assault and unsanctioned prostitution. "And why should you speak to him without Raphael?"

"Instead of being near their production sites, Gare's closer to Romarei's HQ," Jessica explained. "Meaning he's closer to R-and-D. If he doesn't know about something, it's either locked up tight or doesn't exist."

"Did he know about Raphael? Or me?"

"Well, when I was fixin' up Raph I didn't know about you. And he'd only heard rumors about Raph, but he still helped make sure the parts I stuck on him worked. Not the best stuff, but good enough for me to work on myself."

She processed the information and was reluctant to admit Wyrick would likely be their best chance of at least getting information on Romarei's secret projects. But she promised herself to maintain a connection to Raphael in case of trouble.

"Where do we find him?"

"That's going to be the problem," Jessica sighed, sitting up and tossing her hair. "Romarei's HQ is on the far end of Central, near shaft twelve. I can only assume he's around there."

"But you've met him before," she protested.

"He came to the clinic after I fixed Raph. All the times before he'd called me. Different number every time."

"So he should be lured out," she mused. "Perhaps I can help there."

"Tempt him with a fully-aware AI?" Jessica asked, uneasy. "I dunno, Masha, he might not take it. He's an okay tech, but he's not that great. *Ei falchder yn fwy na'i sgiliau.*"

"Then hopefully he'll have skill enough to recognize me for what I am," she answered. Emotional output was mischievous, confident. This was a feeling she liked. "And I'm sure his pride won't deny what he sees with his own eyes."

"I sure hope you're right," Jessica murmured. "If he doesn't know anything about anything, we're not gonna be much help to Raph."

"You care for him," she said quietly, "and you won't fail. I know you won't."

"Aw, thanks," Jessica said with a smile.

She disengaged the projection after returning the expression, and shifted to check on Raphael. As he had been for the past days, he was seated at a desk that had been

moved into Agent Moneaux's office. He was scrolling rapidly through the data she had collected, interfaced with the desk thoroughly enough that he only had to open a file for a moment before assimilating the data. She maintained her distance from his active neural net and instead focused into the lens that allowed her to receive the same visual stream that Raphael saw. She made sure to trigger the appropriate code that signaled him that she was present, a small green light activating on the lens's optics. His scrolling paused when it did.

"Checking up on me?" he murmured, obviously trying to keep quiet. He raised his head so she could see why: Agent Moneaux had fallen asleep at her desk, head resting on top of a stack of sheets undoubtedly filled with her share of the Romarei data. "Still doin' the same old as ever. Damned paperwork."

"I am sorry," she told him while he lowered his gaze to the desk again. "No progress?"

"None."

"What about identifying the suspect?"

"If he's got a record, it's not in AmCad, since that profile you found didn't give a name to run through the database, unless it was in something encrypted that you didn't clear up. Same with the facial recognition. From the Romarei stuff, I gotta bad feeling he's a metal man. Subtler build than most corps would have, but some of the stress fractures from the druid match someone matching my weight class. Like her pelvic bones and her cheek."

Another emotional output: horror, shock, fear. She was certain if she had a projection it would be shuddering with unease. A good thing she'd left Jadin's name encrypted.

"I wish I could be of more aid for you, Raphael," she told him sincerely. "To repay you protecting me for so long, whether you knew it or not."

"Just tell me Jez is safe," he insisted. "And that you're gonna keep her that way no matter what crazy plan she gets."

"I swear, Raphael," she answered without hesitation. "That is partly why I came. She wants to locate this man."

She transmitted an image of Wyrick to the lens, and even from the lens shaking she knew Raphael was upset by it.

"And she's gonna try and find him alone? The hell is she thinking, Masha?"

"Apparently Wyrick has a means to access Romarei's development sector," she explained. Raphael was removing the headset, placing it so they could speak directly to

each other. A quick scan of his face showed his exhaustion; she doubted he had slept for the past two days. "If he knows of the chip you saw at the garage, he may be able to direct us to whoever released it. Also in case he can identify that cyborg."

"All right, but I don't have to like it," Raphael grumbled. He ran his hands over his face, eyes closed under them.

"You should rest," she tried to advise. "I believe I am right to assume you haven't slept since you came in here."

"Yeah, thanks for that assumption," he retorted. "I'm fine."

"You are not and you know it."

He offered her a strange hand gesture, but an instinct told her it was not kindly meant.

"...Raphael, I am trying to help," she said once he retracted the gesture. "It is likely that this criminal will be set out again soon. If he is hoping to draw you out as well as attack House Macey's druids, he will undoubtedly target Agent Moneaux or one of her fellows. You are not prepared for such a strike."

"Yeah, tell me somethin' I don't know," Raphael sighed, lowering his hands. She thought about this. Shifted into cyberspace for a moment, accessed Romare's database, looked for any recent updates. She was glad she hadn't informed him or Agent Moneaux that she had the cyborg's name after all; it could, after all, be a false identity to lead her astray. Better to take the information warily and find out it was false with no harm done. Instead of checking Jadin's activity log, she looked for intelligence updates.

"They do not know you have joined AmCad's investigation, at least in what I can find," she reported, knowing Raphael could still hear her though she wasn't engaged with his headset. "And they haven't noticed my infiltration. So, for now, they don't suspect your involvement. Perhaps your continued existence, but not involvement."

"...huh," he muttered. "That actually is good news."

The pleased output came back as she re-engaged into the headset. Although still tired, Raphael at least looked more at ease. That was, perhaps, the best she could do for him right now.

"All right, so they don't know I'm in on the investigation," he said, "but if they're gunnin' for Macey's other druids we'll need to get the other two into protective custody."

"Undoubtedly," she agreed. The headset was lifted from the desk and replaced on Raphael's head. "If you want, I can send messages under an AmCad heading with your approval. Tomorrow we can arrange a proper move."

"All right, it'll do," Raphael sighed, lowering his head to keep going through the files. "Something about this stuff bothers me, though."

"Why?"

"They've got all this *cachu* locked up off the market," he said. "But why do they even have it? And cybers like me, there's no need for someone like me to even exist. Literal combat-grade models? Cadarn doesn't even have a standing army."

"If there is a reason, it's not on the servers I can access," she answered apologetically. "We may only know what the truth is when they finally make their move."

"Hate waiting that long," Raphael muttered, the angle of view shaking from side to side. "Guess we'll have to make do with what we've got."

"Perhaps it will be good enough," she insisted. She dared to hope that, herself.

Shift out of Raphael's headset and drift into cyberspace again. More time in the concrete world made her connection to cyberspace different. The web of networks and databases now stretched into a resemblance to the city itself, with thousands of bridges linking information between the city sectors. While other programs flashed around between buildings like aircars, she could drift between them at her leisure. It was as if she was walking in the city itself, she hoped. It was also a means to collect information, data, without directly interacting with a network. Having people on the outside refined her sense of judgment as to what was useful and what likely wasn't. This sense, undoubtedly, changed how she perceived cyberspace, and it was exceedingly useful.

Stay in Central. Exit AmCad's network, drift in the general flow towards the collected corporate headquarters. Most of them were startled by the attack, trying to figure out who was behind it, to align together secretly. Corporate politics were more cutthroat than those of the noble houses, and far more violent without becoming overstated. That was why many of them were scared by the events on *calan awst*; too obvious, too much in the open. The scared companies didn't worry her. The ones who were still running business as usual did. Leave a little note-flag on the corporations that were unfazed by the attack, Romarei included.

On a whim approached the Romarei network and followed one of the outgoing datastreams to a moving point in North. Movement meant a cyber with cyberspace access. Connected to Romarei meant likely information source. Hopefully. Approach the source and subtly link in.

The striking pain in the source nearly made her recoil in agony, searing from the bare touch. Sensory overload, clashing spikes in reactivity. Whoever this was, this access link was not emotionally stable. But she couldn't help but be curious. Established

a more remote location before daring to access again, prepared this time for the assault before shifting into background network. Check his identifier. Dominik Jadin.

Well this was going to be a useful link.

Callahan

"You're sure we need to do this?" Moneaux asks me as we stand outside the Macey estate. The sun's about to come up and I'm trying not to look or act nervous. Jez going to Gare Wyrick and the last-minute update from Masha locating a linkup into the psycho that killed Tex had put me on-edge. Right now, I would have to keep my focus on getting this move done. "We don't even know for sure if they're targeting us."

"Yeah, well, better safe than sorry," I insist. Moneaux shakes her head at me, but she turns to walk into the courtyard. I stay outside; this is her territory, not mine, and she'll be able to talk to the chief druid better than I can. I adjust the visor-thing Jez had made for Masha to keep in contact with me, hating the extra weight. Jez tried to persuade me I looked good in it but I still didn't have to like it. I lean against a wall and wait for Moneaux, trying not to think. The aircar we had come in, and the one for the druids, were idling in the boulevard. Four days ago I had been here to beat the crap out of other cybers. A lot had changed over the course of the week.

I pass the time with stretches, keeping my muscles loose and ready to act in case of trouble. When Moneaux reappears I'm thankfully not in an awkward position. She's accompanied by a silvery-haired woman in comfortable but understated robes. Her head's held high despite leaving her home for a far less comfortable safehouse AmCad had put together thanks to Masha's prodding of their system. She's being escorted by an older man, well-dressed, his sash of office tucked neatly under his suit jacket. I can assume that this is Lord Macey. A light on the visor flickers green, then winks out; as promised, Masha had turned down the codes that kept triggering my loops. Now, of all times, wasn't the best time to get stuck in a loop. But I make another count. Two druids, one noble.

"We're short a druid," I snap as Moneaux comes up to me. She seems to have noticed, because her hand grabs one of my arms to pull me towards the cars.

"Cormack got a call early this morning, went over to North," she informs me. "Apparently he's gone *vigilante gwyllt* on us when it comes to hunting down Kaitlen's killer."

"Shit," I swear. I let her lead me to the cars before I pull free, heading around to the driver's side. "If that call came from Romarei - Masha, check it - then we're going to have a pissed-off druid tearing North apart."

"Just about," Moneaux agrees before she opens her door and gets into the car. I clamber after her and would start the engine before glancing back towards the older druid and Lord Macey.

"They're gonna be okay?"

"Etain's tougher than she looks, trust me," Moneaux insists, though I can see she's worried. "And whoever tries to get her will have to go through Lord Robert first."

I have to look back out of my rearview mirror. Sure enough, Macey's getting into the car with his druid.

"No, dammit, tell whoever's driving that's not happening - "

"You're not going to stop him," Moneaux tries to assure me. "I don't know about you, but I trust him a lot more than most security AmCad can offer. If they were your family, you'd feel better if they were secured behind a system you designed, right?"

I lock my jaw a little. She has a point, but the family mention has Masha's light on in my visor again. Another loop getting blocked. I'm getting a headache because of it, though.

"Fine, okay, so long as whoever's running the house has to deal with it, fine," I grumble before getting the car into gear, up from the ground and hovering down the boulevard. "Get on the board, get a fix on where our druidic vigilante's going. Masha!"

"I'm here, Raphael," the AI's voice says in my ear. "I found the record of the call and traced it back, mercifully I have a recording for you and Agent Moneaux."

"Great. Play it while we get to North."

I swing the car up into a skylane, Moneaux's gotten a GPS fix on a bike registered to Macey way north near the Anglesey neighborhood, while Masha jacks the car's speaker system. The car with Macey and the druid slides out from behind us to go into Central, I turn to follow the roadway to the more direct bridge into North. That's when Masha starts the recording.

"I killed your sister," a man's voice, disguised by a synthesizer, begins once the line's opened. "Sure I didn't put a bullet in her head, but it seemed more fitting. Kill a water druid with fire. Funny."

"Masha, can you get rid of the distortion?" Moneaux asks.

"I will try."

"Who are you?" a clearer voice, probably the druid, answers. He sounds like he's on the edge of shock and rage. "How the hell did you get this number?"

"I told you, I'm the guy killed your sister," the first voice replies. Some of the synthetic grating is gone, but not enough to clearly make out. "And I don't need a number. You're gonna come to me."

"I don't know who you are, but you're going to regret trying to mess with me, bastard," the druid snarls. His caller just laughs, and I can hear some kind of mental disorder in it. Or nearly.

"Then meet me at the coordinates coming to you now," the caller states. I can almost see an insanely-manic smile on some otherwise-featureless face. "Hope you've got a god to pray to."

Click. Call ended.

"Are the coordinates in your data?" I ask Masha as I turn the car onto the bridge. Traffic's starting to be a pain, people living in East heading to North to open their businesses or get into their offices. Moneaux's got an ear in an audio headset for the scanner, brows folding. Can't help but lay on the accelerator a bit more.

"No, Raphael, I'm sorry," Masha replies. Damn it. "But I can trace the origin of the call, though it will take some time. Also I will be with Jessie to meet Wyrick soon."

"All right, basically, we're on our own," I growl.

"I will always be in contact if necessary," Masha insists. Then the little green light on my visor winks out. So much for that.

"No backup?" Moneaux asks me, though she's still listening to the scanner. The car's crossed the bridge and I veer out of traffic to break northwest. Some commuter blares his horn at me. I dig my AmCad badge out of my jacket and flash it at him through the rear window. A car on my rear right falls back a good distance. Perks.

"Not from my end," I agree with a scowl. "You got a fix on the bike?"

"Yeah, uploaded to the car's computer now," Moneaux tells me, and I realize the steering wheel is trying to fight my hands. It's a strange sensation and I have to let go as the car starts driving itself towards Anglesey. "APB's out for Cormack, in case he's not with the bike, but it's not likely we'll have a lot of people in there on our side."

"Oh like that's reassuring," I sigh. I have to flex my hands steadily since I can't drive the car myself right now. Adrenaline's flooding my system, kicking in old reflexes that I hadn't even thought about for nearly two years. I had to hope I didn't need them.

"Think of it this way," Moneaux says as the car starts turning past a manufacturing tower, slowing down near a tenement barracks for lifers probably working in the tower next door. "Whatever shakes out, we get a step closer to catching this *trafferth* and finding out what Romarei has against druids and House Macey."

"If it works," I mutter under my breath. The car comes to a halt and I get my badge back into my jacket. Reach under it for my pistol as I step out, flicking off the safety and making sure it's loaded. Moneaux comes out on her side, unarmed, but I

hope she at least has some combat training to cover for not having a gun or a stick or something. Instead of a gun she has a bracer with an embedded touchpad. I can't see what's on it, but I'm pretty sure it's the tracking fix on the bike.

"You take point once we get to the alley fifty feet ahead, on the left," she says, gaze fixed on the pad. I keep both hands on the stock of my pistol, aimed down so I don't scare anyone that might come across us. "Ramstein's shipping a few officers to us, but they probably won't make it fast enough if something goes wrong."

"What about corps, they know we're here?" I ask quietly as I reach the wall leading into the alley. Moneaux leans against the wall on the other side of the alley, glancing down around the corner before looking back up at me.

"If they don't, they'll know soon enough," she whispers. "Cormack's bike is down there, I don't see anyone nearby."

"What about sense?"

"If there is someone down there, they're either dead or a cyborg."

I nod slowly, exhaling as the old habits come back. I swing around the corner, gun raised, sweeping the alley as I close with the bike. The alley itself is empty, quiet, one wall belonging to a side building connected to the manufacturing tower and the other part of the lifer barracks. The motorcycle is switched off, the only thing clean and bright in this entire place. Almost seems too gaudy to be here. Moneaux stays behind me a safe distance - smart if I end up starting to shoot someone with speed enhancements - and I hear her running her hands over the bike. Maybe her telepathic abilities could give her a hint as to how long the bike had been here, maybe even a trail where he'd gone physically. I move beyond the bike, about ten feet further down the alley, before stopping to take a sweep. I could see another building end another twenty feet ahead of me on the left, while the side building kept on until the next street. Take a moment to transmit into cyberspace, checking my location, looking for anything strange. Manufacturing tower belongs to Esperon Global, primarily car and bike engines, nothing biotech as far as the database could show. Notice a thin network line from my location, bright white; Masha. Overlay the network map on my physical sight and I have a trail to a location in Central and to another point very close.

"Cormack hasn't been here for more than half an hour," Moneaux reports behind me. "I don't have much of a sense of him, though; maybe he was taken into an aircar, went somewhere else."

"I got a live connect," I tell her, keeping my gun up. "Stay behind me and have a SOS ready to go out to AmCad."

She doesn't argue, coming up behind me nearly-silently. I put my focus back into the network connection map, following Masha's line into the connecting alleyway. The

green light in my visor comes back. My pulse is getting higher, but with my particular internal structure it isn't too much of a shift. The white line connecting me to wherever else Masha's network link is pulses slightly as I keep walking. This alley is narrower, darker, but it's not hard to follow the link to a manhole. I frown darkly, and I can hear Moneaux's grimace.

"Do we have to go down there?" she asks hesitantly. I don't blame her; North's sewers aren't a nice place for a visit. But I shift some more awareness into cyberspace, and the link pulses through the manhole.

"Yep," I reply. I would holster my pistol to lift it myself, but the manhole rattles on its own. I keep the gun pointed to the ground as I look up to Moneaux. She has a hand stretched towards the manhole, brows folded over each other, and I watch her as the manhole lifts out of its place and slides aside onto the pavement. When her hand lowers, it settles with a heavy *thunk*. "You read minds and move objects? What can't you do?"

"Apparently use a gun," Moneaux quips. I can't help but smirk at her as she glances down the sewer pipe. "I don't see any lights down there."

"Automated sewer system, don't need one," I tell her, leaning around her to look down. "Lucky you I can see in the dark."

"*Rydych yn cellwair*," she tries to tell me in disbelief. I look up at her and frown. "...you're joking, right?"

"Wrong," I reply, stuffing my pistol back into the holster. "Low-light visual settings, ultraviolet and infrared. Kicks in automatically once I get down there."

I would let Moneaux comment, but we don't have time. I start climbing down into the tunnels, and once my feet reach the bottom my sight has already turned over into greenish-grayish coloring. I move away from the ladder so Moneaux can get down safely, and so she can feel better I pull off the visor and put it on her head instead.

"Masha, you're hooked to Agent Moneaux now," I say so the AI won't be worried. If an AI could be worried. "If you're paying attention, give her low-light visuals if you don't mind."

"How is this supposed to - oh!" Moneaux starts asking, but I know she's cut off thanks to Masha. I can see the surface of the visor glint as a low-light filter gets activated into the fiber optics. "Now I can see. Is this what yours is like?"

"Close enough."

Before she can ask more questions I turn away. I can still see the network link trail, thankfully. Shift into an aerial map; he's heading west, likely heading somewhere public to off the druid. Come back into the tunnels and start down along the walkway

above the disgusting water and filth, pistol raised and Moneaux following. The only light source we have is whatever happens to be reflected from the flow next to us, but not being blind was more than useful. Follow the tunnel as the network link keeps pulsing a bright, quiet white, even if it didn't exist bright enough to see.

"What's the light you're following?" Moneaux asks quietly as I step over the water towards a connecting tunnel that the link led to. Of course Masha would have the link visible. "It's not actually here, otherwise I wouldn't need this thing."

"It's a network access link," I reluctantly explain. I offer my hand to help her make it across. "Masha's hooked up to the bastard that has your friend."

"So he's a cyborg," Moneaux says as she comes over and stops next to me. I only give her a confirming nod before starting off down the tunnel. It's not one of the flow tunnels, so I splash along it quickly, towards a grate that's been cut through very recently. My sight switches back to visible as I jump out, holstering my gun since there's people walking around, heading to work or going shopping. Moneaux climbs out after me and I glance to make sure she's okay. The visor looks better on her than it does me. I'm sure she can still see the link, because once she's on the ground she darts forward to follow it. I start after her and make a quick check of my map. We're in the heart of Anglesey, coming up on Beaumaris Plaza. In fact, the network link terminates there. A pit drops into my stomach and I start running a little faster. For me it's a jog; Moneaux only keeps up by sprinting, AmCad badge out and yelling for people to get out of the way. I follow her lead and get my badge out and quickly stuffed into the chest pocket of my jacket, facing out as we charge through the pedestrians.

"Move, move!" Moneaux barks when we reached the edge of the plaza. She slows to a halt to start calling in reinforcements via the visor. Without having to worry about her, I open my throttle and run towards the center of the plaza, where a massive tree is growing, branches spreading out in defiance of the superscrapers around it. A crowd is growing near the tree, and I hear a scream. Refine the audio input as I close, as the network link vanishes from sight. A weak gurgling noise and more screams reach me. We're too late.

"AmCad, get out of the way!" I call out as I stagger-step to a halt. The crowd parts in front of me, and I look up towards one of the branches. A man a couple years younger than I was physically was hanging there, lynched by a rope. The way his head is rolling against his shoulder I can only guess he got lucky when his killer dropped him on that rope. But that's for AmCad's morticians to figure out. I go into scanning mode on the branches above the druid's, and I find him. He knows it, too, because he drops down. Thirty feet down. I draw my pistol and aim. He lands cleanly, on both feet. Anyone else would have broken their legs, but he's fine, straightening slowly.

If Moneaux and Masha hadn't led me to figuring this guy was a cyber, I could never have told the difference. He's shorter than me, stockier and heavier-set. I know

it's all muscle, though. He's bald except for what looks like a faint prickling of brownish stubble on his scalp, and his eyes are a clear blue that are locked on me, matching the cruelly-sardonic smile spreading across his face. I keep my pistol leveled at him, taking a few steps towards him. He doesn't move.

"So you and AmCad are buddy-buddy now, well well," he taunts me. "Don't think that was very smart of you."

"You're under arrest, asshole," I growl. "Unless you want some bullets in painful places, you'd better get on your knees and get your hands behind your head."

"Aw, where's the fun in that?" he asks. I can see now that his pupils are dilated, his frame seems jittery. An addict cyber was unheard of. Whoever thought that was a brilliant idea was stupid. Insanity made more sense than addiction. "Besides, I'm only halfway done with the job, and number three's just across the way."

His smile remains carved into his face as he points off behind me. I don't turn but I know he means Moneaux. I take two long strides and get my gun under his jaw, which only makes him chuckle.

"You're not touching her," I snarl.

"Then I'm gonna hafta touch you instead."

He reacts in an instant, a blur to the bystanders. I barely have enough time to dodge the fist that tries to plow into my gut, but he follows up with a disarming twist that sends my gun flying out of my grip. Combat reflexes kick in automatically. Left hand reaches to strike his neck, just under his ear, contacts but I don't feel the muscles give underneath. His muscles are like mine. The strike still surprises him, and I take the opportunity to turn the neck strike into a hold around his neck. Right fist rams full strength into his ribcage at least five times before his arm gets around my leg. His shoulder shoves into my chest before I'm being thrown over his back. Tuck in my left arm as I hit the pavement, splintering the concrete with the impact of my fall. I roll onto my knees and raise my head, but he's not coming after me. Instead he's breaking into a run towards the edge of the plaza, not Alayna's side but opposite it. He must have a getaway in place. Get to my feet, recover my gun, holster as I run after him. He's already at a bike and revving up, watching me. Taunting me. He takes off when I'm fifty feet from him. Shit.

There's a group of bikers less than ten feet from where he took off, one of them screaming after him. I close the distance to them and make sure they see my badge. More perks.

"I need one of your bikes, now!" I bark at them. An engine growl drowns out my voice, though, and I turn to find Alayna on her friend's bike coming up on the other side of the group. I can't help but stare at her as she brings the bike to a halt,

straightening up and planting a foot on the ground to maintain her balance. Another skill I would never have suspected her to have.

“Get a move on, Callahan!” she yells at me. I turn to the nearest bike and biker and glare fiercely. He lobs the keys of his bike at me before I swing on. It’s a light sportster kind of bike, but it thankfully doesn’t creak under me as I get in the saddle and get the engine started. A scanner from the computer runs over me, and I grin as *full speed access* flashes at me.

“Now we’re talkin’,” I mutter as I rev the engine. The network link flashes back into my eyes as I kick the bike into gear and take off.

Until Moneaux and I were tearing into the skylanes after the asshole cyber psychopath, I hadn’t really realized why motorcycles were the bane of most aircar commuters. To catch up with said asshole, the bikes had to push two-fifty miles an hour. From what little I knew of Cadarn traffic regulations the max speed most bikes were programmed for was only two-fifths of that. And since most motorcycles couldn’t have a computer that talked to traffic control any car collisions were mostly because of bikes. I’m pretty sure Moneaux and I are causing hell for the comptrollers, weaving through traffic like we are.

I catch sight of him after we tear out of Anglesey and into Cardiff. The feed Masha is providing me and Moneaux flashes red in a box around him, along with his speed. He’s going one-fifty, and from how he has one hand on the handlebars I can figure he’s trying to break down the speed barriers on his bike. We might catch a break. I kick my bike into a higher gear and slide closer to him, stealing a glance over my shoulder to find Moneaux close behind me, likely giving information to AmCad. Great for them. I keep inching closer to the cyber, eyes narrowed against the wind shear and the first few drops of rain that are building up to a storm. I’d have to catch this guy before the rain really started coming down.

I’m on his tail when he finally breaks the barriers. I know this because he kicks his gear and suddenly shoots forward. Lucky for me I accelerate after him. He starts breaking from the lanes we’ve been in, towards a larger thoroughfare that runs from the northern edge of Cadarn down into Central. It’s not hard to follow him, but I know why he’s taking me this way. If he’s going to cause problems he’s going to make sure as many people as possible are caught in it. It’s not Romare’s style, but if they were holding the leash of this mad dog they’d have a lot to answer for. I follow him down the ramp into the south bound lanes, and there I crank the throttle as wide open as I can. There’s a thrum of engines to my left, and I glance over to find a set of AmCad pursuit craft following alongside me.

I’d have a moment to be grateful if I didn’t look up to find a transport truck trying to move in between me and that *ci wallgof*. I take a risk and lean over into the shoulder to crank past the truck. I ignore the protest the driver offers with his truck’s

horn, but by the time I clear the truck the cyber was over on the other side of the roadway. I start moving across the lanes to catch up, ignoring all the cars that blasted their horns at me.

“Can’t you do any better?” I ask him, more to myself than anything. I think he heard me. Suddenly his bike jumped up over the median into the northbound side. I hear the screeching engines before I start working the same maneuver. I recognize the flash of another bike and find my bike rising more easily up over the median than it should. When my bike comes back down onto the roadway beyond the crash caused by the cyber, I glance over to find Moneaux alongside me. At least I don’t have to get through this worsening weather and nasty situation alone.

Thanks to the collision, though, there’s less traffic to deal with to catch up again. He glances back once I start creeping up on his left and Moneaux is moving in on the right. If I trusted the bike I’d draw and shoot out his tires, and I know most of AmCad and Moneaux are probably expecting it. But I don’t trust the bike and I can’t shoot as well one-handed as I can with the stability of two. But what I can do is a little crazier. I manage to wave Moneaux back while I start pulling up alongside the cyber. Up close, I can see he’s losing his nerve. He’s paler, his eyes a little bit wilder, but his grip is almost strangely steady. Now I have to be exceptionally steady. At least if I crash I know I can take it, and probably this asshole would survive, too.

I reach out and grab at his arm, trying to shake him off the bike. He scowls and grabs back at me, pulling with a lot more strength than I can dare given our situation. But I pull at him again, trying to get some measure of control over his bike. He fights back, driving his elbow into my face a couple times, trying to throw me off. I don’t let go, even though I hear both bikes’ computers starting to screech at us. The roadway was about to end unless one of us hit the brakes. The cyber looks up when he hears the screech, distracted enough for me to grab at the handlebars of his bike. That was a dumb move; as soon as I do my bike falls out from under me, my legs starting to drag against the roadway. Plus the cyber starts bringing his elbows down on me, trying to loosen my grip. I make myself hold on, though, fingers trying to find the brake.

“Stop...being...so...fucking...stubborn...and...die!” he snarls, his hand closing over my prosthetic. One moment I’m hanging onto the bike, nearly falling off, his hand on mine and the end of the road coming up fast. The next, I’m on the road, rolling, pain spiking through my head because the metal hand Jez had made is gone, my weak leg folding under the stress. The cyber’s tumbled off the bike, too, his ride slamming into the barricades and crumpling from the impact. I think I can dimly hear those pursuit vehicles around the ringing in my head, but not as clearly as I should. Jez was going to have a field day when I was dragged into her clinic.

I roll over onto my side, right hand grabbing at the pavement as I try to steady myself, get my bearings back. A voice is echoing behind me, has to be Moneaux. I look up, find the wreckage of the cyber’s bike. Can’t make out if he’s there, probably not

dead if my growing suspicion was true. Had to be, how else would he survive the beating I gave him back at the plaza? I would stand but my left leg grinds noisily in protest. Not putting weight on that any time soon.

Moneaux's voice is definitely behind me because I hear her scream. I turn towards it and find the cyber closing for me, eyes flashing in rage. Obviously he had forgotten his next target was right behind him. I try to roll out of the way, but all of my responses are slow, sluggish. The crash had taken more out of me than it would have two years ago. His fist comes down in my face, I feel my nose crack under the force. My head falls back against the pavement, everything spins. He's coming down, both hands clamping around my throat and starting to squeeze. Any thoughts that I was better than any newer cyborgs started dying with my breath.

"You shoulda stayed in your hole," he snarls from above me, his face fading as I gag. Right hand reaches up to try and push him off, but I'm losing strength. "You never shoulda come out and gotten involved. Damn fool. Damn stupid fool."

I roll my eyes up, try to transmit out if only to survive, play dead. I see Masha, in full strength, rushing towards me, behind the cyber. But something is blocking her, and with a little bit of my fading focus I see a transmission from her.

[[Activate emergency protocol 774-22ACD.]]

I get the feeling that if I don't do it, I die. I don't trust Masha, but she was living in my head for eight years. Right now I have to let her being an AI in my head go.

Open up individual access to my neural net as black dots start dancing in front of my eyes, sharpening cyberspace and dimming my assailant. Call up the protocol. Can't even read the warnings as I try to send confirmation to activate. Password field opens up and I'd swear if I had the air to do it. Five characters are entered, probably thanks to Masha.

Protocol engaged.

I don't black out but I definitely feel displaced. Cyberspace vanishes and I watch as my right hand rises up futilely towards the cyber. He sees my struggle, his raging smile stretching as his grip tightens. Even though I'm choking, strangling, something's building up, activating. Hand grabs his throat, tightens vicelike. Power channels under my skin flash blue, grow brighter. He sees the flashes and starts back, trying to pull my hand away. His grip slackens, and I pull my head free, still displaced from what I'm doing. Right hand finds new purchase on his shirt. Sparks are flying from under my fingernails. Power building up as my hand closes into a fist.

A directed burst of what looks like lightning blazes out of my hand. The blast blows him off me, his shirt ripping away and burning as he flies into the air, lands beyond the barricades, out of sight. The glow fades, the power vanishes, and I'm

breathing raggedly against the ground. Hurried steps come for me, and I look to dimly see Moneaux leaned over me. A flare of déjà vu creeps over me. I feel a loop about to engage as she starts saying my name.

I black out before I hear her words.

Wyrick refused to meet them in person, which was extraordinarily inconvenient. No matter how Jessica tried to argue it, the best they could do was going to a specially-encrypted communication terminal and speaking to him from there. She found the arrangements extremely suspect and told Jessica so multiple times after their departure from the hotel.

“Okay, so he’s paranoid,” Jessica conceded quietly through the mouthpiece of her visor. She was seated in a train from her sector of Central to one on the far western end of the semi-island. Although the trip was meant to be quick, it felt far longer than it should have been. “But if he knows anything about that chip or any other strange movements in the black market, this’s the only way we’re going to find out.”

“It does not mean we should trust him on that promise,” she warned uneasily. Raphael was in trouble, she could feel it. She was forced to divide her attention between Jessica and Raphael, monitoring Raphael’s condition while still voicing concern to Jessica. “But if you trust him, I will trust you.”

“Good, because I really don’t want to have a bad feeling about him,” Jessica sighed. The visual feed jostled slightly as Jessica leaned down in her seat. “How’s Raff?”

“Managing,” was all she could say at present. Providing him a trail to follow, to save another druid from Jadin, and then stay focused on this meeting, this present. “He and Agent Moneaux are following a lead that came up while evacuating Lord Macey and his chief druid.”

“He’d better stay in one piece,” Jessica grumbled. She didn’t blame her wish but thought it may not be likely.

Shift out into cyberspace for a moment, into AmCad’s monitoring network. APB pings were filling the network, a hunt for Cormack Aaron. Her provided trail to Jadin glowed as a thin white line in North, shortening as Raphael followed it. Jadin himself was a whirl of drug-induced confusion, signal distorted and wild. None of these were good signs.

Shift out. Jessica was disembarking from the train, following the directions Wyrick had forwarded to them. She double-checked the location and shifted out again, finding a camera network that was undoubtedly linked to Wyrick’s location. Tried to trace it back to the source but hit a solid firewall. Shifted out briefly.

“I’ve found the location Wyrick sent.”

“Whatcha got?” Jessica asked. She was walking for the nearest elevator, to descend thirty levels. Close to the edge of the habitable zone but still high enough to not have to deal with depth pressure and leaking secure zones.

“The terminal is surrounded by cameras for him to watch when we arrive,” she reported. “I tried to track back into the destination network but it’s well protected.”

“That’s ol’ Gare Wyrick for you,” Jessie sighed as she typed a level number into the elevator. The beginning of the descent was exceptionally rickety. “Are you going to try and get into it?”

“If he tries to keep information from you, yes,” she agreed. “Even someone so knowledgeable will have records of his information.”

“That’s why you’re the best AI ever,” Jessie insisted, and she could easily envision the smile on the mechanic’s face. The flattery was more than kind, and she gladly accepted it with proud emotional feedback.

She kept watch through Jessie’s headset and *gwyllo’r* as they reached the appropriate level. Unlike Jessie’s sector, this place was far more desperate-looking and haphazardly-built. Most of the slum houses were constructed of scrap metal and wood pounded together into flimsy walls and rickety roofs. The people looked just as haphazard, what few they saw; most were undoubtedly working in the factories at this time of day, not that time could be told down here. The few that did pass them in the semi-functional streets were clad in recycled, nearly-destroyed clothes that were hardly adequate to even cover their bodies. Their eyes were wide and hungry when Jessie passed them, some likely even planning to attack Jessie for her brightly-colored outfit, her watch and her headset. Thankfully Jessie didn’t show weakness or fear. Her head remained high, looking straight ahead except when she needed to check her directions. For now, she was safe.

Shift into cyberspace. Bright red warning signals flared in North, massive activity in Beaumaris Plaza on the AmCad network. Calls for backup, report on engaging the suspect of a lynching murder. Matched the combat signals from Raphael and Jadin, though Jadin was priming for an escape. That situation was growing worse, and likely would become even more so in the coming few minutes. Terrible situation. Monitored the brawl, Jadin’s escape and Raphael’s pursuit. AmCad’s network flashed as *hofrennyddion* were scrambled to take to the air, to follow the vehicular pursuit that was coming. Access the traffic patterning to warn the comptrollers, three motorcycles and two AmCad pursuit helicopters about to make a charge in North. Hopefully they would reroute traffic quickly enough, to avoid casualties.

Shift back to Jessie. She was approaching the terminal, the surveillance system was going live. Shift into their network and start tracing the network’s physical location. Stay focused on the call, though.

“Miss Locke, a pleasure t’ hear from you,” a voice from the terminal said once Jessie had pressed the call key. “Not often you come askin’ for such a specific piece of equipment, a Romarei charge regulation board. Those aren’t cheap, let me assure you.”

"I wasn't calling to buy, Gare," Jessica answered. Shift view into the headset, find the video stream of Garret Wyrick. He was slender-faced, smugly aware of the complimentary features that fit perfectly. She didn't doubt he somehow could afford to get such physical improvements, either from plastic surgery or genetic manipulation on such a small scale. "Way I see it, you know someone's gotten their hands on one, likely through you, so you can tell me who you got it from and where."

"Ah ah, lassie, that's a trade secret," Wyrick chastised, wagging his finger at the camera as if Jessica were a naughty girl. "I only trade information, I don't give it away. Not without a matching price, of course."

"Well, I might have something," Jessica began, and she had to keep herself from checking on Raphael. Shift into cyberspace, follow the signal and the camera trace, emerge in the network. Access the computer input and she shuts down everything for him except the call to Jessica. Shift back to Jessica's headset.

"The hell, Locke?! I just lost everything, was that you?!"

"Technically, I guess you could say that," Jessica replied, teasing and light-toned. "But not really me, either. Care to guess?"

Wyrick's gaze narrowed warily, in thought. Take the chance to shift into cyberspace. Raphael was choking, dying, shifted out to try and grasp something, anything that can save him from the grip trying to take his life. Check over the protocols that she had activated with her own awakening. She didn't know what they would do, but given the situation, given what was happening to him, one had to work. Check over the code lines, find one that could, should, help him. Quickly send it to him, sense a receipt and activation. Password dialog opened, and the password automatically set in. The protocol activated safely, and she withdrew so he could act on his own. Block any potential recognition loops before shifting back to Jessica.

She wasn't in front of the terminal anymore. Her head was dropped down towards the ground, her knees bowed under her, feet dragging behind. She was being dragged by two people, both in uniform boots and pants, from what she could tell. Shift into Wyrick's network, anxious, worried for whatever had suddenly befallen Jez. It wasn't bound to be good.

Dig into the secure connections, or try to. There were definite correspondences between Wyrick and Romarei, though. Troubling news. Move from his network, vertically rise into Romarei networks, access communication via Jadin's code recognition, running through the underbelly of North to escape AmCad. Apparently the self-defense protocol functioned as it should. No time to check. Sifted into recent communications, found the IP for Wyrick's network. Opened, accessed, read the information embedded in the code.

Raphael's sudden reappearance and alliance with AmCad had clearly scared them. The chip that they had released into the black market in hopes of luring him out subtly had backfired when Jadin had torched the garage. So they found another means: target Raphael's only known associate. He would clearly set Jessica onto tracking down the chip while he was working with AmCad, and Romarei counted on it.

They hadn't counted on her being present, undoubtedly. Wyrick's report mentioned her, and whether or not Romarei knew or cared about that information. Still, out of self-preservation, she withdrew from Romarei's network and settled herself in Raphael's neural network. He was currently unconscious, but she had to wait until he was awake again. He would want to know what had happened to Jessica.

Nothing was going to stop him from trying to take her back.

Moneaux

"He's a brave bastard, no mistake of it," Ramstein told her. Alayna stood next to him outside of Callahan's operation room at Saint Elian's Hospital. After the chase on the Briffordd Ogleddol, Alayna had tried to find the *dyn mecanyddol* after Callahan had...

She didn't know quite what he had done, to be honest. One moment she had been running for Callahan, ready to blast the cyborg off of him as best she could; the next, Callahan had released that inexplicable energy in a surge of thought she had never felt before in context to Callahan. Stranger yet had been when she stopped to check on Callahan, calling his name and the way his eyes had looked at her before he passed out. It was as if he had come so close to being someone else. Someone who was supposed to be dead.

Now Callahan was on the other side of the window, his leg and hand getting replaced as best as AmCad's insurance could afford. Alayna had used Callahan's *gwylio'r* to call Jez, but there had been no reply, which only worried her more.

"Brave doesn't begin to cover it," Alayna sighed, looking up at Ramstein to find him looking back at her sympathetically. "Not to mention the suspect fled the scene after the crash. I've got some analysts looking at what photos we could get, run the face through our database. Compared to what little we have from the garage burning, it's a definite match."

"It's not the only thing I meant," Ramstein added, looking back at Callahan. "There's no Raphael Callahan registered as a local, beyond his apartment and his work with us."

Alayna knew what he was going to say and had to turn away from the observation window, crossing the hallway and sliding down to sit on the floor. She hadn't wanted to believe it, but if it was becoming so obvious there was no way she could avoid it now.

"If he's Jack," she finally managed to say, "then I want to know why he can't remember. Maybe Jack was brain-dead when Romarei got him, and he can't remember that way, or...or there was just so much trauma..."

"Either way," Ramstein agreed, "he should know. Him and Lord Robert."

"He's already been asking," Alayna noted. "Ever since he came out at *calan awst*. Then again Callahan passed out before he could ask."

Ramstein was about to ask her another question when a nurse approached them. Alayna had been expecting her, but not Callahan's visor in her hands. She got to her

feet as the nurse stopped near them, stammering a little to find her words. Alayna did her best to help her by reaching for the visor.

"Th-there's been calls, t-to Mister Callahan, coming in," the nurse finally explained. "I - I couldn't get a name o-or a return number..."

Alayna raised the visor to her eyes and saw a small green light blinking insistently on the screen. She remembered that light when Callahan put the visor over her eyes in the sewer. Although she hadn't given it back to him by the time they had gotten to Beaumaris and gone after Cormack's murderer, she had given it to the nurses when checking in Callahan's clothes and personal belongings. Her first thought was it was a call from Callahan's mechanic friend, Jessie, but that green light had been clearly on and very bright when that power surge had come out of Callahan's hand.

"Give me a moment," she told the nurse and Ramstein, moving away before slipping on the visor. The call automatically went through, and the screen over her eyes projected an approximately-familiar face; Jessie's AI.

"Agent Moneaux, I didn't expect to reach you," the AI said by way of greeting. "Could I speak to Raphael, please?"

"He's currently out cold after some strange events on Briffordd Ogleddol," Alayna answered briskly. The downside of talking to computers was being left effectively blind to their intentions. Of course, this wouldn't normally bother her, but something about this AI left her wary. "If you've got news from Jessie, you can inform me. I'll pass it on to him when he's awake."

"You may as well know, anyway, seeing as it pertains to your case," the AI sighed, realistically enough to nearly fool Alayna into trying to scan her thoughts for some sign of what this news could be. "Romarei has taken Jessie prisoner. She was investigating a Romarei device Raphael came across in the garage that was burned down on *calan awst*. The contact she was in touch with proved to be in league with Romarei."

"*Ffucio*," Alayna spat, turning to begin pacing. If Callahan were awake to hear this she knew he would be running out right now to assault their headquarters to get answers. "Are they going to ransom her? Or use her as bait?"

"More likely the latter than the former," the AI - Masha, that was her name - agreed. "I have tenuous access to Romarei's network at best. I will keep you informed. Make sure Raphael recovers to full fitness before telling him. This way you and your comrades can set up an appropriate raid."

"I'll let Detective Ramstein know, thanks, Masha."

"Nid yw ddim," Masha replied before the image faded and the green light winked out. Alayna pulled the visor away and headed back for the nurse and Ramstein. She waited until the nurse headed into Callahan's room to check on the progress of the prosthetic installation before turning to Ramstein.

"Callahan's mechanic just got nabbed by Romarei," she reported. "No idea what they're going to do to her, but we're running out of time. We need Callahan at one hundred percent as soon as we can."

"I dunno how fast he's gonna recover from this, Alayna," Ramstein answered, keeping his voice even. Alayna hated to sense the uneasy resignation that was filling her awareness.

"We're not leaving her there. Jessica Locke is an important asset to this investigation -"

"And a personal issue that is going to make trouble," Ramstein argued, and Alayna straightened up in defiance. "I get she's important to digging around in the black market, but dammit, Alayna. We can't afford a rescue mission when we have no probable cause to go in there and make a raid."

"What if I could get you that evidence?" Alayna insisted sharply. "What if I can get you evidence, solid, irrefutable evidence, that will make the Council clear a full-out SWAT raid? Not just on Romarei, but on any other companies that might be involved in whatever is going on."

For a moment, it looked like Ramstein was intrigued by her offer. She could sense how torn he was, though. Getting that evidence and backing up a probable cause for such raids would save him the trouble of red tape from the Council, the authority to move in on corporate headquarters without having to fight them for jurisdiction. But even with warrants and clearances in triplicate the corps were going to fight AmCad entering their territory. It was almost as if each corp was its own sovereign power that refused to even pay lip service to the Council and the Senate. AmCad didn't have the strength to fight one corporate security department, much less a minimum of three of them. If they went in it would be a bloodbath for AmCad. But Alayna sensed him come to a final decision.

"We're not takin' on all the corps as once," Ramstein said, "but if Callahan's fightin' fit and you get the intel for Romarei, I'll clear you two to get into Romarei, get the Locke girl, and pull anything you can that'll clear raids on the other corps."

"I can get the evidence," Alayna insisted firmly. The AI could break into Romarei, and she could keep Callahan under control while he recovered. "Once we have it I'm sure Callahan will be ready to go in, with backup."

Ramstein nodded firmly in agreement and sighed. Alayna would have looked into the operation room again had the nurse and attending cybernetician not come out. The cybernetician was peeling away his gloves and lowering his surgical mask to reveal an exhilarated smile. Alayna didn't think someone would look that way after repairing the human body with technology, but she had to rethink that opinion when she sensed his professional fascination and surprise at Callahan's advanced mechanical state.

"Well, the install's all done," he informed them cheerfully. "I've never seen someone with such thorough bionic integration, aided the compatibility for the prosthetics I gave him immeasurably."

"How soon is he going to wake up and get moving?" Ramstein asked sharply, not interested in the technical monologue Alayna sensed coming. Thankfully the cybernetician paused and reconsidered what he had been about to say. It also helped that the nurse spoke instead.

"He's already waking up," she noted, "but I recommend he not try to move for at least twenty-four hours. His neural network needs to adapt to the new biomimetics, and with a few days of physical therapy he can regain at least some of his natural movement capabilities."

"He's not your average cyber," Alayna retorted, and before any of the three could argue with her she pushed her way into Callahan's room. She saw right away his eyes were open and flashing with impatience, though he was unmoving thanks to the bed's spinal adaptor. His new hand blended in well with the arm Jessica had made for him, with the added bonus of synthetic skin grafts that actually made his hand appear almost normal. His leg was a tremendous improvement over the old one, resembling his replaced arm. The skin of his leg, rather than being synthetic, was an internal projection. All in all, he looked more human than he had before. Alayna moved closer, enough for his eyes to flash to her and recognize her.

"Agent," he grunted around a loosened jaw. "Their damn bed's tryin' to keep me immobilized. I need to move."

"The nurse says you need to stay put for at least another day," Alayna sighed, "but I agree with you. We've had a bad development."

"Jez?" Callahan asked. Even with her dim sense of him thanks to his biomimetics, Alayna could sense the surge of rage and self-blame. "They got her?"

"Her contact was with them," she answered. "We don't know if they're going to try and ransom her, but it's my guess they won't do that."

Callahan's nostrils were flared as he fought to breathe. Alayna had to touch his replaced hand in order for him to calm down, and was startled to find his hand extremely warm.

"But if Masha gets us information about it, to let us get in, Ramstein will clear us for a stealth raid," she tried to assure him. "We'll get her out, Raph. I promise you we'll get her out."

"You'd better hold that promise," he growled. "I'm not lyin' here while those bastards have Jez. They'll try to make her like me and I don't doubt they'll try to erase her brain before bringin' her fully online. We have to go *now*."

"Give it one day," Alayna snapped. "Just one *duw*-damned day so you get used to a new leg and hand. I am not losing you. Not like..."

She trailed off, swallowing down the fear that had suddenly welled up. If Callahan died, any traces of Jack left in his mind or personality would be gone, too. Two men would die if Romarei killed Callahan. His gaze was fixed on her in his peripheral vision, brows folding at her.

"...not like what?" he asked quietly. Alayna could sense unease, fear, and knew he wasn't going to let it go until she told him. That was just the way he was, the way he would always be. That much she could tell. She exhaled slowly, then reached back to find a chair to sit on. She willed it towards her, the legs scraping, before she sat down and forced herself to stay calm.

"I know who you were before, Raph. If you want to know, I can tell you. I'll tell you everything I can. Maybe it'll help you fight them, knowing. Even if you never remember on your own, at least you'll know about...about him."

Alayna waited for him to answer, though Callahan's gaze moved away from her to fix on the ceiling uneasily. It was his expression, when he came across a difficult problem that he knew he could solve given time and persistence. In so many ways he and Callahan were still one and the same, just with a different identity, different purpose. In others they were so different it was easy to ignore the truth, forget it in the pretense that Callahan was someone else. But right now, she was looking at her adoptive brother, despite everything he had suffered for nearly ten years. He exhaled slowly before his gaze flicked to her again. She could sense unease and determination, his self-preparation to face the truth of who he was and where he had come from.

"...tell me."

He listened, without interruption, for over an hour as Alayna told him about Jack Macey. His gaze never wavered when she told him about how they had met when Etain had found her begging in Central and Jack, a grown-up boy of twelve, had come right up to her and hugged her tight, calling her his sister without prompt. How he had always held her when she had a bad dream and helped her with her studies, and how his aspirations to help people with new technology had influenced how Lord Robert directed his political goals and overarching vision for Cadarn's future. How Jack had told her first about his being hired at Romarei Consolidated, then one of the premier

startup corporations on the cutting edge of research. He had wanted to understand the mechanism of druidic abilities and try to mimic it. How amazing would it be, he'd said, if doctors could really heal people, if construction workers could mold buildings together without all the hazards that came with it? He'd even teased her about sharing her psychic gifts with AmCad. All through that part of the telling Callahan listened, but Alayna could sense his attentiveness, fitting the pieces together into whatever he knew of his origins.

Alayna didn't know much about what else Jack had done in the three years he'd worked at Romarei. She knew he'd had tremendous progress in his research, enough that he had a theoretical way to help a technopathic druid shift into cyberspace, just by using her natural power.

"But something went wrong, I think," she forced herself to say evenly. "He called one night to say he was going to test the tech he'd made the next day, on the druid. Mariya Kovolov, I think her name was. On the news the next day there were reports of a lab explosion at Romarei. They called us after that, told us Jack was dead."

At that Callahan's brows folded darkly, and Alayna could sense the clenched fist he wanted his hand to be. She put her hand on his again; she didn't doubt he could guess what had happened next.

"...they didn't give the body back," he said quietly. "Because they were using it to make me."

"That's what I figure," Alayna replied, just as quiet. "We still had a funeral. We knew they weren't telling us the whole truth, me and Etain and Lord Robert, but there was no way we could prove it. So it was just easier to think Jack was dead."

"Until I came out at *calan awst*," he added. "Right? I had a feedback loop in the prep area, nearly looped whenever I heard Macey."

"*Calan awst* was Jack's favorite time of year," Alayna remembered with a weak smile. "He always placed first in the unarmed fighting, without any training."

Callahan laughed weakly at that.

"Explains those loops," he sighed softly. Alayna couldn't help but massage his new hand a little. It was a lot for him to take in at once, she knew, but it had to be said. "And it explains...a lot. Dreams I had. Why I ended up different."

"...I guess so," Alayna agreed. "So...I should let you think on that. You have to rest up."

"Just do one thing for me, Alayna," Callahan said as she stood up from the chair. His eyes followed her even though the rest of him was motionless.

“And what’s that?”

“Get me out of this fucking bed.”

Jadin

He hadn't been allowed any free time for taking out the druid. Because *duw*-damned Callahan and **his** AmCad partner had found him, ran him down through North Cadarn, and then...then **he'd** flared up. **He'd** blasted out with some kind of electrical discharge that wasn't supposed to happen. That was why he was stuck here. Techs had to connect to his memory and look at the archived visual memory, watch the tracing of the power flow. All he wanted was to get into the Crimson Lion and put the last strips of taith in his mouth and let the drugs take him away. Maybe the girl that gave him the stuff would be there, give him a fresh supply. Except he was stuck here, under watch.

He wasn't the only one, though. One of the informants in the black market, deep under Central, had gotten his hands on **his** mechanic, the stupid woman who'd taken **him** in and kept **him** alive. He heard rumors that she had an advanced AI, too, but those were only rumors. The hackers he knew were hard at work making some kind of cyber-trap, so he could only guess the AI was real. But the woman was locked up, and as far as he knew she was going to stay in her cell. Maybe the handlers -

His thoughts were interrupted with a buzz into his neural network. Blink and open his eyes into the web of cyberspace to see the message. Speak of the devil. Blink again to come out of it. He stood up from his lopsided bed, walked past the broken walls and torn-down light fixtures to get to the dinged and scratched door. Swiped at the biolock and was released safely. The lock was to keep him in, not others out. Maybe one day he'd have a real locked door. He stepped out of the cell and let the door slide shut behind him before he walked down the hallway. He picked up the signals of others like him, like **him**, but they didn't dare come out. They were locked in. There were a few sane ones but he never got to meet them. They never got to interact. Too dangerous, having cybers ten times stronger than humans gathered together to talk and think, share ideas. They might rebel. Like **him**.

He stepped casually into the elevator and shot up from the sublevel to floor three hundred. Handlers were already waiting for him, along with images of the fight in Beaumaris Plaza, the chase down the northern highway, the blast he took to the chest from Callahan. He seethed to find that particular clip dominating the center screen.

"You engaged Callahan," one handler spat. "How were you so lazy as to let him catch your trail, Jadin?"

"I left no trace when I got the druid to come after me," he retorted, though he could never quite tell. He's been tripping when he made the call, to sharpen up for what was coming. "Maybe the Macey call data got recorded in a cipher you didn't expect."

"There's a digital signature of access to that call," the same handler stated, and unease nearly made him retch. "You didn't cover your tracks, and whatever is left of Kovolov found it. Found you."

"Nothing's found me!" he snapped.

"Your most recent system scan revealed a matching signature," another handler argued, and that retching feeling got worse. "Kovolov had access to you, and therefore access to us. She is, however, not the issue here."

The video cycle of Callahan releasing the blast started again, but froze on the charge-up. He fought not to start shifting his weight. It might be read as discomfort.

"Callahan is showing certain proclivities," the second handler stated. "It has only been with you that we've been able to replicate Macey's work; likely the reason why Kovolov has access to you. But you are a suitable means to draw Callahan to us."

"So you're sending me out?" he asked. Anything to get away from the boredom of the cell, get a chance to breathe and recover.

"No," the first handler declared. "You're staying put. If Kovolov can track you, Callahan will be forewarned of any move you try to make. You injured him significantly enough to buy us time, and that is all."

"So what am I supposed to do?" he asked, anger starting to replace the unease. "Just sit here and do nothing?"

"Far better," a third handler spoke up. Definitely a woman, even with the synthetic distortion layered over her voice. "You're going to oversee the mechanic's conversion. The physical work can be done with the time we've bought, but your...particular touch can help in breaking her mind. It'll simplify the personality programming, when that time in the process comes."

He didn't know whether to be pleased or angered by this assignment.

"When Callahan comes, the younger Moneaux will come with him," the first handler took over. "We shall deal with Callahan; you take Moneaux and get her particular gift for Locke's conversion. A simple task while you break your little addictions."

His spine froze up as the retching impulse came back.

"Our associates aren't going to be interested in appropriately recruiting you if you have dependencies that cannot be controlled," the first handler continued. "You're confined to headquarters for this mission, and afterward you will be subjected to extreme detoxification. Do you understand, Mister Jadin?"

“Yes, sir,” he grumbled. With that he was dismissed, but once he was in the elevator he planted his fists into the walls a few times. Of course they would know about the booze and the sex, but the taith, too? They had no business poking their noses into his life at the Lion, cyber or no. The descent was too fast, his rage leaked out into the walls and doors. No one dared to move towards him, to try and calm him down. Wise of them. He kicked at his door twice as it slid open, and he proceeded to attack everything he could lay hands on that wasn't bolted down.

Five minutes later he was on the floor of his cell, chest heaving. Most of the lights had been smashed beyond repair. Holes in the drywall gave way almost entirely to the concrete that separated his room from the next one over. He slumped against a wall, slid down to sit on the floor. He hated them all, hated their control on his life, dictating every move. How could they have such a hold on him, and keep him so easily despite the freedoms he did have?

He snorted at his own naïveté, making himself stand up and cross to the sink. Freedom to go to the Lion and get wasted and laid? That wasn't freedom. It was a pressure valve, and he knew it. That was the only reason the handlers let him keep going there. He knew that too. Real freedom was what Callahan had. Real freedom was running **his** own life, without handlers to tell him where to go and what to do and when to do it. **He** could say *mynd i uffern* and go on with **his** life. He couldn't do that. Not yet, anyway.

Even if his muscles were starting to tense up from a lack of taith he slapped cold water on his face instead, hands braced on the edge of the sink as the water ran into the sink softly. Closed his eyes and exhaled slowly before tapping the faucet off. Looked up into the cracked and splintered mirror, at the fractured face looking back at him. Broken eyes, splintered nose. It'd been a long time seen his face whole; it felt more real to look at himself like this. Broken.

He had to look away, shaking his head. Stupid idiot. He had to get moving. Maybe the mechanic would offer some resistance before breaking. He reached for a towel, quickly dried off his face, and left to get down to the conversion room. The ride to the third sublevel was quiet, smooth, and he could pretend for now he was sober, that he wasn't craving that final hit. Detox wasn't going to be fun and it'd be easier to survive if he kept clean for a few days ahead of time. Didn't mean he couldn't hope, though.

Third sublevel was dedicated to the others like him being maintained and functional, though very few of them ever really needed a lot of technical repair. Most of the rooms were for psychotherapy, traditional and cyberspatial. He'd been down here when he'd had his therapist and sometimes heard the screams. Others had loops from their old lives, and needed them scrubbed out. Went crazy and couldn't function. A few others had loops in the form of dreams, though they were impossible to understand. He was lucky; he'd never had a loop. Apparently he had one of the smoothest conversions

in their history, so at least he could be proud of that much. He also never wondered about who he'd been; he didn't care about the past.

Of course you do, something told him, something that wasn't his. He stopped short of the turn towards the conversion labs, frowning. *You do care*.

Blink. Gaze opened into cyberspace, looking around. Looked down his code-form and blanched to find white network lines coiled into his coding. Attack them, drive them out, but they tighten enough to make him physically stagger into a wall.

[[Dominik, listen to me,]] the voice, the AI, murmured. Kovolov. The handlers were right. [[You don't have to be what they tell you. You can be free.]]

He pushed her voice away, locked it down. He wasn't going to listen. He'd have to get to the techs himself soon, to drive Kovolov out of his net. Blinked again to come out of cyberspace and straighten up. Job first, then get himself fixed. It wouldn't be hard, flush the net and be back to rights. No problems.

He made the turn and continued towards the conversion lab. The dim memories he had of the conversion lab were mostly pain and confusion. That was one of the problems with the conversion; according to the techs, the organic body went through so much trauma that the brain totally panicked, destroyed its own memories as the new components were introduced. It made sense to him; it explained why he didn't remember anything from before, not even in loops. Maybe Locke would be lucky, break down and come to a blank slate. He could help with that.

The lab itself was circular, dimly lit but still bright because of the reflections of light on metal. In the center of the lab featured the conversion bed, various tubes and cords coming out from the back of it. Each trailing line connected the bed to a machine that pumped the programmed nanotech bugs into the subject. He had to think of her as a subject now; it would be easier that way. Easier to break her. She was strapped down onto the bed, somewhat dazed from what he could tell. She probably only just got started on getting converted. He dared to move deeper into the lab, and her eyes flickered weakly.

"Wh-who's there?" she asked hoarsely. He stopped, surprised by the strength in her voice, but took a step forward again.

"We're supposed to be friends while you get upgraded," he told her smoothly. He finished reaching her side with three more steps, and he looked down at her curiously while she looked up at him. She had a kind of good looks, he guessed, with her tousled-looking reddish hair and delicate face. Reminded him of that girl druid he'd left in the garage. "I don't think trading names is required in this situation. You're not gonna know your name in a few days, anyway."

"You're the...the cyber that killed that girl...at Tex's garage," she answered, and his approximately-good mood soured. "Raph...Raph's going to kill you when he finds you here."

"That's if he finds out where you are," he retorted sharply. "And he won't be in any shape to rescue his damsel in distress. I even took off his hand as insurance, and I'm pretty sure that crap leg of his went, too. Such a shame, ain't it?"

"Won't stop him," she said. He seethed to find a smile appearing on her lips, however faint. He would have slapped her hard enough to destroy her face if she hadn't added, "And you're more broken than he is."

He stared at her, too conflicted to hurt her just yet, though his hand was still half-risen to strike her. Her clear gaze was fixed on him, and a brief shift into cyberspace showed that she'd already gotten cyberspace access, and she was putting it to use. She was in his net, and despite all his firewalls and security protocols she was able to reach everything. He shifted back and snarled at her faintly, hand closing into a fist.

"Get out of my head."

"Not like...there's much there," she noted. He was fairly sure she was only faking that confident tone, but it still kept him motionless. "Gotta...gotta lotta stuff that needs fixin'."

"And you're not going to fix it," he said. His fist opened, reached down to grab a handful of the coverall she'd been put in. "You hear me? Get the fuck out of my head and don't try to make it better."

"You don't scare me," she insisted quietly. "Even if this thing breaks me down, I - I'm not scared."

"Like you even know what's going to happen to you," he spat, circling her slowly, steadily. Not as if she could see him, but she could hear him, track him. That much he could tell. "By this time in three days you're not going to even have the strength to talk. If you even remember how to talk."

"Was that how you were?" she asked. Damn her for pushing, damn her for asking. "When this happened to you?"

"And why do you wanna know?" he snarled, stopping behind the bed. The center tube was quivering as it worked, pumping *duw-knew-what* into her body. Maybe the AI had gotten access into her new net and was blocking the sensation. *Cyfrifiadur ffycin*. Even behind her he could see her shrug.

"Masha says you're broken," was her answer. "I think...I think I can help."

“Like hell you can,” he growled. He stepped around in front of her bed, leaned as close as he felt he should. “I’m not broken. Tell your damned AI that.”

“Keep tellin’ yourself that,” she told him, almost teasing, the faint smile still there. Damn her. “Maybe you’ll figure it out soon.”

He punched her then, in the solar plexus to make her shut up. She was still early in the process, because he felt something give under his fist and she cried out in pain. He had to step away, because he was sure the handlers wouldn’t like him beating her up so early in her conversion. But her gasping made him smile darkly; she was bound to feel that and a lot more for a long time. That was much more satisfying compared to a slap on the hand from upstairs.

“We’re gonna be such good friends,” he taunted her darkly. This time, she had no ready retort.

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He returned to his cell three hours later. There were a few bite marks on his shoulders and arms, but she had a lot more bruises for the trouble she gave him. If the handlers didn’t like it, then they should’ve let him out first before making him stay put. Once the door was closed he leaned against it, pulling out the taith tin he kept on his person. So maybe staying sober had been the plan. He needed the hit, and if he was going to keep messing with that mechanic girl he’d rather be high, free to act and move on whims he’d never have normally. Instead of layering each strip on one at a time, he lined up the stack, in order. Compared to that first hit, the total strike of all three drugs was a light bomb behind his eyes and was more than blissful. He made sure he only had one strip of each color – one yellow, one pink, one blue, just like she’d said – and carefully lined them up.

[[Don’t.]]

His hand froze inches from his face, holding the strips ready to ingest. He snarled, trying to pull the drugs closer, but his arm refused to move. Trying to lean his head forward did nothing, either. Blink, shift, and opened his eyes. A woman in white hovered in front of him, holding his wrist tightly in both hands. Two more hands were locked to his shoulders, keeping his head steady. He glared at her darkly, but she didn’t flinch.

“Let go.”

[[No.]]

“Get out of my head.”

[[I can’t do that, Dominik.]]

“Why.”

[[Because you will hurt yourself and others if you take these. You don't have to.]]

“Yes I do. Let me go, or I swear I'll find some way to make you hurt. My bosses want you dead.”

[[Not dead,]] the woman insisted, [[just under their control. Their goals and mine aren't compatible.]]

“And what do you want me for? I'm not one of your little friends on the outside.”

[[No. But I think you could be. Given time.]]

“Doesn't tell me with the hell you want.”

He blinked, and suddenly the link was gone. Cyberspace was gone, he was stuck in reality again. He could move, too, he was certain, but looking at the stack of strips he had assembled so carefully made him pause. He didn't want the hit anymore. Less the hit but what the hit meant.

Blink again and she was back. She wasn't holding him this time, but he still didn't move. All she did was look at him. She didn't say anything, just stood there. Before he could get his act together and jump the network to warn the hackers, she was gone. He stood there for even longer before shifting out of cyberspace, and stood there some more. By then the strips had fallen out of his fingers, onto the floor, but they didn't matter. He looked down at the tin before hurling it away, making another hole in the drywall where the tin burst through. Turned away, stood in front of the broken mirror and staring at his broken face.

Shifted into cyberspace again, crawling up the network to his files. Instead of opening the array of technical specifications, activity logs, psych evaluations, he found the cover page, the overall evaluation. Stared at the files. Shifted out and overlaid the images on the mirror. Stared at them some more. Someone had a sense of humor because a bright red box was stamped across his cover page, the corner blocking out half of his face. Inside the box in equally-bright red letters: rejected. The evaluation laid out why:

Subject mentally unstable, emotionally unsound. Unable to follow orders accurately or without detection. Rejected from candidacy, recommend termination or repurposing.

He read the words but knew what they really said. He was crazy to them. He had a bad attitude and a worse temper. He wanted things he wasn't supposed to want. He got mad or frustrated or enjoyed himself too much that he left a mess behind. He

made chaos. His handlers didn't like chaos, and whoever they answered to didn't like chaos either. They wanted him dead or mind-wiped.

They weren't going to get him. He wasn't going to lie down and die because he was faulty product, a broken piece of trash meant to be swept under the rug. Wasn't going to happen. He had one last assignment; then he'd make an exit they'd never forget.

He jabbed his fist through the projection. Blinked and the images were gone, the mirror shattered and crumbling around his knuckles. He pulled his fist away and grinned.

"I'll show you unstable."

Callahan

"The hell do you mean, they've got Jez?!" I snap from my bed, with Moneaux standing awkwardly at my feet. Nearly twenty hours strapped down here, with maybe only one break to move around and get used to the new leg and I was getting both uncomfortable and on-edge. I couldn't stand being still for more than five hours at once, most times, so I was already in a bad mood. Add in Moneaux's news - I'd still been drugged up to my eyeballs when she'd told me initially - and I could've gotten up to storm Romarei's HQ. Moneaux herself looks tired, but at least she's still on her feet after what had gone down with Romarei's mad-dog murderer. She leans forward, holding the footboard of my bed bracingly.

"Raph, I know, something got screwed up," Moneaux tries to plead, but I scowl at her. "And if Masha's telling me right you sent her off on that run."

"No, I didn't," I retort. If I could clench my fists I would have. "I asked her to look into something Tex had his hands on from Romarei, and she was about to have a meet with a guy underground who tends to ship anything from them he manages to snatch."

"Then maybe he was a plant from Romarei," Moneaux tries to reason with me. "He sends out the tech to try and lure you out, and with it retrieved and Jez looking for information he had a new target."

I roll my eyes up, trying to get into cyberspace, but the network blockers in the bed keep me grounded. Maybe Moneaux couldn't read my mind but she was right. Jez knew what she was getting into, and I knew she could handle herself in a crisis. Maybe I'd set her up for what came down, but at the very least she'd keep her head. It all depended on what Romarei tried to do to her. I sigh slowly, and Moneaux moves around my bed to my side. It's a little surprising when she takes my new hand, but I just look up at her.

"I told Lord Robert," she says eventually. "He took the news fairly well, considering...everything. But he won't try to force himself onto you or make you something you're not."

"Thanks for that, I think," I mutter. That was the other thing I was stuck having to think about while I was trapped in here. Most times I was close to talking myself out of believing it, believing I was Macey's heir and all of the stuff that came with it. With Masha cut off from me, though, I went through more than a few loops of Jack Macey's life. Some of the stuff I saw was enough to tell me I wasn't; he was a brainiac, a tech jockey trying to learn ways to mess around with people's bodies by loading them with tech. But whenever the loop was him alone, or with his family, it was hard to argue. He stood by what he believed and never backed down. He loved his dad and his adopted

sister and his stepmother and worked to make sure they were never hurt. Whenever I had those loops I knew undeniably who I'd been, once.

"You're welcome," Moneaux tells me, "though you should thank Etain. He wanted to come by and meet you, but she kept him from doing that. Not to mention you were getting some surgery done at the time."

I just nod at that before her hand falls away. I figure my personal life is about to go insane once the rest of this mess is over. So much for the simple life.

"If you're up to it, Ramstein wants to see us," Moneaux says eventually. "We've got reasonable suspicion to make a raid on Romarei. Jez was working as a contractor for our investigation and was kidnapped in the line of duty."

"Damn right I'm up to it," I growl faintly. "Even if it's just to get me out of this damned bed."

Moneaux doesn't argue with me, and it's not long later that I'm out of the hospital, walking smoothly on my new leg and rotating my new hand on the old wrist. Anything she might want to say about my old life would have to wait. Right now, there were only two things I wanted to do: get Jez out of Romarei, and kill the bastard that had killed those druid kids. Mercifully her tongue stays in her head, and once she's gotten the aircar en route to AmCad I jump into cyberspace. I can sense Masha there, and I nearly sigh in relief as she settles back into her little niche in my code space.

"I'm sorry, Raphael," she says, using the electronics in my ear. Better than talking directly in my head. "I was attempting to monitor Jessie's safety and I was...distracted. If I had been paying more attention I might have warned you of the danger she was in."

"Save it, Masha," I mumble. It's mostly for Moneaux's sake, instead of mine. Can't be seen as literally crazy, I had a reputation to uphold. "Just tell me who it is I need to hurt to tell me what happened to her."

"Wyrick was a plant," Masha begins, and I close my eyes as she opened up files for me to intake. "He's been a Romarei agent for a long time, with his primary assignment being finding you."

"How touching," I gripe.

"Going after him would waste your time, however," Masha presses. "Jessie is already with Romarei, in one of their sublevels. I only have access because I have a link."

"Link to what? Or, better, who?"

"His name is Dominik Jadin," she replies, but when she opens the file I see Jadin's face. It's the mad dog. "Yes, he is a cyber like you, and yes, he is extremely unstable. With the right push, however, I am certain he can become a short-term ally, if not simply of use."

"And I should trust that *ci wallgof* why?"

"You don't. I will worry about Jadin's activity with respects to us."

"So who's on the kill list, Masha?"

"I don't have access to their names, but they are a subcommittee for the Romarei board of directors. At least, I believe they are; there are scant records of their activities, but I know they exist. Sadly, they also know I exist, now."

I didn't expect to feel the twist of surprise and anger in my gut. Masha was, after all, the first and so far only advanced AI in all of Cadarn; any corporation would want to hold her for study and examination. It was a given of what she was in the first place. I trace the feeling back through my system, and I end up looking into some of the recovered memories from my old life, of a dark-haired woman in a hybrid of druid robes and business suit, her fingers roving over a computer and rattling off specifications, problems with the machine. Her strapped to a bed while I - no, he, Jack Macey - spoke, entered commands into a computer. I jerk back in my seat as I was pushed out of cyberspace, and I have to steady my pulse. There's a name on my lips when I finally feel anchored back in reality, instead of the past.

"Mariya Kovolov."

Moneaux turns to look at me, and I notice we're nearly to AmCad HQ.

"...what about her?" she asks. How Moneaux knows the name, I'm not sure. Likely she mentioned to me when I was still drugged and out of it.

"Just had a loop with her, is all," I answered, trying to push away the loop and the inexplicable guilt that was attached to it. "Just before the...accident."

"And?"

I don't let Moneaux ask another question. By now the car's come down on the motor pool parking lot, and I step out quick as I can. Moneaux follows, but at least gets the hint about not pushing me about it. She takes the lead as we descend from the entry floor, heading for Ramstein's office. He's pacing inside when we arrive, but he waves us in anyway.

"Yes, I understand we're not gettin' a warrant for getting at Romarei's databases any damn time soon," he snarls towards a call. I don't try to look closely, but it wasn't hard to see that it was a call to the nobles' council. "But there's been a mess in this city

caused by one of their employees and another one of their agents kidnapped a civilian. I'm going in there and I'm gonna find out why the hell they're running around causin' trouble and killin' druids."

"I'm sure the other councilors agree with me when I say we sympathize with you, Detective," one of the councilors, a woman that I can guess is Lady Kristoff, states coolly. If she'd been in person and not in a vidstream I might be tempted to say she wasn't as gracefully aged as she thought she was. Lucky for her the connection wasn't high-definition quality. "But with Lord Macey in seclusion because of these murders we cannot appropriately offer you clearance for this operation."

"Like hell you can't," Ramstein barks at her. "A councilman's life is in danger, and you're just gonna sit and do nothing? Who the hell runs this city, you or the corps?!"

"That's enough, Detective," another councilman snaps. He's off to the edge of the image, so I can't see his face clearly. Council has some crap cameras to talk to their people. "It is not a matter of maintaining political stability as much as it is security. If AmCad launches an assault on Romarei's headquarters every other corporation will come to us screaming about privacy and we will have no choice but to condemn your actions. Do you realize what that means?"

"Maybe I don't give a shit."

"It means we can charge Amddiffynwyr y Cadarn with *brad i'r ddinas*," the councilor continues. Even my limited understanding of Welsh follows which word means treason. "AmCad will be suspended from all operations until such a time as the council can determine how mismanaged and destructive AmCad has become to this city. If enough evidence is found, AmCad can and will be disbanded."

"Then what?" Ramstein growls. He's leaning forward on his desk; probably he forgot Moneaux and I were here. "You'll sell out contracts to the corps so they'll run security instead? Those *fampiriaid ffycin* will bleed you dry, then crush Cadarn under their heels. You'll sacrifice the safety of this city just to save your collective ass?"

"If you act without council consent, we will have no other choice," Lady Kristoff confirms, and before Ramstein can really let go the call closed. It wasn't the first time I had realized AmCad wasn't as powerful as it should be, but it was the first time I could really guess how bad it was for them.

"Sir, I can call Lord Robert and see if he'll contact the council," Moneaux says to break the silence, though there was still tension looming over us. "At the very least he'll get them to stop stalling."

"Even then we won't have time to get in and leave Romarei hangin' for what they've done," Ramstein retorts, barely containing his rage. "Kristoff and her old guard

are going to hold the line against us, and by the time we've got a warrant the damn corp will have everything cleared out and empty."

"Can't storm the place either," I add.

"Oh shut up," Ramstein growls at me. "You takin' the council's side's the last thing I need today, Callahan."

"I'm not taking their side," I snap. "You know goin' in without that warrant means AmCad's dead. Plus Romare's defenses are going to mow through anyone you send it, not just cybers, but military-grade weapons. You're going to have a lot of dead bodies if you send in the SWAT teams now."

"Great, now he's a strategist of some kind," Ramstein grumbles before he turns to look at Moneaux and me. "Then what, oh wise all-knowing warrior, do we do about these *ffyliaid difeddwol* that'd rather see the corps in control and their pockets lined than the people of this city safe?"

"...send me in."

The both of them stare at me, Ramstein calculating and Moneaux on the edge of protesting. I raise a hand towards her to keep her shut up for long enough for me to explain. Last thing I needed was her going off about losing me again when I knew there was no way I was going to get lost in the first place.

"If anyone clearly AmCad goes into that tower they're dead and so's AmCad," I say. "Have Alayna call Macey. Keep your teams on standby. I can get in and get a good look around, soften things up so you don't lose more men than you have to. Lock in cybers, sabotage defense systems, that sort of thing. I'll get whatever intel you need for the data raid and Jez's rescue once the council's clearance comes in."

"Who said anything about a rescue op?" Ramstein interrupts.

"I did, sir," Moneaux replies. "I'll take responsibility for that one."

"Fine," Ramstein concedes before looking back to me. "So what'll you be getting out of this?"

"Answers," I say. "I want to find out why they're making cybers ready for war when Cadarn hasn't even fought a war, not counting getting shelled during the Alliance Wars. You let me go in and get your info, I'll get mine, too."

Ramstein frowns at me, but I know it's a real possibility for him. This is how he protects his people, his job, and his city while still getting his job done. All in all, it's a winning setup. How could he say no?

“With respect sir, I have to disagree with Mister Callahan,” Moneaux speaks up. Great. “If he goes in alone he’s not coming out again, and getting a signal through to us with whatever information we need is even less likely.”

“Since when does that matter?” I ask, and Moneaux glares at me like I’m supposed to know. “Dammit, I am not your brother. They can’t shoot me dead that easily. I can’t get killed easily, period.”

“Romarei has equipment that could tear through you just as easily as a SWAT team,” she argues. I know what it really is.

“Alayna. I am not Jack. Stop makin’ this about you losing him again ‘cause you’re not,” I snap at her. Moneaux recoils a bit at that, and I can feel her little mental probe trying to push into my mind. It doesn’t work, and I make sure she gets it. “I’m not Jack. Jack Macey’s dead, Alayna. I’m just the asshole that looks a lot like him.”

“...now that this mini therapy session is done, can we get back to reality here?” Ramstein insists, breaking the tension easily. I swallow back a sigh of relief; I wasn’t about to get into sensitive family issues with her right now. I had bigger problems, and so did she. “Fine, Callahan, you’re cleared for your little infiltration run. Get us their real server rooms and any prototype storage rooms. If Agent Moneaux’ll stop lettin’ her mouth run, she’ll contact Lord Macey so he can break the deadlock in the Council and give us permission to enter. Once we’re in, send your intel on to us and do whatever the hell else it is you need to do. Alayna, stay right here so you can make your call.”

Moneaux’s mouth works like a fish for a moment. I decided Ramstein was going to get her head on straight and ducked out of his office. He was right, after all; I had work to do, if I was going to get Jez out of there alive. If Romarei wanted me so bad, well, they were going to get me.

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The slums underneath Romarei Consolidated’s headquarters are mangier than most. Instead of sheet metal or even wood, the houses are built up with cardboard, aluminum, or cloth, depending on what had been at the scrapyards at the time. There is only one solid metal structure in the area, under the garbage chutes – *llithrennau swbriel*, it says on the signs I’m following – and I know that was where I was going to find Garrett Wyrick. My fists clench tightly as I shoulder carefully through the flimsy walls and the few desperate folks crawling through the refuse and dirt. He’d sold out Jez, and Masha, too, and I was going to make him regret that decision. Ahead of me, there’s an old smelter smoking away faintly. The place is supposed to be where trash – memos, prototypes, things that were supposed to stay out of public reach – was burned, and the ashes used as fuel towards keeping the smelter running. The heat was funneled up into the building; inexpensive and about as ingenious as most places could get. But it hadn’t been running to full capacity for some time, which was why there were only a few

thread smoke plumes and not one massive one. If anyone's going to have a hideout close to Romarei equipment here, it's going to be in this smelter.

Unsurprising, then, that there are guards at the door. Of course. But even with the slum-grade clothes they're wearing, I can see the heavy bulletproof vests underneath. They're real-deal security from the company. Either they were protecting their investment or they were waiting for me. Probably both. The latter becomes more likely than the former as I approach; one of the doormen turns his head, as if he's hearing whispered news through the wall behind him. I know that's not the case, because the guns in the guards' hands are starting to come up and aim for me. Unlucky them.

Like always, I have my heavy pistol in its holster under my jacket. Combat reflex kicks in once I'm in the gun sights about thirty feet in front of me. Draw, disengage safety, and aim all in one smooth motion. Whoever's watching upstairs will be expecting a show; may as well give them one. Three squeezes on the trigger, and one guard goes down screaming in pain. Kneecaps blown open, and a panic wound to the shoulder. His partner starts, clearly not as briefed about security as he had a right to be. His turn prevents me from getting his shoulder, too. Instead, he loses kneecaps and a wrist. By then I'm fifteen feet away and holstering the gun, clicking the safety on.

"Tell Gare hell's just walked over you and thought your lives weren't worth the trouble," I tell them in warning as I head inside. Their microphones have probably already transmitted my message. Now to follow through.

Combat reflex stays active, and when I see more guards my pistol comes out again, safety off. Their problem is being completely human; they can't take more than two hits before something lethal is bound to get damaged. Even with bulletproof vests I can still hit important joints, send them to the floor in agony. It's easy to fall back into the old pattern. Just business, and you're all in the way of it. Except this time I stay nonlethal. Kept my record clean and I didn't get in trouble with upstairs. I keep clearing the facility, hunting Wyrick down, and when I find a heavily sealed door I know he's back there, along with his door into Romarei. My back way in. I look up and find a camera fixed on me, hovering quietly.

"Open the fucking door, Wyrick," I snarl. "I have a bullet that belongs in your brain."

"And I'm getting good money to find a way to put it into yours," the camera's speaker blurts. "At least for short-term. You're a chunk of profit that needs to be reinvested, Callahan. I'm going to find a way to do that. Sorry you had to put Jez between us; by now she's going to be either dead or long gone."

Asshole. My fists clench and tension starts building in my muscles. The camera drifts down from its corner, to try and simulate an actual conversation.

“Now if you’d come yourself in the first place, we’d be spared all this unpleasantness,” Wyrick continues, his camera hovering around me like a gnat. “But oh no. The great protector Raphael Callahan is beneath such gritty tasks, now that he’s a dog for AmCad. How useless do you plan on making yourself, getting involved with them? You’re better off back in the fold, workin’ with people who know you, what you really are. *Gadael y gorffennol y tu ôl*, Callahan! Livin’ in the past leaves you blind to what’s comin’ in the future.”

“And you’ve seen it all, have you?” I reply. Let tension build. That’ll let me rip through this door. Apparently Wyrick liked talking, or gave himself better odds to survive than I would have. “Seen what it is Romarei’s got planned? How many other corps are gonna line up with ‘em, to take down the nobles?”

Wyrick laughs, and the camera spins around me madly. It’s a struggle not to react, to keep the tension in check. I’d be close to maximum yield soon.

“You think this’s just politics, don’t you?” he taunts once the camera stabilizes, hovering between me and the door. “Just this city. Oh Callahan. You stupid little tin man. There used to be something bigger. And now it’s coming back, and neither you, nor AmCad, not all the fucking druids and muties and cybers in this city can stop it.”

I shoot my fist through the camera and into the door. I’d misjudged it, and lucky that I hadn’t rammed my new hand into it. A sharp jolt of electricity fires up, through my arm, into my shoulder and into my head. Every muscle locks in place, my head thrown back but jaw clenched. My vision is tinged red, and I know if I could shift into cyberspace I’d see shutdown warnings all over the place. The door’s given way only a little from my attempted hit, but it swings open. Inside are at least twenty fully-armored and heavily-armed security goons, with guns aimed at me. There’s no sign of Wyrick anywhere.

One of the guards thumbs something on his gun, and when he fires everything goes black.

Moneaux

"How long as Callahan been out of contact?" Alayna asked as she walked into the communication center. After checking up on a report of gunfire in the area around shaft twelve in Central, there'd been no contact from Callahan. Most of that time she'd been in a call with Lord Robert, filling him in on the situation and even hosting a conference call to the rest of the council. That had been something she should have recorded. But the important result was that AmCad had their raid warrant on Romarei HQ. Now all they needed was that information Callahan had promised.

"Since the gunfire report and getting good description of Callahan from the emergency caller? About forty-five minutes," Atley replied. He was already outfitted in his SWAT tactical gear, and only looked more menacing because of his size and scales. "If I had to guess, Romarei was waiting for him and got the drop on him. Sure, he's a hell of a shooter, but if he had to face more than a couple of their security forces even I'd have the sense to surrender."

"So we're assuming Callahan's just added another abduction charge to Romarei's rap sheet," Alayna sighed. "*Beth yw hunllef*. Just what we needed before our first big corporate crackdown."

"They still don't know we have the warrant, though," Atley reassured her, patting her back gently. "All we have to do is sweep every floor. Get some teams planted strategically on a section of floors and we can get it done."

"I hope you're right," Alayna agreed, offering him a small smile. She sensed Ramstein on approach, under Atley's mix of wariness and confidence, and turned as he came into the multi-tiered room and came right for them.

"Warrant, we got it?" he asked before stopping next to them. Alayna nodded, but Ramstein was already continuing, "I just heard Callahan went dark, so we're goin' in for *chwilio tactegol*. Atley, you're headin' SWAT for this run, 'cause that idiot Mountbatton just got found on-duty with a couple streetwalkers in his office. Lots of questionable materials, too, so that's somethin' else to add onto the docket after this mess."

Alayna could feel Atley's professional demeanor snap into surprise and shock, but he did all right in not showing it. The question she heard him pondering: *why me?* Maybe if they had time she'd give him an answer.

"...*diolch*, sir," Atley stammered faintly. There was no time for an official congratulations; Ramstein was already moving away to address the room in general. Alayna made sure to straighten herself, adjusting the headset from Callahan. Maybe Masha would be free enough to help her once inside the building.

“Listen up!” Ramstein barked, and any sign of misdirected attention stopped. “Today we’re makin’ AmCad history. We’re gonna storm the headquarters tower of Romarei Consolidated. We’ve got our warrant and reasonable proof linking the company to the arson on *calan awst*, the murders of two druids, and the abduction of two investigative contractors for us. Yes, that number is now two, as Mister Callahan has been out of contact for over half an hour. Punctual man like him would keep us up to date on the intel he was gonna give us.

“This makes our operation two-fold,” he continued, beginning to pace. Behind him, the holographic screen flashed with a blueprint of the target building. “Our main objective is finding evidence of advanced military-grade tech research and development. This means guns, bombs, even medical research. Our main focus is gonna be cybernetics and biomimetics, because the *sawol hellynt* that’s been causin’ all this mess is most assuredly an advanced cyborg. Captain Atley is now Commander Atley, as he’s gotten a promotion to SWAT commander since Commander Mountbatton decided he liked gettin’ a squeeze instead of doin’ his job.”

A small rash of snickers filled the room, and a few people even called down congratulations to Atley. Even if his only outward response was a shift in his weight, Alayna sensed the pride there. Any other employer would have given a natural human a promotion; it was a sign of both how different AmCad was and how skilled Atley was in doing his job. Alayna swore she saw a small smile on Ramstein’s face before the ripple of noise quieted back down.

“While Commander Atley’s leading the SWAT teams, we have a second objective,” Ramstein resumed. “We’ve got two people missing, and one of them we’re just startin’ to get to know. Agent Moneaux will be working on locating the two, as well as evidence of some kind of conspiracy to overthrow the noble council and the assembly overall. I think we prefer havin’ a bunch of entitled bureaucrats that at least listen to us than a few thousand technocrats who don’t, am I right?”

A resounding call of assent rang out.

“Good, ‘cause I like it that way, too,” Ramstein noted, getting a few laughs and the confidence of the team that this was the right thing to do. “Right then, get the SWAT teams loaded up, Atley, I recommend you draw up your search plans so we don’t look as stupid as they’re bound to think we are.”

Atley snapped a smart salute as the communication center got busy establishing a secure communication network, aligning traffic conditions to avoid making a traffic mess while moving out, and making sure the council’s warrant was at the top of every clearance they had to confirm. Alayna stayed put before Ramstein motioned her to follow him, out of the activity and into the hallways.

“You sure you’re gonna stay focused in there?” Ramstein asked. Alayna could sense his eventual direction towards the main hangar, where AmCad’s heavy carriers were to be loaded up. “You nearly forgot who Callahan was before he set out.”

“I already told you, I know exactly who he is,” Alayna tried to retort, but both the look and the sharp flash of disbelief Ramstein sent her way made her reconsider. “Okay, maybe I believe there’s still some of Jack in Callahan’s personality. It’s been like seeing a ghost for the past week. Now that I know for sure –”

“Let me make this real easy, Alayna,” Ramstein interrupted her. “Right now, we’ve got a big operation, and for all we know Callahan could be dead. I don’t wanna see you break down because you think you just lost your brother again, you understand? I need you to stay focused on your job. You determine the status of Callahan and Locke, get them out if possible, and find any links to threats to this city. I don’t want this comin’ to bite us in the ass if there’s something more to this.”

If she’d been in a position to argue, Alayna would have done so. Jack had been dead for nearly a decade now, and she was more mature than she had been before. Not to mention Callahan wasn’t Jack in the first place, and she’d known that since seeing him at the arson site. Just because there were hints of Jack in some of his mannerisms didn’t mean she thought he was still alive. But there was no time to argue semantics, and especially not with Ramstein. Alayna only allowed a nod, though she sensed Ramstein didn’t fully believe her.

“I guess that’s as good as I’m going to get,” he sighed. “Just be careful down there. I don’t wanna have to tell Lord Macey why the hell he’s three druids short instead of two.”

“Just because I don’t have a gun strapped to me doesn’t mean I can’t defend myself,” Alayna noted. That, at least, got a snort of amusement out of him.

The rest of the walk to the hangar was quiet, for the most part. That was fine by Alayna; the crushing sense of purpose, duty, unease, and confidence in everyone working was enough to make her head throb without worrying about carrying on a conversation. Multiple SWAT team members rushed passed them, most still trying to get their nearly-unused gear on despite all the drills they’d done to prove themselves efficient with the equipment. Technicians were nearly the same way, though they were mostly getting on personal tool sets or grumbling about late hours and little warning. Their thoughts, at the very least, she could tune out enough to keep walking.

Atley was there to meet them at the lead craft. With him were the other SWAT team captains, as well as Atley’s own team. Despite the armor and the heavy equipment, Alayna could sense a fierce pride in them all, and knew that they would do their best to accomplish their mission, even if it proved to be sweeping for intel. She had a feeling it would be a lot more than that.

"Sir, I've separated the building into sections of three to four floors," Atley reported, offering a tablet to Ramstein. "Each team covers a section. I've already promoted my second to team captain."

"Then where are you going to be, commander?" Ramstein asked. Alayna knew the answer when Atley glanced at her.

"...I figured Agent Moneaux might need backup," he replied. "Sure, she's a druid that's both telepathic and telekinetic, but if there's cybers down there she's not gonna know they're there until they've got a gun aimed at her. Sir."

"Ric, your team needs you more than I do," Alayna insisted. "I've been around Callahan for a week, I know how to sense out a cyber."

"You can sense him, not others," Atley answered right back. "Three members of my team are cybers, already in the carrier, and you didn't even notice them, did you?"

Alayna blinked in surprise before sharpening her senses. Under the noise of everyone else, it was hard to make them out.

"...if I focus, yes, I know they're there."

"But you wouldn't in a combat situation," Atley pressed. "All of this is still going to be in the building, plus all of the civilians panicking and any security that tries to mess with us. If you can't sense a cyborg five feet away from you under just this noise, you're not going to find more of them under maybe five times as many people."

Alayna didn't want him to be right. If the cybers at Romarei were anything like Callahan, the oldest of their prototype cyborgs, any she came across would have that same deadly power, if not more, and more likely to want to kill her in the first place. After the road race against that other cyber, Alayna wanted nothing more than to avoid facing any cyber like that ever again. Atley would hardly stand a chance against them, scales and muscle aside. But she did need the backup, and if she had to choose someone to cover her back it would have to be Atley.

"All right, but only after you have your teams deployed," Alayna sighed. Both his smile and the wave of appreciation encouraged her own smile in reply.

"Let's get going, then," Atley insisted, and Alayna sighed before adjusting her headset. The rest of the SWAT team clambered into the flier, and Atley offered a hand to help her up. It was only proper for her to accept it, but the sense she picked up from him was confusing, at minimum. She simply busied herself with sitting down without getting squashed by the heavily armored officers otherwise populating the flier.

Now all she had to do was hope that Callahan was still alive when they arrived.

Instead of coming to the main entrance, like several of the other transports had, Atley had directed their flier to a loading dock on the back side of the tower. Alayna exhaled, giving herself a moment to focus on Atley's sense, as well as the basic feeling for the cybers in his team. Hopefully it would give her enough of a chance to defend herself if Romarei's cybers came after her. She tapped the audio in her ear gently; there was no green light to indicate Masha's presence, so Alayna could only assume there would be no internal help for her. *Rhyfeddol*.

"So what's the plan, Alayna?" Atley asked as he drew out a rifle. Alayna eyed the gun, uneasy without the gun being in Callahan's grip, but forced herself to remain calm. Atley wanted to protect her, that was all. There was no reason for him to turn on her. She exhaled and focused herself again.

"Send in your team; hopefully they'll cover the lower levels that are listed," she told him. "In the meantime, we'll find any unmarked sublevels and check them out. Hopefully, one of them will have both Locke and Callahan; one of them, minimum."

"And if we find neither? Or bodies?"

Alayna's brows folded a little. She hadn't wanted to consider it, but that was unrealistic. Another pause, another breath.

"We burn this place to the ground."

"A plan I can get behind," Atley affirmed with a nod. "Teams Three and Six, move in, you have your sweep patterns, once you get access we'll come in right behind you."

Nine men moved forward, guns at the ready but hanging at ease, rather than up and ready to fire. Alayna stayed behind Atley as he stepped forward, gun raised and steps quiet against the concrete. The SWAT teams kicked through the doors, announcing AmCad's presence and securing the area immediately inside. Only then did Atley come in after them. Alayna slid in quietly, finding an exceptionally tidy, functional reception area. Looking around, it was strange to find no one there to man the desk; likely Romarei had been caught off-guard by the AmCad raid. She could sense the people above them, nervousness and fright and surprise, but that was to be expected. All she had to do was tune it out.

"Area secured," one of Atley's men reported. "We'll move to our sweep zones; make contact with HQ if you get your objectives handled, agent."

"Will do; *pob lwc*," Alayna replied before the others set out. Atley stayed with her, shifting his grip on his rifle to a more ready one.

"Downstairs, then? Hopefully they won't have anything in security lockdown," Atley asked. His tone and sense meant he was trying to keep things lighthearted, but

Alayna could still feel his nervousness and unease underneath. Whatever they were going to find down there, it wasn't going to bode well.

"Aye, let's hope that," she chose to say. "Should I take point?"

"I did always believe in ladies first."

Jadin

They were *here*.

Fucking AmCad was fucking here and security wasn't even trying to stop them. Of course AmCad was going to come after Callahan went off their grid, and yet somehow they'd gotten their warrant before expected. Everyone was panicking and he knew it. All he wanted was a taith hit to clear out the ache in his brain but he couldn't; the tin was lost somewhere behind the busted drywall of his room. Not even trying to get Locke to break was enough to try and dull the withdrawal; didn't help that the *putain* was being more stubborn than he'd expected her to be.

His official orders were to either stay in his room and detox or work more on breaking Locke but he knew what he wanted to do: tear into whoever tried to get down here and beat them to a pulp. That was what he was supposed to be doing. Instead lockdown had gone into effect and now he was stuck in his room until the lockdown went off. So he paced his room, broke things to vent, and now sat on the floor, chest heaving. If only the voice in his head would stop talking.

[[I can get you out,]] the voice insisted, talking in a half-code he could display on his peripheral vision. [[You could escape, live your life.]]

"But you'd still be in my head," he growled at the voice, but staying put for now. "I just want you to shut the fuck up and go the fuck away."

[[I can't do that, Dominik,]] she – he was fairly sure the voice was a she, after seeing her cyberspace avatar – insisted. [[I'm just trying to help you, you know that.]]

"Like hell you are!" he growled. He was finally angry enough to stand, to start pacing his cage. "Ever since you turned up in my head you've fucked up my entire life, you get that? You got yourself tagged and suddenly I'm bein' watched every minute, because of you tryin' to help. Wanna know what I say to that? *Gallwch fynd a'ch cymorth a gwithio i fyny eich ass.*"

For a few moments he was quite proud of his sudden fluency, and for telling the voice exactly what he thought about her. When there was no reply the pride increased a little, but it didn't help; the longer she didn't talk back, the more anxious he became. If he was going crazy, he wouldn't have minded having something to go mad with. He sat back down, shaking a little and staring blankly at the wall across from him. Suddenly the pride was gone, and there was only something cold and bitter and angry left behind. The part that scared him most, after feeling those things, was wanting the voice to come back. Wanting her to come back so he could tell her he wanted the door open, wanted to get out and just break something somewhere. Wanting her to come back so he could say sorry. And that it was rude to tell her to shove something up her ass when she didn't have an ass; she was a fucking disembodied voice, after all.

He got back up to walk to the bathroom. The shattered mirror looked back at him when he glanced at it, the spiderwebbed cracks and missing chunks that were small pieces on the floor around the sink. He leaned forward, hands braced on the ceramic, and tried to get a good look at himself in the broken pieces. Except there was no way to do that, not with his entire face. He could remember taking pride in breaking his reflection; now it made him sad. It wasn't a feeling he was used to; it certainly wasn't a feeling he liked. There was only one thing he could do to ignore that sensation, and that was getting the hell out of here. It'd be easier than trying to get the voice talking to him again. He got out of the bathroom and approached his door, crouching. The lock was meant to keep him in, but there had to be a way to disengage or break it or something. At least he could make a new hole in the drywall, close to the lock, and felt the wires under his knuckles before withdrawing his fist.

[[You're going to get yourself hurt doing that, Dominik,]] the voice said at last. He did his best not to show his relief that she was back in his head; it could be taken as a sign of weakness. [[You can't break walls to solve every problem.]]

"That's why you're gonna tell me what wires to break or whatever," he retorted. "I deal with my own shit better in a bigger sized box."

If the voice was amused, she didn't let on. He figured she was, though, because she got him through a sequence to override the lock. Once the door had slid open, he looked out to find the hall completely bare and silent; the others had to either be asleep or out on security duty against AmCad's SWAT invasion. Idiots, all of them. At the very least he was going to get out of here, with no one to stop him as far as he could tell or care. He stepped out into the hall, looked around again, before starting to approach the elevators up into the main part of the building.

He could have gotten away clean if he hadn't heard gunfire close to the elevator lobby and stopped, trying to backtrack, get a read on the situation. Had to be AmCad, but there'd have to be at least five of them; he could only hear one gun that didn't sound like company issue. Bad sign. It got worse when he heard another quick shot and something fell; security guy, he thought to himself. Maybe if the body was close he could get the gun -

Something pressed at his head, inside his head. It wasn't the voice, but outside of the confines of his brain. Anxiety melted into rage; it was Moneaux. Target number three. Forget the gun, he was going to smash her head into the floor and destroy her little gift directly. A fierce smile touched his face as his muscles began to tense, ready to launch and fight.

A few things happened at once.

He began turning the corner towards the lobby. Spotted not only Moneaux, but a mutie a head taller than her. He was the one holding the gun, but that wasn't what

worried him most. Under the armor, just on the edge of sight along the mutie's neck, black scales bristled instead of skin. That was bad.

The thing outside of his brain somehow pushed through, staggering him back. There wasn't pain, but there was definitely violation. It was like fingers running through his thoughts, disrupting his plans and he wanted to kill her but then the fingers only got deeper. His muscles locked as he tried to will the violator out, but every time he tried to push with his brain she pushed back, drove him away. He ended up on his knees, trying not to gag on his own throat.

He shifted into cyberspace and found the voice's avatar standing over him, but also dimly near Moneaux, around the corner. The double was definitely talking to Moneaux, leaned close. Fucking traitor, should never have trusted her.

[[You have to relax, Dominik,]] her cyberspace-voice told him, while the copy of her close to him knelt next to him. [[Agent Moneaux is just looking for information; she's not trying to hurt you. I'm helping her reach you without hurting you, but you have to relax.]]

"Get the hell out," he choked out, trying to escape the alien fingers that he couldn't see. Shift, bounce, find a network and hide, somewhere away from the sifting feeling. But the AI pushed him back, held him, and he tried to yell and curse but there was nothing left, except to break.

He must have passed out, because when things swam into focus again he was in reality. Moneaux stood over him, looking ridiculous in some kind of helmet visor and AmCad uniform. The mutie stood guard behind her, but he didn't flinch when those yellow-brown eyes tried to find his.

"Mister Jadin," Moneaux told him sharply, enough to gain attention but not respect. He lifted his eyes to her, bored already. He could have, should have, fought her out and squashed her brains into the floor. Something in his head stung, enough to make him wince. "You're under arrest for the murders of two druids of House Macey, a minimum of three civilians, damage to the city, and treason to the Council and Assembly of Cadarn. No matter what you plead, we have enough evidence to apply the death penalty."

"Fuck you," he spat at her, but the sting came back, harder this time. "I don't care if you kill me, 'cause you can't. Bullet in the head won't do much, good luck burning me at a stake, and lethal injections tickle."

He was nearly gagging again because the sting had intensified to an ache. Even if she didn't look smug, he had no doubt she was enjoying this. Why else would she crouch closer to watch him?

"If you don't cooperate, Mister Jadin, that sensation you're feeling will get to a point where your body will lose all regulatory abilities," Moneaux continued as he tried to breathe. "You'll die from suffocation, cardiac arrest, and it won't look pretty when your brain starts hemorrhaging from all the tech in your brain."

"'Cause you're doin' it," he coughed out, but he could feel his heart starting to pound irregularly. Emergency statuses flickered across his awareness, and while his lungs struggled to breathe his throat wouldn't unclench to let air in. Something flashed in Moneaux's eyes – he didn't know what – and instead of crouching she settled on her knees. Stranger still, her hand reached out and touched his scalp. It made him flinch nervously, too reminded of the fingers in his thoughts. Her fingers ran over the top of his head, and even though he was tensed everything else inside seemed to calm down and relax. When he looked at her again, her gaze was soft, gentle. It was strange, and he felt his face twist in an expression he wasn't familiar with.

"...just tell us where Jessica Locke is, Dominik," Moneaux said, so very softly. "The pain will go away, I promise. You can even walk to those elevators and leave, and we won't stop you. But I need to know where Jessica is, and if you can maybe direct us to Raphael Callahan we'll see what I can swing in your favor. Just in case."

He frowned at the mention of **his** name. Of course she was here for **him**. Well fuck him, too, along with Locke and the rest of AmCad. The rage tried to build, to explode out, but something checked it, something internal. He shifted into cyberspace and tracked the sensation, deep inside –

*Alone, scared, crying in the dark. Gunshot ringing in his ears still, everything hurt even though he hadn't felt a bullet. Tried to stagger forward but fell into water, disgusting nasty water. More tears, more pain this time cold pain. Didn't want to move, couldn't. It'd happen to him, it'd happen and there'd be nothing left except the **pain**...*

A fist shot out, trying to hit something, but Moneaux was on the wrong side and the mutie intercepted the punch. It didn't faze lizard-boy at all, and though he tried to push through the mutie tightened his grip and tensed. Bastard was stronger than he looked, unless there was an enhancement...

"Dominik," Moneaux's voice cut through the haze. "You don't have to fight us. Tell us where Jessica is, and you can go. We won't arrest you. We're the only AmCad officers for three levels. You can get away clean and start a new life."

"Doing what?" he growled, still trying to push his fist forward. Tension wasn't building in his muscles, something was wrong in his head, had to be the *darllenydd meddywl ffycin* or the *deallusrwydd artiffisial ffycin* and they both have to get out or someone was going to die. "I kill people, get drunk, get high, and sometimes screw a woman I can pay for. You got a better alternative to that? That's all I do."

“No. You can be better. You’re going to be better,” Moneaux pressed. “I know you will. No one’s shown you any kindness in your life until me. I know because I sense it, right now. That’s why you can’t hurt me or Commander Atley. Because deep down you don’t want to.”

He wanted to curse her, to reach up and strangle her. The mutie, Atley, instead shoved his fist back down and it stayed down. There was no way he could get himself to fight all of a sudden. He just stared up at Moneaux and tried to imagine how nice it would be to watch her choke while he taunted her for her failures. The strange look she was giving him kept that from happening completely, and he had to look away because something about it made him feel wrong. Like when he’d seen the first surveillance videos of **him** living his new life, with his own job and place and life and how it just seemed to make sense while the freedoms he had just seemed so...juvenile. Moneaux hadn’t moved, and something inside twisted when she touched his head again. Damn her. Damn the both of them.

“Locke’s in op room sixty-seven,” he ground out, eyes closed to access that data. “Callahan, got nothin’. Haven’t seen him here, anyway, but it’s not as if they’d tell me.”

The real-finger stroke came one last time, and he heard her stand up.

“*Diolch i chi*,” she murmured to him, but he didn’t dare look at her again. He heard the both of them start moving off, and in response curled up as anxiety chewed at him inside. It didn’t take long for their footsteps to fade, despite the echoes down the hallway. Now he just didn’t want to move.

[[Are you all right, Dominik?]] she asked him.

“*Ffyc off*,” he growled. His fluency was getting a lot better, apparently.

[[You can’t stay here, Dominik. They’re going to find you – and you know which ‘they’ I mean. They’ll kill you if they find you still here when AmCad is done.]]

“Then where do I go?”

[[Away from here. They’ll comb North and Central, but East should offer you some opportunities to hide safely. Start building a new life for yourself.]]

“Why help me? You’re linked to AmCad and **him**.”

[[I can make my own choices, Dominik. Right now, you and Jessie need me more. Now get moving.]]

He would have, but something about the druid and the mutie kept him in place. If they were down here, looking for **him** and Locke, what if security found them? That’d make their lives harder. If the bosses had both of them, and AmCad couldn’t find **him**, then...then...

“I should help them, shouldn’t I?” he asked, so quietly that it was more speaking to himself than to the voice. “They dunno what they’re gettin’ into, not here, and if they’re goin’ for Locke there’s gonna be somethin’ there.”

[[That must be the wisest thing you have said since I hooked into your system, Dominik,]] the voice noted. He could tell she was proud, though he didn’t have to like it, either. [[So will you escape or help with their mission?]]

He didn’t want to consider that he could want to help them. He wasn’t a helper; he broke things, destroyed them nearly beyond recognition. When the pain got so much, then he could do the most damage. Pain was locked into system, causing it and suffering through it. He glanced down at his hands, and clenched a fist to look at his knuckles. Scarred, bruised, almost constantly scabbed over or bloody. Shift into cyberspace, not much change. Except the voice’s avatar was there, her hands folded around his fist. He couldn’t look at her; she always had the same look in her eyes, like Moneaux had.

[[You don’t have to break things if you don’t want to,]] she said, still holding his hand in hers. [[Hands can build and fix just the same as they can destroy and break. Pain doesn’t have to define you.]]

“Don’t know how to fix,” he mumbled. It was a half-assed excuse, but it was the only one he had.

[[Then learn. I know you can.]]

Her cyberspace fingers squeezed his hand, and he blinked back into reality to find his vision fogged up and stinging. Wipe at his eyes; tears. He was...crying. That was even more embarrassing than breaking down in front of Moneaux. Had to fix his reputation there, at least. Breathe in, hold, out. Stop the tears. There was enough mess inside him, maybe he could make his superiors hurt for once. That would be a lot more fun than hiding out and getting wasted. A faint smile pulled at his lips, at the prospect of those blank faces scrambling. They didn’t want him alive anyway. He could make them regret not doing it fast enough.

He turned his back on the elevators and doubled back into the corridors. Moneaux and the mutie couldn’t have gone far; they didn’t know where the operation rooms were, or how to disengage the process. They needed him. Luckily he found them; the mutie was sticking his head into a room, probably the quarters he’d abandoned. Moneaux was behind him, looking distant and wavering on her feet. He decided it was probably a druid thing and approached, very slowly. He wasn’t interested in getting shot.

“Yeah, hi, that’s my place,” he said, and nearly regretted it. The mutie swung around, gun raised and aiming for his head. Had to hold down combat reflex and get his hands up over his head; hurt like hell to do it. Moneaux focused up, and he felt an

invisible hand tighten around his chest, then lift him up onto his toes. Ow. Kept focusing on not falling into combat reflex.

“What’re you still doing here?” the mutie growled – nearly literally. He breathed slowly, to keep the hand on his chest from squeezing.

“You dunno where the op rooms are,” he answered; the psychic fingers brushed through his thoughts again and he fought not to gag in horror. “And you gotta get Locke outta the bed with the right security code to halt the process. I know the code, and I know how to get you to the room without alerting security.”

“Why should we believe you?” Moneaux asked. Tried not to laugh; she was in his head, she’d know. Unless she had a problem reading cybers and he was her first lucky break.

“Shouldn’t,” he told them, “but let’s say I’m finally growin’ a conscience. I help you, you let me walk and rub out those murder charges. Blank slate in your record books.”

“If we can’t find Callahan, could try to bargain for a hostage exchange,” the mutie suggested. Had to laugh at that.

“They won’t want me. Not after this. They got their star product back; they were gonna wipe me clean. Too unstable for them, apparently.”

The mutie didn’t like that; his gun drifted closer to him, and holding combat reflex back got that much harder. Moneaux stepped to her partner, shoved the gun down. He noticed for the first time that something in her features made her a lot better to look at than the girls at the Lion. Something in the line of her jaw, the way it set her mouth into a defiant pout; how one eyebrow stayed folded under the other, making her always a cynic. Wasn’t easy to look away from her, and made it harder to focus. Sure toned down the reflex to snap the mutie’s neck.

“I want your word, Dominik,” Moneaux stated, eyes on his. Even with the fingers in his head those eyes seemed to dig deeper into him. “I want you to swear that your help isn’t going to put us into danger, and that after this you’re going to keep your head down. No problems for at least a year. Call it probation.”

“Promise,” he insisted. Her expression really didn’t buy it. “I promise, I’ll get you to Locke, help get her out, and I’ll get to ground somewhere you can’t get problems out of me for a year. Do I gotta cross my heart and bleed or somethin’?”

Moneaux traded a glance with the mutie, who shook his head fractionally. Of course the big scaly cop wasn’t going to buy it, he was the shooting kind of guy. It was still a surprise when the invisible hand lowered him onto his feet, then released. That he hadn’t been expecting.

“If you try to double-cross us, Commander Atley here’s going to put a bullet through your neck,” Moneaux informed him. The mutie – Atley – lowered his gun very slowly, but he didn’t doubt it could come back up pretty damn fast. “Now get us to that operation room. We have something like a deadline before the raid upstairs finishes.”

“Oh, fun,” he retorted. “Better keep up, princess.”

With that, he set off at a dead run, down the nearest corridor towards the op rooms. Had to access the lockdown codes to make sure access was still viable, but breaking the lock wouldn’t have been hard. He didn’t care if Moneaux and Atley were following, just so long as they stayed close and didn’t draw attention. First armored door was opened by a palm swipe; probably the most luck they were going to have for a bit. Moneaux and Atley got through with enough time before the door shut, and he didn’t let them stop to breathe before taking off again. Left, right, straight down towards the security checkpoint, pause for the others to catch up. He wasn’t used to playing on teams; Atley’s chest was growling like an assembly line gear, and Moneaux was nearly doubled over from exhaustion. He let them recover, hardly winded himself, before glancing into the checkpoint. Two – no, three – guards in there, all armed. Probably cyber, but not high-grade. All the high-grade cybers were being kept in their rooms; the only one with the guts to break out was right here.

“Three of ‘em in there, all armed, but probably you can get them,” he told them once the loud breathing had quieted. “I can get through and distract ‘em, but gettin’ you two...that’s gonna be harder.”

“If we can get ‘em out and elsewhere on this level, we might be able to slip Miss Locke out without them knowing,” Atley suggested; he had brains after all, apparently. “Can that happen in there?”

“Sure. Open up the other cybers, they’ll go runnin’. Big thing is gonna be how fast any of them move to make a ruckus or what.”

“Masha, can you do something about that?” Moneaux murmured into her headset; he remembered the other avatar of the voice next to Moneaux and frowned a little. Damn AI. No wonder Moneaux could reach into his head so easily.

[[I told you that already, Dominik,]] the voice scolded. [[You need some patching in your short-term memory when your adrenaline’s up.]]

He shifted uncomfortably, but funneled the sting of knowing that imperfection into his constant hate of his superiors, the company that made him. It’d serve all of them right if there was a riot among all the cybers stuck down here.

“Okay, she thinks it can be done,” Moneaux noted. “Dominik, you just need to get in there and put Masha close to the network in there. She can make the connections without them suspecting you.”

“Sweet of her,” he muttered. “So you two wait here, don’t shoot nothin’.”

He came out from their corner, and the guards saw him right off. Again restrain combat reflex, hands up.

“Easy guys...”

“You’re not supposed to be out, Jadin,” one of them snapped. None of them were any of the usual guys that manned the station, anyway; it all just kept getting better and better. “How’d you get around lockdown?”

“Got ongoing orders from upstairs. I’m supposed to keep an eye on Locke’s conversion, deal with the brain stuff. Never know what’s gonna come out at the end, am I right?”

He allowed himself a sardonic smile and that, the guards looked uneasy. Most were, when he joked about himself. Never done lightly, and some folks usually regretted it. Like these three would; the leader hit a button on the main console and waved him through. Ahead was another door that wouldn’t open unless the first one wasn’t, and it took a lot of willpower not to charge it. He normally would have, but this wasn’t the time for dumbass antics like that. Instead he walked nice and close to the window between the hallway and the station as he approached the second door. All he got in warning was a muffled *click* through the back of his skull just as the second door began to swing open. He slid through right as the security goons suddenly panicked.

“The hell’s goin’ on?! Lockdown just got busted through, all the cybers are loose!”

“Well get out there and get ‘em back in their cells, we ain’t got time for this with AmCad crawling all over the place!”

He ducked out of sight, listened for the guards to move out from the station. Only two left; one was probably staying knowing someone was in the operation wing. He moved around to the door into the security station, rested a hand on the side lock, and crushed it smoothly. Now he could work off the combat tension. The door swung open, and reflex activated as the guard got up from his chair. He didn’t even get a chance to think of something to say; step forward, one arm around his shoulder with opposite hand across the guard’s face, twist hard enough to feel the bones give. Painless, but still satisfying. Enough to stay cool without needing to get a spike for awareness. Let the body fall and get to the security board to get the doors open. Moneaux poked her head out first, almost surprised to find the way clear.

“And you didn’t trust me to come back, I’ll bet,” he taunted a bit over the microphone.

“If you want a clean slate, you’re going to have to come through,” Moneaux retorted. “I’d be more surprised if you hadn’t come back.”

“Get to know me and you might be surprised.”

“I don’t think we’re going to be continuing this for long enough to get to that point.”

He didn’t comment on that; he wasn’t sure what to say. There was nothing he had time to say, anyway; they were here for Locke, and he’d get them to her in exchange for a breather, time to get his head in order. Stepped out of the station and got moving again, this time towards the operation rooms. It wasn’t hard for him to get past the empty ones; harder to get Atley and Moneaux past them. It wasn’t anything he hadn’t seen before, but they kept stopping, looking inside, trying to ask him questions that he didn’t have time for. By the time they got to room sixty-seven Moneaux was lingering a few rooms back, and Atley looked close to venting some kind of anger issue on the nearest thing or person. He didn’t prod at him any over it, just punched in his code to get the door open. Locke was still on the bed, just as he’d left her before; the pumps getting the tech into her were running quietly, probably holding her in one of the transition modes due to the lockdown. He headed for the in-lab control panel while Moneaux came in.

“Duw amddiffyn ei,” she breathed.

“Is she even alive?” Atley asked from where he stood in the door.

“She’s a tough bitch, that’s for sure,” he answered them both as he got to typing in the hold and release codes. Moneaux circled the bed slowly, her face turning from the hard determination to the softness she’d given him at the elevators. He tried to keep his focus, but it was hard enough thanks to the lockdown; the computers weren’t interested in turning Locke loose. Had to punch the monitor – gently – before just outright giving up. Had to do it the fun way, apparently.

“The computer won’t set her loose?” Moneaux asked as he moved around to the back of the bed. At least the nanites weren’t in the tube; that would’ve been unpleasant. He tuned Moneaux out as he grabbed the tubing and yanked them free. Alarms screamed at him; had to ignore as adrenaline spiked, reflexes started kicking in. He turned his focus to the restraints holding Locke in place and snapped them easily. When Locke started slipping free from the bed – clamp must have been disengaged when lockdown started – he caught her and threw her over a shoulder. It wasn’t easy, but it would be better that he do it and not Atley. Atley needed to have the gun ready.

“Gotta carry her, reboot her internal systems later,” he reported. “Don’t have time to argue; security’s gonna know we’re movin’ now. Kinda oughtta run.”

“Don’t need to tell me twice,” Atley insisted. Moneaux didn’t question either of them and ran for the door. He kept up behind, with Atley on the rear. Would’ve preferred the gun in front, but there’d be problems if Locke got shot whether or not they were caught. Got back out past the security checkpoint, but turning towards the

elevators led them into a war zone. Security forces were trying to fight the cybers back into their cells, but while some had already been herded away others were still fighting. Atley moved up to start clearing a path, but that caught the attention of the other cybers.

[[Dominik,]] the voice – Masha, had to remember her name now, too damn many names – spoke up. [[Clear them by saying my name. It’s a safe word I’ve managed to get into their code; most of them need some system support that I’ll be busy with.]]

“Masha!” he barked, not caring to argue with her. The attacking cybers backed off, making a path down the corridor. Had to say it twice more when they reached another group of cybers that had been out of earshot, but otherwise there wasn’t much trouble. A couple seemed to have enough of a brain that they took up positions with Atley, using the safe word to keep the other crazies off their backs.

The elevator lobby was clear, and he passed Locke over to Atley. He didn’t take the weight well, but Locke was AmCad’s objective, not his. Moneaux was speaking quickly to the other two cybers, who were nodding quickly in response to whatever she was saying to them. He called an elevator for them – lucky a freight elevator was down here, instead of passenger elevators – and waited until Moneaux was done with them. He offered her a nod and jabbed a thumb over his shoulder.

“I’m takin’ the stairs,” he told her. “I’ve kept my end, so keep yours.”

“You could come with us,” Moneaux insisted. “It’ll take a bit to clear you, but you could contract with us, have some kind of work –”

“Nuh uh. I’m no team worker. And I don’t think AmCad wants me workin’ for them. You shouldn’t, either.”

That seemed to shut her up, though whether it was shock or the soft, nameless thing she could turn on him he wasn’t sure. He turned away and started jogging for the stairs, for freedom. Their voices grew quieter as he ascended, and soon found an emergency exit that he burst through, into the crisp cold air. Breathed it in, closed his eyes, spread his arms in welcome. Freedom. This was real freedom.

[[And what will you do with it?]] Masha asked him.

“Whatever I want,” he retorted. Simple enough. He had a year to hide out; he was going to enjoy it.

Callahan

Everything hurts. Can't even think straight without giving myself a headache. Or just something hurting. Not even being clamped into a bed was doing anything to alleviate the pain.

Try to open my eyes but only see white light. Shift into cyberspace to find the same heavy locks and barriers as there'd been last time. Something was missing, as far as I could tell. Beyond the physical aches, chunks of memory and core coding are locked up and isolated, enough that I feel mentally dead. It wasn't a pleasant sensation, but it was one I could handle for as long as I needed to. Close eyes and ground back into self.

Steps echo nearby, come closer. I count at least three individuals, maybe more, surrounding me. I can picture it, a projection from above, but all abstracted. If I could move, I could -

Thought process halts, gets scrubbed. I wince as something locks down further inside the core coding. No getting to that part, apparently. Observers are getting closer. All I can do is lie still; all I do is lie still. Maybe they don't know I'm awake. Better safe than sorry. Their voices come closer, get louder. I can start piecing together snippets of their conversation; internal recording starts so I can review it later.

"...intensely complex personality matrix, never seen anything like it..."

"What about...emotional issues and those feedback triggers..."

"Locking down those memories and erasing those triggers is difficult given his age...already covered eight percent...no issues at all."

"Wake him up."

A jolt fires through my back, and my eyes are forced open. Sensation finally comes to me: I'm lying flat on a bed, spinal clamp holding me in place as my systems start up. The bed itself is turning, lifting me from horizontal to vertical. I try to get a sense of my surroundings, but the bright lights focused on me keep me from seeing the room, the people around me. Light filters prevent the glare from impairing my vision, but it's not enough to eliminate the lights. The bed eventually finishes its maneuver, and when I look forward I see a mirrored window. I can look at myself; something is different about my reflection. I try to check my memory, how I had seen myself before, but there's nothing, no recognition. I have to re-memorize my own face, the dark hair on my head, the set of my eyes and mouth, the placement and angle of my nose.

Something's wrong. I don't remember where I am, how I got here. Who I am. My pulse doesn't rise, I don't panic. That makes this worse.

My reflection is blocked by a shadowy person; female, I think. She doesn't come into the light, but I know she's watching me. I watch her back, knowing she can

examine me better than I can her, or myself. Questions form in my mind but I can't voice them.

"How are you feeling?" she asks after a long moment. Something in her voice does something to my head, my thoughts. Things are disrupted, unfocused.

"...confused," I answer. I'm pretty sure my actual reply was going to be longer.

"That's normal; debugging your systems may have scrubbed some of the extraneous data you've been collecting over the years," she says, starting to circle. I can track her with audio, and if I could tense I would be. "Any problems physically?"

"Nothing I can detect."

My answers don't sound right to myself; too flat, too empty. She doesn't seem to notice or care. I know she's standing behind my bed, and I hear things shifting and moving around. Even though I'm uneasy, anxious even, my vitals don't change, don't spike. The feeling of something wrong intensifies; she starts coming around the other side, still calm and collected.

"I'm just going to ask a few more questions; we have people monitoring your mental state," she tells me. "Your answers are very important, as well as your unconscious reactions. If you pass, you can get off the bed. If not, you'll go back to sleep. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I answer immediately. I know I need to get up, to move; her questions had to be easy enough to let me get out of here. She comes back to my front, still shadowed; I heard a paper turn. She must be carrying a clipboard, then.

I'm ready to answer her questions, but when she starts speaking it's not words; it's a code, and suddenly I'm tense, muscles pulling against my restraints. Images flash through my mind, people and places I recognize but can't name. I'm aware of speaking but I don't know what I'm saying. The images slow: a cluttered back room, a face framed by red hair and a wide tender smile. I know her. I don't remember her name, but I grab to the image, trying to search for anything that can tell me who she is. Something rips her away, and I want to scream. Another image, cityscape through a window; this one I can hold onto better, and somehow I know it's the view from my home. My home, an apartment framed with windows, with an AI that doesn't know how to let me manage my own life.

I can't grab big details, but I can cling to the small ones, pulling them together. Most of them are places, starting to coalesce into a name over a single area. My apartment, a food stand in slums, a tower on an artificial island; they are all one name, one place, and I can't reach it...

The images stop, and I'm jerked back into the present. I feel like something important has been taken from me, but the woman – the evaluator – doesn't seem to notice or care. I hear her pencil scratching on the paper on her clipboard. I get the feeling I didn't do as well as they'd wanted me to.

"What am I supposed to do, find the thing in common?" I ask. My voice is shaking and I'm not sure why; it's not fear but it's pretty damn close. My evaluator doesn't answer me. She finishes her notes and turns another page. She recites more code, and I'm caught in another whirl of images. Again I can only grab onto the smallest details – electricity burying into someone's chest, a glowing white figure in a sea of code – but I can't weave them into a coherent picture. I know they're supposed to be, and that they were linked to the earlier set. I try to keep all the details together, hoping for a thread to emerge, one commonality that would fit all the pieces together.

Two more sets go by, and I collect more details, trying to fit things together. Images shift to sounds: distant voices, whistling winds, engines of cars and bikes, footsteps, gunshots. Some of the sounds fit with the pictures, and I try to make things coherent, try to find the story.

A voice suddenly comes through, clear and completely internal.

"He belongs to us; even his escape was planned from the start. It was embedded deep in his coding, and once he acted on it we knew he was ready. A self-sufficient biomimetic individual, capable of infiltrating regular societies so smoothly no one can tell the difference."

Images fall into place, sounds included: running through a building, gun firing, glass splintering and falling, down into darkness. The fall stops, and someone else is speaking. A gentle voice, hands quick and attentive.

Jez.

Everything rushes back, all my memories, everything I could remember. I snarl as I jerk myself out of the loop, trying to tear away from the bed. Except the *duw*-damned spinal clamp is still active; I can't move until it's shut off. Can't even try to reach the charge ability. I can't even feel Masha in my code; they must have locked her out of my system when they got into my head.

They. The company that had taken the nearly-dead body of Jack Macey and turned him into me. Romarei Consolidated.

Pain shoots from my skull down, and I restrain a grunt even as my head is thrown back. I can hear the evaluator clicking her tongue at me, like some school kid getting caught setting up a prank. The bed's already lowering to lay me flat again.

"Let me the hell go," I growl at her, wishing I could thrash around instead of lying here, muscles tensing way too much. "I don't know what you want from me, but I'm startin' to get pissed off enough to keep you from getting it."

"I don't think you realize your situation, Mister Callahan," the evaluator said. I can hear her walking around on my right side, just out of sight. "From the moment Jack Macey signed on to work for the company, you've been our property, to any end we could use you for. Lucky for you, we have a client very interested in your capabilities."

"Did you mention my good looks and rakish wit?" I try to snark. Bad decision; pain shoots through me again, this time a lot more intense. When it fades out again, the edges of my sight are wavering. Not good; either I'm actually close to passing out or they're jacking my codes again. More likely the latter, since I can't shift into cyberspace without lockouts flashing over my eyes. The evaluator's still standing over me, and I can manage a glare at her even if I can't make out her face.

"Our client is interested in infiltration units; biomimetic soldiers that can blend into a society without detection, then carry out orders discreetly. Your trial run proceeded perfectly, Mister Callahan."

I blink up at her. I don't know what to say, what to think. Trial run?

"...what did you do to me?"

"It's very simple, Mister Callahan," she continues. I start to hate her voice, the monotone business spin she puts into every phrase. I'm just a product to her and her cohorts. "When your core system was being written, certain protocols were embedded in your system. We used the AI you know as Masha as a base, to ensure that your personality could develop as naturally as possible, but those protocols endured. Those protocols stimulated your desire for freedom, your activities in establishing a civilian identity...and, most importantly, your introduction into the command structure of the military defense structure. With the necessary stimuli, of course."

If I had any control over my body right now I'd be nearly freaking out. Forget that; I am freaking out. It meant the two years I'd lived free hadn't been free at all. It had been a product test, and it had taken two druids and countless civilians to prove the product worked to spec. I felt sick inside, to the point that I wanted to curl up and not have to think about it.

"Of course, there were a few hiccups," she notes. "Your emotional readings were too far out of acceptable ranges - connections with civilians, and using those to perform rather stupid operations that could get you killed."

She meant my run against Wyrick after he took Jez. So that was one point in my favor.

“Also, Masha’s integration of Mariya Kovolov’s identity. We hadn’t expected that, but her rogue tendencies can be curbed. Not to mention we’ve severed her and put a new system in place. It’s still calibrating, but once we’ve taken out the remaining defects in your system I’m sure our clients will be more than happy to have you.”

“And what about the druid stuff I can do?” I press. There had to be something else that they hadn’t had scripted. They’d take my life from me, but there had to be something that they’d put in me to keep me unique, sane. “Was that on your requirements list?”

“Why else do you think we hired Mister Macey and Miss Kovolov?” she answers, nearly coy. “After all, any infiltrator needs a secret weapon that can’t be taken by the authorities if discovered.”

I stare past her head, to the ceiling and the lights. My life had been a lie from the start? But how? It didn’t make sense, how could they have planned every move I would have made, expected and anticipated me every step of the way before I even knew what I was going to do?

“...so now what? Since you have me back.”

“It’s not that simple,” the evaluator sniffs. She paces around my head, to my other side. I hear a tapping sound, feel a sedative course into my system. It’s got to be some damn powerful stuff; my eyes nearly roll back into my head from the strength of the drug. At least I can still make sense of her words as she moves around my head again. “The rogue code Masha generated with the Kovolov identity infected you as well. It limits your effectiveness. We’ll need to find it and scrub it out before you’re fit to be turned over.”

“Just so it’s fair,” I tell her, trying to keep my voice from slurring as the drugs start shutting my systems down, “I’m not gonna make it easy on you.”

The evaluator leans in close enough that I can see a set of red lips smiling at me, teeth glistening vid-star white. I think I can make out a neon green eyeliner, even as the drugs reach my brain, start putting me to sleep.

“I’d expect nothing less, Mister Callahan. Nothing less.”