

**Victim City Stories**  
**Issue 1**  
**written by Dale Hammond**  
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### **The Chains That Bind, The Skull That Bleeds**

They thought they could trade in flesh and broken wills. They thought the women of Victim City were theirs for the taking. They thought there would be no consequences. They didn't know they were being watched. They didn't know there was a man who would stop at nothing to break their chains. They didn't know about the Bleeding Skull.

### **Beer Bong Bloodbath**

Hearts are broken, bodies used, and desires fulfilled that are so shameful they demand the privacy of the unsold lake house on the edge of Victim City.

They didn't think they would have to live with the regret.

They were right.

### **Violation: Red Holes**

Will the killer become the target, or does Death herself fear George Murdam, the Murder Man?

## **The Chains That Bind, The Skull That Bleeds**

By Dale Hammond

“You’ve been taking all your meds?”

“Yes, Miss Holly. Except for the Devratote. The headaches aren’t so bad, so I got taken off that.”

“Well, that’s some good news. I heard you did some volunteering at Services for the Blind. Is that for community service, or...”

“No, no. Just had some time on my hands, figured I could make some use of it,” he told his social worker. He didn’t tell her he was picking up orientation and mobility techniques.

“Have you thought about starting in a work training program, maybe looking towards getting a part-time job?” asked Miss Holly.

He stared at his hands on his lap. “The, the volunteering I can do for an hour or two, and not every day, before I start getting too, you know, out of it.”

“Of course. I don’t want you to think anybody’s rushing you. You can’t rush healing. But you are looking better, especially without those cuts and bruises on your face. I take it you’re keeping yourself safer than you had been.”

He made the mistake in the past of trying to cover up a black eye with makeup, something he wasn’t particularly suited at, certainly not enough to hide it from a woman’s eye. “Yeah, yeah I’ve been safe.”

“Good to hear it. Is there anything you wanted to talk about while I’m here?”

“No, ma’am. I’m good.”

“I’ll be on my way then.” Miss Holly gathered her bag and stood up. “Since you might have some time on your hands, would you be able to help me with something, Dean?”

“Always.”

Miss Holly pulled a small stack of papers out of her bag. Photocopied missing person fliers with a young woman on them. “My sister’s friend hasn’t come home in a few days. With this new thing the Police Commissioner is... well, anyway, would you be able to put up some fliers?”

“Anything to help.”

“Thanks. I’m not sure when my next visit with you will be. They’re doing some stuff with the caseloads and, well, not your problem. Thanks again, Dean.”

“Thank you, Miss Holly.” Dean saw her out of the one bedroom apartment.

Dean knew what his social worker was referring to regarding the Police Commissioner. Commissioner Foley had quietly dissolved the Missing Persons Unit of the VC Police Department, citing budgetary restraints and jurisdictional issues. “The purpose of a Police Department is to enforce the law,” he had said in press statement. “If the citizens of Victors Crossing want to report a kidnapping or a murder, these are crimes we can investigate. But it is not illegal

to be missing. If a grown man or woman isn't where their loved ones want them to be, it is not a matter for the police."

He looked at the flyers. Miss Holly had only given him a small stack, probably more to give him a sense of purpose than to actually be of help. She knew that he didn't like having his house, food, and medical bills paid for by social services, and that he wanted to do something to earn his way. As Dean Mason he could help putting up fliers.

As the Bleeding Skull, maybe he could do more.

His disability card got him a bus ride to VC University. He tacked up the flyers on various bulletin boards across campus, then took advantage of the area's many wifi hotspots to do some research on his netbook. He found some shade in a small park and began working.

From the flyer, her name is Alana Favors. She is nineteen years old. Last seen five days before. He knew that it was probably too late and that she was dead, but he was going to operate under the assumption she was alive. Her loved ones were surely doing the same.

He started with social networking sites. One of the pages had been taken over by a parent or friend, and directed her friends toward the efforts to find her. A website was put up, and several of her friends and family had posted what information they had. He learned she was a student at the community college, and that she was last seen after leaving an anime club get together on campus. Her roommate said she never made it home. Dean scanned old comments and posts, looking for a love interest. A couple of mildly creepy comments proved to be a cousin, but Alana did not appear to be in a relationship, occasionally lamenting the fact in her posts. Her last post was "I guess I'll give it one more try. Wish me luck!"

If she had left town voluntarily, she did so without a goodbye or change of clothes. Without a relationship or known stalker, the abductor was either a stranger or had a low profile. Aside from the odd movie, the only regular social event Alana attended was the anime club at VC Community College. The next meeting was in two days, a week after her disappearance.

Dean spent the rest of the afternoon over the various social networks, learning everything he could about anyone associated with Alana Favors or the anime club. Some of the members had restrictive privacy settings. Dean had a series of false profiles on many networks and message boards, many of them with pictures of sociable young women, which usually helped him gain access. He found pictures of events and studied the faces.

He looked up a satellite view of the VC Community College campus. Between the hall that housed the meeting and her dorm there were no public streets. The meeting adjourned at 9 PM, early enough for some light foot traffic around campus. A snatch off the streets was looking unlikely. But who could say she went straight home.

Dean was lost in thought, and missed his bus stop on the way home by several stops. On the walk back, the faces he had examined got mixed together. Some were guilty, some were hiding something, some were asking for help. He made it back to the apartment and tried to clear the faces from his head.

The next morning before dawn, Dean got up and began his training. Using the wifi of a neighbor who hadn't figured out how to set a password on their router, he quickly looked up the faces of Alana's friends and the members of the anime club. He looked up the VC Sheriff's Department website and reviewed the mug shots from the previous night's arrest. Dean was not naturally good with faces. So he tried harder.

He warmed up with some simple katas and shadow boxing. Elbows, fists, knees, feet, all striking the air in the middle of his apartment. Knuckle press ups and crunches.

The apartment complex was backed by a tree line, some undeveloped land, and one of VC's many abandoned construction sites. Dean slipped out the back window of his apartment, opening it just enough for his slender frame to slip through. He hopped the back fence and ran through the trees, trying a different route so as not to create a trail. He was getting better at avoiding the branches lashing at him as he ran in the dim morning light.

The construction site was abandoned, the builders bankrupt to the point they couldn't hire security. Some occupied bedrolls lined just inside the fence. Dean ran deeper into the construction for some privacy. Today was weight training.

For weights he used cinder blocks and rebar, and his routine was for strength rather than show. Deadlifts, squats, pushups with cinder blocks on his back. Between sets he ran through the mug shots in his head:

Erick Rudniki, Burglary

Jeffrey Crossley, Aggravated Assault

Marquis Johnson, Evading Arrest, Northside Murder Syndicate tattoo

Dean jumped up, grabbed the end of an exposed I-beam, and did a set of chin-ups and muscle-ups, reviewing the anime club members: Cody Carston, Tina Saddler, the faces of two men and one woman he didn't have a name for.

He jumped to a vertical I-beam and shimmied up to the next floor, jumped back down to the concrete below, practicing his tuck and roll. He finished with a jog out of the site into an adjacent park. The faces began to blur together, so he kept running and cleared his mind, concentrating only on his breathing. When he stopped, he was a mile away from where he thought he was. He jogged back to the apartment and reviewed the pictures again, quizzing himself, matching names to faces.

Dean geared up as a college student: VCU t-shirt and backpack. He didn't risk attending the anime club directly. He set himself up on a bench near the main entrance of Welsh Hall, netbook on his lap, looking studious. He checked faces as the club members filtered in, checking them off against a file of group photos, while pretending to study. Looking for known members that did not attend.

He narrowed the field to a dozen regular attendees. He excluded the women for now. He checked for posts from the men:

"Can't make this one, test coming up."

Jonathan Wexler is at VC Wing Stop.

"Sry Savior Dragon Twilight is gay."

Dillon Dawley is attending Mu Theta Pi Playbro Ball.

Dawley had some of his accounts set at private, but a request Dean had made from the account of "Tayshalicious" had been accepted. No mention of the anime club on his accounts, but he had been tagged in group pictures, and had left comments about the club on other members profiles, including a "I'm all over that shit" referring to the last meeting. Dawley had been editing all the accounts he could, removing any reference to the anime club. There was the possibility grief was a factor, but the grieving don't go to frat parties. And neither do anime club members.

There was no other reference to Mu Theta Pi on his profile, and he didn't appear to be a member. Either he intended on crashing, or he was a guest. Either way, the Bleeding Skull wanted to know why. He was going to crash a frat party.

In the Welsh Hall bathroom he took off the VCU shirt, revealing the black wife beater below. He pulled his hoodie from the backpack and loaded his pockets with some of the smaller gear. The netbook went in the backpack, and the backpack got stashed in a trashcan a block from Mu Theta Pi house. Dean waited until the party was in full swing, judging by the holler and whooping. He would have a problem passing for a fraternity brother, but drug dealer he could manage. And drug dealers were always welcome.

He pulled the hoodie up and walked to the front door, cell phone in hand. A particular beefy frat held a hand up to his chest as he came inside. "Private party, bro."

"Got a text," Dean winked casually

"Who from?"

"Jay," Dean guessed. If there wasn't a Jay, he could pass it off for John or Joe, but the frat at the door looked like he stopped caring and nodded him in.

He weaved through the crowd of drunks until he found Dawley, waiting his turn to play Guitar Hero at a TV. Dean grabbed a beer and positioned himself near a trio of girls. He had his back to Dawley but made sure he was within earshot. Dean didn't want Dawley recognizing him if they crossed paths again.

"Oh, man, you hear?" Dean started, matching his volume and obnoxiousness to the crowd. "They found that girl!"

One of the girls took the bite. "Which one?"

"That girl. The one that was missing. They finally found her."

"Is she OK?"

"The police are working on it now." Dean hedged his bets on whether she was alive or not. Either way, Dawley bolted. Dean turned to see him and another man head to the front door. Dean tore away from the girls and headed out the back door.

He rushed around a keg line and came back around the front through a side gate. Dawley and the other man were rushing down the street, arguing in hushed tones Dean couldn't quite make out. Dean ran at a crouch behind cars on the other side of the street. The two got in a jeep two blocks from the frat house. Dean darted across the street as it pulled out of the spot. He crossed behind the jeep as it sped up, tossing a small metal box that stuck to the bumper. A GPS tracking device with a magnet on the frame. The placement wasn't good, but he hoped he'd only need it for the night.

Dean ran to the trashcan where he had stashed his backpack and retrieved his netbook. The GPS could be tracked via the manufacturer's website, through an account Dean had opened under a false name with a prepaid debit card. They advertised it as being real time, but the location was only updated every fifteen minutes.

Dean called a cab and ran five blocks to a coffee shop to meet it. By the time the cab arrived, Dean had tracked the jeep to a freeway headed to the suburbs.

"Where to?"

"Wilson Heights. I'm waiting for my friend to text me directions from there."

"All right, but the meter's running."

On the move, Dean kept hitting refresh on his browser. The tracker was moving into the outskirts of Wilson Heights, where graveyards of half-built developments stood empty or unfinished. He lost his wifi connection and couldn't find another open one. He had the driver drop him off at an apartment block nearest the last location he had and paid him with most of the rest of his cash. He would need to find a different way home.

At the apartments, he ducked between two cars and tried again for a wifi connection. There were several at the apartments, and he tried passwords like 12345 and admin, or the same as the network name. He got in with cutekitty92 and checked the GPS. It was at the far end of an empty development, down a short unnamed dead-end road a half mile away. Dean took in the map for a solid minute, memorizing the street layout and various routes.

Dean jogged the distance, on the lookout for car headlights. He cut from the sidewalk to a backyard when a pair of lights started to turn towards him several blocks ahead. He couldn't tell if it was the jeep. The development was sparsely populated. Sun-worn "For Sale" signs littered the front yards. The outskirts of VC were littered with such developments, built during the real estate bubble, and left languishing after the housing market collapsed and the developers went bankrupt.

As he came up to his destination, he cut through an overgrown field instead of approaching by the street. The house was a small two-story. Overgrown lawn, no yard furniture aside from a single chair by the back door. The paint still looked okay. Like its neighbors, Dean guessed it was never sold or rented. No vehicle in the driveway, but a couple of interior lights were on. The jeep likely double backed while he ran through backyards.

Bleeding Skull pulled a thin surgical mask from his jean cuffs and slipped it over his face. The hood came up. He slipped through the backyard and checked the windows. No sound, no movement. Inside there was little furniture. A couple of cheap chairs in the living room, a TV on a crate on the floor. No kitchen fixtures, some pizza boxes and bags of chips.

The back door was unlocked. Bleeding Skull turned the knob silently and slipped into the kitchen. He crept with practiced silence through the bottom level. Nobody there. A few DVDs by the TV, a game console, empty cigarette packets, a bong. He crept up the carpeted stairs to check the upstairs rooms. Only one door was closed. He stuck his head into the open doors first. No furnishings aside from a couple sleeping bags and air mattresses. He approached the closed door and lowered himself to the floor. He held his breath and listened. Some sniffing, a little gulping. Bleeding Skull cracked his neck, ready for movement. He turned the knob silently and opened it into the room.

The sounds came from the far corner. Soft gasping. Crying. And some buzzing. Bleeding Skull's eyes grew accustomed to the dark, and from the light creeping around the window blinds, he made out a shape quivering in the corner. He stood straight and felt the wall for a light switch.

He saw the girl first. Naked in the corner, on her knees, a chain coming a hole in the wall to a metal loop around her neck. Her hands were in front, in prayer possession. She didn't react much to the light. Bleeding Skull quickly

took in the room. An air mattress on the floor with a single sheet. Some condoms and wrappers. Torn stockings, tubes of lubrication, beer cans, whiskey bottles. Stains on the carpet, though at least not blood, he thought.

Bleeding Skull grabbed up the sheet and approached the girl. She curled in a bit but kept her pose. "I said I was sorry," she yelled through her tears, an edge in her voice. "I don't have a fucking bathroom, what do you expect me to do?" Bleeding Skull came up to her and laid the sheet over her back. It was then that he noticed that she was in a prayer position over some feces. The buzzing was flies.

The girl flinched when the sheet came over her. Bleeding Skull made an effort not to touch her. "I'm not one of them. I'm getting you out of here. You're going home."

She turned her head, but recoiled when she saw the mask and hood.

"What the fuck are you supposed to be?"

She was not Alana Favors. "Someone who doesn't like to see a woman in chains. Let's get you out of here." She had police style handcuffs on her wrists. She pulled the sheet closed in her front as Bleeding Skull led her away from the corner into the middle of the room. "Relax, I'm not going to hurt you," he said, as he undid his belt. The girl became alarmed, until Bleeding Skull pulled the belt up and used the prong to pick the cuffs. He put his belt back on and examined the neck shackles. It was attached to a thick chain by a padlock. The chain led to a hole punched in the wall, and locked again in a loop around a thick supporting beam. "Do you know where the keys are?"

The girl sniffled and had problems catching her breath. "I don't know. They don't take it off."

"We'll figure it out. Do you have clothes here?"

"Yeah. I think they're in the closet."

Bleeding Skull went to a walk-in closet. There were some clothes, a purse, and a selection of lingerie on the floor. He scooped it all up and laid it in front of the girl. "Here, get dressed. I'll find the key and get you out of here."

She started sorting through the pile of clothes on the floor. "OK, OK, just hurry. They were just here, and I think they were just going to get some beer. I think they're coming back."

Bleeding Skull went into the adjoining bathroom and rummaged through the drawers. Some toilet paper, condom boxes, no keys. He started downstairs to check for tools in the garage when headlights shone through the front windows.

Bleeding Skull slipped down the stairs silently and backed up to the end of the living room. He started running when he heard the key in the door. It was ajar about a foot when he slammed into it with a flying shoulder tackle. He heard skull bounce off wood. Bleeding Skull snapped to his feet, cut off the porch lights, and swung open the door. There were three shapes on the dark porch. He kicked the middle one in the chest, knocking him back over the stairs and spilling the other two like bowling pins.

The one on the right got a snap kick to the groin. He doubled over, and Bleeding Skull wrapped his forearm around his throat in a headlock. Bleeding Skull kicked his feet forward and the two fell backwards, driving the top of the

man's skull against the door frame.

The one on the left made a blind punch in his direction. Bleeding Skull side stepped it, caught the arm, and locked in his shoulder. His knee came up into his solar plexus, then met his face. As he fell, Bleeding Skull swung him through the open doorway.

The one on the right started to stand. Bleeding Skull slammed an elbow into the back of his head, smacking his face against the door jamb again. Bleeding Skull grabbed a fistful of hair and pulled him into the house as well.

The last one still lied on his back in the front yard. Bleeding Skull's eyes had adjusted to the dark. This one was Dawley. His legs slid around beneath him, and he didn't look like he could exhale. Bleeding Skull left him for a minute and came back to the two inside the house.

He recognized one as Dawley's companion from the frat house, still conscious, but looking like he couldn't see. Bleeding Skull yanked a handful of cables from behind the TV set, pushed the man to the floor, and tied his hands behind his back. "Don't get up," he hissed.

Bleeding Skull turned his attention to the other man. College aged like the others. A comic book t-shirt and belly. He was starting to cry. Bleeding Skull grabbed some more power cords and turned him over. "Don't, don't," he gasped.

"Shut up and don't move." Bleeding Skull quickly bound his wrists and turned his attention back outside. Dawley was at his feet, but stumbling. His face had more anger and less fear than his friends.

"You from another clan?" he sneered between snatched breaths.

Bleeding Skull played along. "I'm here for the girl."

Dawley stood up straight, a fire lighting in his eyes. "Get your own brood sow! You want mine, you challenge me for it, coward!"

Something more is going on. Dawley sized him up. No glasses, no squinting, but telltale marks on the bridge of his nose. An Affliction knock off shirt and new designer jeans but a cheap haircut. Some muscles at the bicep but skinny legs. An outcast in high school, trying to get with the cool kids in college. Just started lifting weights and thinks he's tougher than he is. Bleeding Skull would have chalked him up as harmless if he didn't keep women chained up.

He would play his game for now. "Consider yourself challenged."

Dawley started "I'll name the..."

"Right now, you fat fuck," Bleeding Skull taunted. He cocked his head to the side, put his hands behind his back.

The fire in Dawley's eyes flared. "I'm not fat!" He telegraphed a right hook. Bleeding Skull leaned out of its way without trying. He didn't like fair fights. He wasn't very good at them. But he hoped a sound humiliation would dowse that fire and get Dawley in the mood to answer some questions. Dawley turned and swung again before he was even in range. Bleeding Skull giggled softly. "I will vanquish your faggot ass!" Dawley screamed, his voice cracking. He tried a front kick.

Bleeding Skull decided it was time to take control again. He grabbed the ankle and twisted, while kicking Dawley's other leg out from under him. He fell on his face, and before he could get up Bleeding Skull had his ankle trapped in

the crook of his knee. He bent it up behind his back. Dawley felt the pull in his leg as an elbow crooked at his head and pulled his neck back. Pain popped around his stomach, knees, ankle, and neck.

"I submit," he managed, flailing his arms.

"The keys," Bleeding Skull hissed. Dawley pulled a single padlock key from his pocket. Bleeding Skull didn't have anything to tie him up with. Fucking shame. He stood up and football kicked Dawley in the jaw.

Bleeding Skull started back up the porch, running when he heard a voice. The companion from the frat house was talking into a phone lying on the floor, arms still tied behind him. Must have been in his back pocket. Bleeding Skull snatched it up and turned it off.

"The rest of us are coming," he taunted. "It was stupid for you to come alone."

Bleeding Skull took a USB stick from his pocket and stuck it in the phone. He took his captive's car keys, pulled out his wallet, and memorized his name: Michael Bailey. He checked the other man's pockets. The software wouldn't work on this one's smart phone. The name on his debit card: Cody Bianca.

Bleeding Skull retrieved the USB stick and tossed the phone to other side of the room. He had no time for questions, and he wasn't willing to bet this woman's life that the police would get there before whoever was on their way. He ran up the stairs and knocked on the open door in case she wasn't ready.

"We have to go. More are coming," he said, showing her the key. She started to kneel, then stopped herself and just turned to allow Bleeding Skull access to the lock. The padlock and shackle slipped off.

The woman grabbed a handful of chain and struck Bleeding Skull across the forehead. She ran out the door, high heels in one hand, purse in the other. He shook it off and went downstairs. He wasn't going to chase her. She had every right to run.

Downstairs she was kneeling over Bianca, smacking him in the face with a sharp heel. "Where's my phone, mother fucker!" She saw Bleeding Skull descend the stairs. She pointed a heel at him. "Get the fuck away from me!"

Bleeding Skull held his hands up in submission and stopped. "Tell the lady where her phone is," he suggested to Bianca.

"We threw it in the river," he blubbered, tears mixing with rivulets of blood from his forehead. She stood up and gave him a quick kick in the midsection before rushing out the front door. Bleeding Skull followed her outside at a respectful distance.

She looked around the front lawn, deciding her next move. Bleeding Skull pulled out Bailey's car keys and pushed the remote to unlock the door. The jeep's flashing lights in the driveway got her attention. "It would probably be better to drive." She turned and glared at him. He tossed her the keys. She caught them and stood for a moment, weighing her options. "I wouldn't blame me if you wanted to leave alone, but seeing as how the rest of them are coming to kick my ass for what I did to their friends, I could really use a ride." Bleeding Skull's voice softened as he talked to the woman.

“What’s with the fucking mask?”

“What I’m doing isn’t exactly legal. I’m on my fifth felony tonight, by my count.”

She nodded to herself, then tossed the keys back. “Better if you drive, I’m kind of fucked up.”

Bleeding Skull caught them and tossed them back. “Better if you drive. I’m still a little dizzy,” he said, pointing to his forehead.

She took the driver’s side. Bleeding Skull pulled his magnet mounted GPS device off the back bumper and popped it in a more discrete place under the car before getting into the back seat.

“Sorry, I thought you were one of them, and you were fighting over me.” She started the jeep. “How do we get out of here?” Bleeding Skull directed her away from the freeway to a back road behind the development to avoid crossing paths with anyone on the way out that may recognize the vehicle. He produced an old flip phone and dialed 911. He reported screaming and gunshots at the house, then hung up. Bleeding Skull doubted that the police would be able to make any arrests without the women’s cooperation, but he wanted to cause some trouble. The chains might open an investigation on the police’s end, or at least generate an incident report that he could get some names out of.

“So if you’re not with them, and you’re not with the cops... what’s the fucking deal with the mask, dude?”

“May I know your name,” he asked gently, going through the items in the back of the jeep. He focused on a laptop.

“Sintalia.” Her stripper name, which matches the heels and surely fed her abusers disrespect. “What’s yours?”

“The Bleeding Skull.” She snickered at that. “And when the police asked who broke into the house, let you loose, and kicked the asses of those three pieces of shit, what will you tell them?”

She giggled despite herself. “Some crazy fucker in a hoodie and skull mask. Fair enough. I’m just glad somebody was looking for me.”

“I’m sorry to say I wasn’t looking for you. There’s another girl. Alana Favors.”

“Fucking figures,” she mumbled under her breath. Then it came out. “I sat there and did everything they wanted me to, and all I could think about was who was going to help me, and I couldn’t think of anybody who would even know I needed them.”

Bleeding Skull opened the laptop and found that it was still turned on and logged in. He produced his USB stick and stuck it in a slot. “I’m sorry I didn’t know about you. Ms. Favors is a friend of a friend, and that’s why I knew about her. But I’m glad I found you, and I’m glad you’re out of there. Head over towards those houses.” Bleeding Skull was steering her back into a different development.

“I’m sorry I’m being such a bitch. It’s not like I don’t disappear for days anyway, I shouldn’t be surprised. I think I was only there for two or three days anyway. It just seemed like forever.”

“You’re not being a bitch, Sintalia. Nobody should go through what you must have gone through. Nobody has the right to do that to another person. I’m sorry

for what happened to you.”

Sintalia smiled and looked at Bleeding Skull through the rear view mirror. “Thanks. Thanks for that, crazy skull face, dude, whatever. Where are we going?”

They were moving closer to the freeway, houses and apartment block giving way to convenience and grocery stores. “That’s up to you. I don’t tell you what to do. The police or the hospital would be my suggestion, but that’s up to you.” He tore a page out of a comic book lying in the back seat and started writing with a sharpie from his bag. “Here is the address you were at, and the names of those three men.” He tore another page. “Here is an IM address. If you don’t want to go to the police, I can understand, but you may be able to help me. If you feel up to talking, message me. And If you’re not reporting it, I’d ditch the car if I were you.” He produced a digital voice recorder and felt around the plastic interior moulding for a suitable cavity.

She stopped at a red light. “Are you going to be able to get where you need to go?” Bleeding Skull asked.

She looked out the front window. “That sounds really deep the way you said that,” she sniffed. “But if you mean am I good to drive, yes. I can take you..”

The light turned green. “I’ll miss my bus. I hope to hear from you.” Dean Mason pulled his mask off as he got out of the car and stepped onto the sidewalk.

Dean meditated in lieu of sleep on the bus ride and three connections back to his apartment. He went over everything he knew while doing his exercises. It was too late to hit the construction yard safely, so he did them in his room. Hindu squats and handstand pushups.

His leads: three names, a rental property, a frat house, an anime club, and some odd statements. He kept his mind away from speculating. Get as many facts as you can, then start the guesswork. Dean dropped to near splits and stretched out his legs. Some future sources of intel: spyware on a cell phone and laptop, a voice activated recorder in the jeep, and Sintalia, if she contacts him.

Dean pulled a bag from behind his hot water heater in a utility closet. He closed his eyes and reached inside. The bag was filled with a variety of cell phones, most deactivated, that he acquired from a variety of sources. He practiced identifying the brand by the shape and feel of the phone, and tested his memory of how to navigate the menus quickly.

Unless Sintalia went to the police, it was unlikely that his earlier call would lead to an arrest. But it would turn up the heat. Heat makes the scared talk, and the stupid make mistakes. Sintalia was alive. Dean hoped the same for Alana Favors. He cursed himself for taking his two hours of practice and exercise, but if he skipped them every time there was a crisis he would be ill-prepared to face the next one.

He did make a shortcut and bathed while practicing holding his breath under water. He took his netbook and began researching on the bus ride to the library. The central library was near the courthouse, and not all records were to be found online.

He checked the booking logs for his three sparring partners from the night before. No such luck. He skimmed the rest of the night's mug shots and skimmed through their associated charges, but nothing related jumped out.

He did social media recon on the three. Dawley he was already familiar with. Michael Bailey was too common of a name, and he couldn't find any public accounts with his face on them. Cody Bianca had some presence. A freshman at VCU. Some "likes" for anime and comic books.

He moved on to the house from last night. Several real estate listings as For Sale. The taxes were paid by Lloyd Dawley, as were the taxes on several other houses and condos. Dean made a note of those locations for future reference.

Mu Theta Pi wasn't connected with the community college. Dawley could not have been pledging. Dean forced himself again to stop making connections. Facts first. He checked as much of their membership as he could from their website and connected social media. A search of the local news revealed a hazing scandal eight years previously, but those alumni should be long gone.

He got off the bus and entered the central library. A security guard went through his bag on the way in. Dean went straight to the fiction section and turned the paperback racks around until he found what he was looking for. He had never read these books before but the covers used to turn his head, especially during puberty. He found one: *The Slave Wenches of Dominus* by

Murray Walton. On the cover was a beautifully painted barbarian warrior in a loin cloth holding a chain. At the end of that chain, a woman in a metal bikini, kneeling, hands in prayer, a shackle around her neck.

“Gogan the strong, thou surely are the strongest of the warriors of Dominus. Thou shalt do whatever is thy will.”

“Silence, sow!” Gogan used the least of his strength as he introduced the sow to the back of his hand, lest his full force strike her as dead as the Lizardarians of the burning swamplands he so recently vanquished. “I need not your permission to have my pleasure, for I would take what I desire. Besides, I have a mind to put your mouth to better purposes.”

Dean flipped through the paperback, not able to read through the whole page. Sword fights, chains, lengthy descriptions of muscled warriors, and the strange words from last night liberally sprinkled through the pages. Clan. Sow. Vanquish.

Dean returned the paperback and settled at a table with his netbook for some internet research. Murray Walton wrote a series of fantasy novels beginning in the late 1960s set on the world Dominus. Clans of warriors fought for survival against the reptilian Lizardarians, and fought each other for breeding stock, as the Lizardarians had kidnapped most of the women for food. The Lizardarians’ had a taste for the fat and old, so only fit young women were safe. Early books had male domination as a subtext, but it began to dominate the plots of later books. An attempt by some of the woman to withhold sex for better treatment led to women being literally enslaved in chains, and in later books it was explained that women weren’t truly human, and started to be referred to as brood sows. By the 1980s the Lizardarians rarely made an appearance, and the series devolved into bondage pornography.

The series was cancelled in the mid 1980s, and Walton became famous in the publishing world for his angry letters to editors, claiming that weak men being dominated by women was the cause of his work not being published. The letters were reprinted in fanzines, and it became a running gag to read excerpts from his unpublished works at Sci-Fi conventions.

In the last decade, the series found a new life in the form of Endless Worlds of Fantasy, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. The game’s concept was that any fantasy or science fiction character or franchise could be simulated on the same world. The crew of Star Trek could go on a mission with the hobbits from Lord of the Rings. Players began creating their characters based on the world of Dominus, as a joke at first. Clans would fight over “sows”, and the vanquished would send porn pictures to the winners. Some of the players would send actual pictures of their wives and girlfriends, and the practice came offline in the shape of the Ways of Dominus.

Dean read a blog writing about the “Cult of Dominus”, but as far as he could tell, there was no actual leadership or even organization. Players of Endless Worlds of Fantasy began wife swapping outside of the game, and this circle began attracting people interested in BDSM, mostly in rural areas. Swinger

parties were held, and friendly games of poker (or online duels on EWOFF) were held, the winner getting sexual favors from the sow of the vanquished.

He found one news report from Georgia in which a fight club was broken up by police that intersected with the Ways of Dominus, but that was the only instance of any illegal activity that he could find. The “sows” were consenting to their roles, though many of them were undoubtedly in abusive relationships. Nothing like Sintalia’s situation.

Dean moved on to YouTube. There was a phenomena of “challenge videos” posted by those that followed the Ways of Dominus. These preceded parties, and different clans would taunt their opponents, bragging about their might, and sometimes showing off their sows and how well trained they were. Dean plugged in some ear buds and found a seat against the wall so the rest of the library wasn’t disturbed.

A search of Dominus Victors Crossing or Dominus Victim City did not yield anything useful. He began slogging through challenge videos. Skinny shirtless men with peach fuzz moustaches holding bored toothless women at the end of chains. Some in double-wides, some in apartments, some in the woods. Dean clicked quickly through related videos looking for faces. Some wore masks, giving him the unpleasant task of listening through whole videos and trying to remember the voices from last night. He wasn’t good at voices.

It didn’t take long. A fat kid in a flame shirt and skull mask on his bedroom webcam, X-Men poster in the background.

“First of all, Rockarolla69, I’m not fat! This is pure muscle, sculpted in the burning swamps.” The kid flexed from the safety of inside his shirt. He looked at his computer screen below the webcam. “No! No! You’re the fag! You are!” His bedroom door starts to open. “Mom!”

The video stops. “Fat Ass Loser Responds” has well over a million hits. Little Dillon Dawley had gone viral. Several Fat Ass Loser related videos and remixes were reposted, but clearly Dawley had taken down his original posting profile. Dean suffered through the rest of the videos. Several recurring themes: he’s not fat, you’re the fag, not him, and he’s looking for a brood sow.

Fat Ass Loser was too broad a search term, but he managed to find the handle Dawley gave himself: Domicide. From there he searched Ways of Dominus message boards, where he found that Domicide was the stuff of legends. Several long posts told stories of him inviting himself to swinger parties, getting beaten up and thrown out, claiming to be twice his age on dating websites.

This was in Arkansas. Fits with the idea of Dawley reinventing himself in a new city. Would he move out of state for any community college, much less VC? Might have gotten in trouble living with mom, so dad sets him up in VC. Dad has some real estate that Dawley’s taking advantage of. Alana Favors may be in one of those other properties. Unless she’s dead and Sintalia was her replacement.

Dawley’s first reaction was that the Bleeding Skull was from another clan. Dawley had a clan of at least three. Were there more in the clan? Was there more than one clan involved? Dawley found a couple of BDSM want ads in VC, but no organized presence that he could find anywhere near that part of the

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