

No Dogs in Philly

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Smashwords Edition

This book is available in print at most online retailers.

To Teofil, MC, G.E., Jamike, and Sky

Pronunciation Guide

Gaespóra: Guy-ass-pour-a

Elzi: El-zee

Saru: Sah-roo

Ria: Ree-uh

UausuaU: You-ows-you-ow. Often abbreviated to Uau.

Wekba: Wake-bah

ElilE: Ee-lie-uh-lee

Hemu: He-moo

IlusithariusuirahthisulI: Ill-oo-suh-thar-ee-us-ear-ah-tuh-sul-eye

Chapter 1

Saru had ignored the calls from the Philadelphia Daily, the call from Frank Galloway to appear on *Wake the Hell Up! Philly*, the call from Lorelei Ilesella to be interviewed on *Tonight Tonight*, and even a call from Mayor Whitlow's press secretary requesting a photo op. The call that gave her the greatest pleasure to ignore came from the Gaespora. It came in the usual fashion of summons from the ultra-wealthy and ultra-powerful wishing to impress. There was a custom sonata su-tone that had been attuned to her psychosomatic profile. The image that appeared on her player was of a peaceful green forest with a trickling brook—it was a pretty accurate re-creation of the forest behind her parents' farmhouse in Tyrone. This told her all she needed know: they wanted her, and her specifically. She hit ignore.

Five seconds later the su-tone appeared again, the sonata and the image of her parents' forest. She hit ignore again. Five seconds later there was a new su-tone—not pleasant piano, just a horrible grating, like scratched vinyl and kitchen knives clattering in the sink. The forest was burned to the ground and the river ran with blood. What the fuck? She hit ignore. She'd never seen any su-tone like it. She ordered her player to ignore all messages from suspected Gaesporan nodes.

The su-tone appeared again, about five minutes later, and now she was pissed. She had spent good money on an override, floating a standard bid of over \$3,000 to block commercial calls. Any jackass dumb enough to call her private line would have to pay at least that amount to make an attempt. It worked in screening out the riffraff but she realized there was no way she could win a bidding war with the Gaespora. They could keep her player ringing day and night for a lifetime. She unfastened the dime-sized player from below her right earlobe and placed it on the center of her desk. She retrieved *Ethics in the Age of Knowing* (a gift from Eugene, never opened) from the otherwise empty bookshelf, held it over her head, and smashed the player just as it began the vinyl scratching again. Problem solved.

The next morning her office was closed. The whole damn building, forty-five stories, right on the corner of Thirteenth and Locust. There was a crowd of confused workers out front surrounding the superintendent, who was trying pudgily to answer their questions: What's going on? Why is the building closed? Why can't we get to work and trundle on in our sad, sad lives?

"The building is under new ownership," the super said, shouting over the crowd. "They've changed all the locks."

"What do you mean 'new ownership'? How is that possible?"

"Please, people, I know just as much as you do at this point. I got the call this morning. No one gets in."

"That's not legal!"

"You can't do that!"

"What about our jobs?"

"What about our stuff?"

Saru left and turned down Walnut Street, walking east, no particular destination in mind. They had taken her player and her office—for there could be no misunderstanding the message. They wanted her, bad, and they were willing to spend a lot of money and inconvenience a lot of other people to get to her. There were, as far as she knew, over sixty different businesses, large and small

in her building—she occupied a tiny two-room office on the thirteenth floor that didn't even have its own bathroom. They could have sent two toughs to stand in front of her door or bribed someone to change the locks, but they bought the whole damn building and all that headache.

She found a Nikafe and bought a small black that she jazzed up with a splash or five of bourbon from her flask. She sat at a small table facing the window and watched the people hurry by. It had started to rain, gray drops for a black sky. An elzi lay outside in front of her, body blocking the gutter. The water pooled around him, black, acidic, rising to his neck. She wondered if he would drown.

This was a lucrative age for the private investigator—so many people disappearing, and a weak, underfunded, unmotivated, amoralized police force more likely to take a bribe than a stab at a criminal. Saru was good, she knew, but hardly the best, and maybe no one else realized how lucky she'd been in the Favre case. Nine times out of ten it was a kid looking into the UausuaU, no real mystery to solve—fuck, her job was 90 percent maid service—but the Favre job just happened to be an honest kidnapping and she just happened to be friends with enough scumbags to get a good tip.

The rescue was a solid piece of work, she had to admit. The kidnappers were suspected Puritans, crusaders, implant and improvement free as whatever God made them. They had taken the child not for ransom but to bring him over to their way of thinking with good old-fashioned torture—the family had gotten some fingernails in the mail. The kid was a scion of the Favre, the family that owned Priamco that owned Freedom Innovation Technologies (FIT) that begat Diosis that manufactured all manner of vaccines against the diseases of sin. It was an odd target as the Favre had about as much operational knowledge of Diosis as Saru did of her own small intestine, but the Puritans didn't strike her as being a particularly educated bunch.

She had hired a few mercenaries to go on the hunt with her. There was a Net ranger named Pollycock, who'd proved useless as the Puritans obviously didn't use Net technology. She'd found a sniffer on South Street, a scent fetishist who had jammed a screwdriver in his eyes and ears to focus on his favored sense. He had a keyboard on his wrist, a real hack job held in place with chicken wire, but it worked well enough to communicate and hammer out a deal. She'd figured that if these folks were serious in their beliefs they'd have to stick to a pretty narrow diet to avoid Gaesporan food alteration and they'd have a unique smell. It didn't turn out to be the case—the sniffer was good but not that good and there were all kinds of other things that got in the way. Leading him around the city on a leash, she'd seen how the general reek of shit and garbage confused even a man who could sniff out a pig from his donut farts.

They had to be in the AZ, the Assistance Zone. There was barely any technology there, no cornercams or autometers, fuck, not even running water or a security spike in most places. Any Net access points would be illegal and unmonitored. There was a great mass of elzi, lured by the unmonitored Net access and the assistance points, the great pillbox buildings that delivered food weekly to the poor and useless. Originally actual humans had distributed the food aid, but that plan had been scuttled quick as the elzi didn't wait in line and they didn't fill out paperwork. Every Monday underground trolleys brought in food to the distribution centers. It was raised up on elevators, the domes opened, and elzi swarmed over the feast in an orgy of consumption. Paradoxically, this was the safest day to venture into the Assistance Zone—an elzi was less likely to take a lick at your throat if he had bread in his belly. Every month or so a resolution was entered in council to poison the food and clear out the elzi menace, but the rehabbers always shot it down. Idiots.

She had ventured in on a Monday with the sniffer, no real plan other than to follow his nose and find some granola-munching zealots. They had wandered aimlessly, almost running into an elzi frenzy, which seemed to excite the sniffer for some reason. The very odors that repelled her, the

diarrhea reek of decay the elzi exuded, were ambrosia to him. She thanked her private God that she'd been blessed with fetishes considered close enough to normal.

There amidst the shrieks and growls of the elzi and the ecstatic panting of the sniffer, she had had her breakthrough. The kidnapers had nabbed this kid off the street, shot the fuck out of his Royce, dragged out the driver and two bodyguards and executed them. They'd used blenders to liquefy the brains and prevent memory recreation, but the bullets themselves were the key. They cost a fat buck—these were high-class, tuxedo bullets, not something your standard thug could afford even if he saved his welfare checks and mugging spoils for a lifetime. She checked the three munitions stores in Rittenhouse that stocked blenders. No robberies, but a sale at Franklin's Freedom Assurance Emporium to a Walter Fran four days earlier—two days before the kidnapping.

From there it had been almost too easy. She'd hopped onto the Net and plugged in Walter Fran and the Favre Group. There were sixteen connections. Walter Fran had gone to school with Charles Favre, the boy's father. They had started a company together, Glorium, a religious update impulse motivator that identified sinful thought and generated warnings ranging from flashing red hallucinations to migraines. They had argued over the scope. Walter believed it should be a tool to guide the McFaithful and Charles saw it as a corrective measure for the prison population.

The feds got involved. They wanted the impulse to become a standard input in all citizens—part of the birth cocktail. It would warn citizens away from thinking treasonous or law-breaking thoughts. The bill made it out of committee, but then it was squashed by the Hawks with Gaesporan backing. The Gaespora, of course, opposed any mass impulse programming of the population.

The whole deal had become a distraction to Charles. He was by then involved in building Priamco. He bought out Walter and as a final fuck you he changed the company to Glorium Galorium, a sex impulse that delivered pleasure depending on the degree of transgressive thought. It became a best seller. The whole kidnapping was a grudge, nothing more, an attack of opportunity by one elite on another.

Proof would have been impossible, and even if she'd gotten it the momentum of the legal system favored the aggressor. She'd found Fran's condo in Rittenhouse, a penthouse suite, though not in the nicest building and nowhere near as nice as the Favre estate. She'd bribed the garage guard with a few hundred bucks and waited behind a pylon next to Fran's car. When he came out she'd zapped him unconscious with her cattle prod and tied him up with zip wires. The old ways are best, her mother used to say. She'd driven Fran in his own GMW to the Favre estate and handed him over to their director of security, along with her report. They would've tapped his brain and ripped out the memories of the thugs he'd hired, or maybe just straight tortured him. There was a chance he'd hired the thugs and been vague on the instructions, but she didn't think so. If it was a grudge he'd want the proof, want to know, want to see his revenge on the big screen.

She'd taken a cab to the police station and turned herself in. Eugene had phoned and argued her case and the Favre had paid her fine. She was in and out in forty-five minutes. The Favre security people had found the boy in a church basement in the AZ. The kidnapers had broken a few bones and pulled a few teeth, but he was fine. He took a trip to the Gaespora and was healthier than he'd ever been. The whole adventure was quite exciting for him, quite a win—a good story to impress the fun girls. He could have died in a ditch for all Saru cared, but finding him alive and pretty earned her a fat bonus, so all in all she was happy. It had been an exciting week, a lively news cycle for April, and somehow in all the excitement some dipshit security guard somewhere had mentioned her name to the press and now Saru Solan was famous. A hero, a true face of private justice, a symbol that the system worked. Shit.

And now her brand-new player was broken—not her fault—and her office building had been bought by the Gaespora. That's what it was. They were using her. She was the star of the moment, good looking, she reasoned (hoped?), for a law bitch—she still had all her teeth, at least, and only

one fair scar down her cheek—and they wanted to bring media attention to some bullshit issue or other. It was that bastard Whitlow trying to polish his dick with star power so people would forget what an awful job he was doing. To be fair, she didn't know any cities that had succeeded in scrubbing the streets of the elzi, but at least they'd spent less money failing. A third-plus of her winnings each year went to city taxes, and they sure hadn't fixed any fucking potholes yet.

She finished her coffee and then her flask and walked out into the rain. A homeless man was offering umbrella service and after a quick negotiation she paid him eight bucks to walk her as many blocks south. He grabbed the bills and took off; she clubbed him in the back of the knee with the prod (off) and took his umbrella, throwing the eight Ws down into the wet filth of the sidewalk. Bastard, it's more than you deserve. She walked down Pine Street to an old brownstone mansion with a fancy copper sign on the gate that read: "Eugene Gercer-han Bernstein, Attorney at Law." She opened the gate and, ignoring the buzzer, pounded on the heavy oak door.

Sissy, his secretary, opened the door. Petite woman, mid thirties, dressed in the latest fashion—a dress of brown bands that wrapped around her body and left visible just a hint of black panties and bra. It went well with the leather gun belt around her waist.

"How many times have I told you to use the buzzer?" she said, annoyed.

Saru shoved past her into the antechamber, tracking mud onto the rug and draping her purple peacoat over the chair by the fireplace. She felt a hand on her shoulder, a surprisingly strong grip. She tensed.

"You're not special," Sissy hissed. "You're not different."

Saru took a deep breath. She felt the rage of the unwanted, unasked-for touch, her blood quickening, body warming.

"I'm going to break your wrist," she said.

The grip didn't waver; Saru wondered what was going through the other woman's mind. What would happen if they fought? What would Sissy's move be? To jerk down and slip a tranq dart in her neck, most likely. She'd wake up in the gutter like an elzi, wallet gone, piss on her face, maybe some freak would steal her clothes and feel her up. Of course she'd get a good, hard zap at Sissy's thighs before she dropped, give the cunt some action, and what a pretty picture that would be, the two of them passed out in Eugene's fancy-ass foyer.

The fingers let go. Stiffly, Sissy dropped her arms to her sides.

"He's with another client," she spat. "You'll have to wait."

"No thank you."

Saru stomped down the hallway, making her presence good and known, scuffing up the wood floor with her boots, trailing a hand along the wood-paneled wall and skewing all the paintings along the way. She half expected to feel the needle prick of a dart in her back, but Sissy contented herself with sucking in a breath sharp enough to cut. There was no reason to antagonize Sissy, other than it was easy. Whatever stick was up her ass would have to be carved out.

She got to the office door and prepared to bang, but it swung open and a short, portly, balding man in a tweed jacket stood in the doorway, her fist in rap position a centimeter from his face. He didn't blink. Friar.

"Hello, Saru," he said. "Congratulations on the Favre case. Excellent work."

"Thank you," she said. Somehow Friar always managed to disarm her with his politeness. If she was the pudding cup of detectives, Morgan Friar was tiramisu. His specialty was UausuaU crimes, and there weren't too many out there with the stomach to poke at those. He went way beyond your typical elzi disappearance case, investigating the darker crimes, crimes that most people considered nothing more than rumor—feasters and queens, the people that supposedly looked at the UausuaU and didn't go mad, or they went mad but kept their ability to think and plan and take action.

“So nice to run into you like this,” he said. “Seeing your face always brings me cheer. You’re too pretty for this line of work.”

“And you’re too fat.”

He chuckled. “True, true. I’m too busy to exercise and too cheap to buy a better body. Besides,” his voice changed; it was warm still in character, but she could feel the chill below, “it would only get ruined anyway.”

She stood to the side and watched his fat rump shuffle down the hallway. How did he do it? Even if he hired mercs to do the dirty work, there were too many everyday near-death sits for a PI to have the body of a pastry chef. Any scum worth talking to would doodle a wound in his paunch and tap dance away with his wallet. She filed an idea: follow him, see what he does, how he operates.

She went into the office and offered her customary sneer at the opulence. The PIs of the private justice system did the work and the lawyers saw the rewards. Shiny wood floors, fancy rugs from foreign zones, paintings of his family everywhere—was that a new chandelier?

“Jesus Christ, what’s next? A golden throne?” she said aloud.

Eugene gave a snort and stood to offer her his hand. He was tall, taller even than she was, and stupidly handsome. She had thought a few times of pumping him full of drink and running her hands through that curly black hair, but she’d probably get an invoice in the mail for it. She slapped his hand away and collapsed into the overly plush seat before his altar-desk.

“The Gaespora want me for something,” she said. “What is it?”

“Saru, I appreciate your patronage, but you can’t just barge in here like this. I was in a meeting with Mr. Friar, which he kindly—let me stress that—*kindly*, agreed to postpone because I didn’t want you kicking down my door again.”

“They were calling me all night, outbid my call blocking, custom summon tone, a sonata that made me almost cry and a picture of my parents’ farm.”

“Are you listening to me?”

“They bought my building today.”

“What?”

“They bought the whole office building. Thirteen Oh Six Walnut. Shut it down. I’m guessing by this point they’ve found where I live and they got that too. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know. This is unusual.”

“I want to get a case together. Start putting together some sort of action, something aggressive, to put them on the defensive. Money’s no object; I’m flush from the Favre case. They can’t get away with this.”

Eugene stared at her flatly and then burst out laughing—God he was pretty when he laughed. He went to his liquor cabinet and poured them each a tumbler of bourbon—his on the rocks and hers a straight fistful. He handed her her glass and then sat, swirling the bourbon, serious.

“I’m flattered, really, that you think I’m up for this, but what you’re proposing is ridiculous. Launch a case against the Gaespora? On what grounds?”

“I don’t know,” she said, hotly. “You’re the lawyer, make something up, reckless intimidation, intent to violate American freedom, do *something*.”

“What do you think I can do here? What judge do you think would even hear the case? Their salaries, their mistresses, their kids’ medicines and their wives’ fake tits all come from the Gaespora. I’d be laughed out of court and if I didn’t shut up you’d find me dying of diphtheria.”

“So you believe that bullshit.”

“I don’t believe—I know. They bought your office building for crissakes.”

“So what am I supposed to do, get on my knees and suck their alien dicks?”

“You could talk to them—maybe not hang up and ignore their phone calls. Jesus, most people would give their right arm to have a sit-down with the Gaespora and you’re ignoring their phone calls. I don’t believe you sometimes.”

“I don’t enjoy being pushed around.”

“This isn’t the playground; you can’t beat up every other kid and call yourself king shit of the turd pile. There are rules.”

They glared at each other. Eugene looked away, out the window. The rain was coming harder now, coming up to be a good ol’ spring thunderstorm. Saru downed her bourbon and held the glass out for a refill. Eugene filled her glass. He squinted his eyes shut and Saru guessed he was shooting out a command to Sissy to cancel his next meeting. Wordlessly he packed a long, curving vape with some hash and a few stimulants. They smoked and stared out at the storm. An elzi had gotten stuck on one of the barbs on the iron fence around the building. They watched him jerk himself free, leaving his hand and most of the forearm behind. He stumbled down the street, causing pedestrians to scuttle to the other side. A cop came over and herded him into a paddy wagon.

“Shit,” Saru said. “There’s no way out of this, is there?”

Almost as soon as she said it, there was a knock on the door, soft, polite, Sissy.

“Come in,” Eugene said. The door opened and she stepped in. She looked ruffled, uncomfortable—uncharacteristic. Even before she spoke Saru knew what she would say:

“Mr. Gercer-han Bernstein? There are two gentlemen here to see you. They say they belong to the Gaespora.”

Chapter 2

What they didn't understand was the simplicity—it was killing him. He'd been operating on three to seven layers of consciousness since he was sixteen years old and now that was gone. They had hacked away all his distractions, all his facets—his virtual kingdoms, virtual sex, his mischief, news feeds, criminal enterprises, and voyeurism. He'd been flitting from implant to implant, seeing life through other people's eyes and tongues and cocks and skin for so long that now, trapped in his own fat body, he was disgusted with himself. Is this what he was? A blob of flesh in a ratty armchair with a catheter and a feeding tube—when had he even put that in? Had it been a good idea at the time? Now without the freedom to eat the meals of others he was stuck sucking down the phlegmy white goo that sustained him. He shouldn't have been fat—he hadn't even bothered to measure the input. He'd just jammed it in and swum back to the Net. God, would he have swollen up like a balloon, would he have burst eventually? Or would the fat have squeezed against his veins until they clamped shut and his brain went dead?

Now his whole existence was focused on the search, the girl, the streets of Philadelphia, the homeless shelters, the crack dens, the whorehouses and strip clubs, the private sex clubs, and the orphanages. How old was she? They didn't know. What did she look like? Blue eyes, eyes so blue they hurt. Was that it? Yes. He was starting to despair. He twitched his eyes to the left, the bucket with his toes. What would they take next? A new day was dawning. It occurred to him that traveling up from his feet they would eventually reach his cock, and then he thrust himself back into the search, records, records, records. Blue-eyed girls, and one other clue—the arson. She had killed a man apparently, allegedly, burned him to ash. A friend of theirs? Maybe. How did they know? They just knew.

He found himself cursing the police for their incompetence, cursing the media for their neglect—couldn't they even note a building burning down? Wasn't that worth a footnote in the paper? If it even was a building. It could have been a car or an outhouse or a submarine for all he knew, vaporized by a girl with blue, blue eyes. He was going to die, he realized. He was going to be chopped apart piece by piece by piece. The creepiest part was the way they watched him. All four of them—maybe there was a fifth standing guard upstairs—they sat, eyes closed but pointed at him. They were still, perfectly still like statues, and silent. The only sound was the hum of his computer and the squeak of the chair or a fart from his fleshy prison.

They were feasters, they had to be; it was the only explanation. They weren't thugs or robbers; he'd been in enough of them to understand their way. They weren't twitchy or angry or greedy or even cruel. In ten toes he hadn't seen them move or eat. Only the leader spoke. They carried no weapons but knives, and he didn't know a lot about knives but he knew these were sharp. The leader's knife had gone through his toe like it was nothing, not even butter, just a quick flick and the toe slid off. There was no pain—they had injected him with drugs, mind-focusers, analgesics, and their own blood. This last fact convinced him of their nature. The feasters were blood worshippers; they believed if you ate a man you gained his strength. And he suspected that would be the fate of this girl. They believed she had some power and they meant to eat her.

The leader's eyes flickered open. He stood and withdrew a syringe from his jacket. He calmly slid the needlepoint into his neck and sucked out about a juice-box full of blood. The leader walked over and jammed the needle into his neck. He felt nothing with the needle but oddly the blood

entering his body burned. He could feel it spreading out through him, warm like piss in a pool but not diluting, just filling his body with heat. He wondered what diseases were coming along for the ride—a fancy new hepatitis perhaps?

He realized then, that there was no randomness involved here. What he had taken for brutal motivation was a ritual. Every twenty-four hours, on the exact second, a toe was removed. Every twelve hours blood was injected. Every six hours a new cocktail of drugs to keep him awake. He was being transformed—like a club with a notch for every skull it had broken. These were creatures of ritual, moved by ritual, obsessed with ritual. They were clocks, machines, vampires, slaves to a higher order. He felt a comfort—was it the blood?—in this ritual. He had thought his search methods to be perfect and orderly, but now he recognized how crazy, how random they were. He began again, from the beginning, from birth records, genetics. He knew, somehow, that the eyes were natural blue and not a bought alteration. He knew much more now, the knowing a great staff he could lean upon. It was wonderful to *know*.

There it was, all the girls in Philadelphia born with blue eyes in the last forty years. Now their medical records. It was a phenomenal amount of data, more than he could ever know or process, but it seemed to glide by. He felt his consciousness divide like a cell, and then again and again and again until he was a thousand cells, a million, all working in tandem to solve this problem. In the background, time was passing, seconds, days? Millennia? He felt light and free, a mind without a body, a creature of pure data. And girls, surrounded by girls, so many in just one area, beautiful, ugly, horrid, filthy sacks of copulation making more and more girls—did they never stop? Why was he here? This girl, Charlene M. Farrow, grew up in Kensington, black with blue eyes, was this the girl? No, she was dead, beaten by her husband into a coma. And this girl, Ramona Ko, she was the one! No, she was married, three kids, Glish teacher in the suburbs.

And what was this? A cell-mind trembling in the foreground, bursting with excitement, rushing, exploding, destroying all the other tiny minds around him. It was the girl! The one they wanted—they, who were they? It didn't matter, they knew, they knew already he had found her; he had done it. She had made a call, called her mother and he had heard the voice, all the bits of data going through the line, and he knew the voice belonged to those eyes because all data was one, any form of information expressed as any other; a stream is a star is a tree is a limb is an arm or a drop of blood or a snowflake, a scrap of cloth, my God, no, God, he understood, understood everything!

In the climax of knowing he died—or at least his new self, his transformed self. He found himself, his old self, alone in a chair in a cold basement. He looked down and saw stumps where his legs should have been. He looked to his sides and saw similar stumps where once had been arms. The pain was coming now, the drugs, the blood, the bliss, all fading. He understood now. He had glimpsed the UausuaU—there was no doubt. He had seen into the dark and emerged sane, but he had paid the price in flesh—he knew now, there was always a price to be paid. This task was his task; it had always been his task, his gift from the Uau, his purpose to serve. He spat out the feeding tube. There was a tremor in his throat, a tickle, a vibration, traveling up to tremble on his lips. He burped, then he groaned, and he coughed. And then he laughed, a quick, harsh bark, and then another and another until he could no longer stop and the laughter raced madly out to echo through his tomb.

Chapter 3

It was a mistake, Ria thought, to go into the subway. She had taken the normal route, sliding through the oversized storm grate on Logan Boulevard, climbing down the iron spikes that some nameless hip had hammered into the walls, dropping carefully onto the cinder-block island—now practically submerged from the pounding rain—and then feeling her way along the wall until she came to the hatch that lead to the abandoned Logan Station. She had stepped carefully over the mounds of dozing elzi, careful not to even brush against the coat-hanger or chicken-wire antennae poking from their eyes or ears or throats. The boojie were afraid of the elzi, but to her they were a comfort. They were the canaries of the underground, their snores and growls and whimpers a sign that all was safe.

The dog had followed her, of course. She had thought the trip underground might shake it, but of course the dog wasn't real and didn't have to climb ladders or slide through grates or tippy-toe hop from cinder block to cinder block to find his way to Lo City. It was there, in the shadows, in the corner of her eye, prowling, watching her. It grew and shrank with the light. Black as a pit with golden eyes or suddenly gold with black eyes. It wasn't a breed she had ever seen on vision but it looked maybe like the bastard freak of a wolf nailed down by a lion. Lately it had been growing larger, huge sometimes, like a parade balloon swelling to fill the streets and the terror would overtake her, a suffocating sense of *impending* and she would run, tear down the street, shoving the sneering boojie out of the way and confirming to all the world that she was indeed a crazy woman unfit to handle herself.

Fuck you, she thought at the dog. It stared at her from the shadows. You ruined my life.

It had appeared five years ago—was it really so long?—on her thirteenth birthday. Or was it fourteenth? Was it her birthday? She couldn't recall. A birthday was no different than any other day back then unless it fell on a Friday and the free lunch program had cheesecake. She loved cheesecake. It had come in the same little plastic cups that all the other deserts had come in and she had licked it clean every Friday. Mom had called her fat, but that wasn't true, she was skinny as a stick, which was what Derrick used to say, laughing at her, but it didn't stop him from kissing her under the bleachers. Was that when the dog had first appeared? Under the bleachers with Derrick Wilson, between his sloppy tongue kisses and him grabbing her boob so hard it hurt? She had slapped him for that and then she'd let him do it again.

She wasn't crazy though; she knew that. The dog was there, even if no one else could see it. Sometimes it left—but never because of the pills they gave her or the words they said, condescending—but it always came back. At first it was tiny, not a puppy, not cute or juvenile, just smaller, a little wiener-dog version of itself. At first she thought it was because of the acid or the pink powder that Bobby had given her that she later discovered was lolacaine, another sex drug, and he was just trying to get her to put out. Why was it that all the “nice” guys were just trying to wet their cocks? The only one she had even really liked was Cale—he was an asshole but at least he never made his plans a secret. He always brought over a bottle of sweet rum, and not the dollar-store kind, and she'd let him touch her a few times, even use his tongue when she was feeling really foggy, but it felt better to shoot him down each time he thought he was going to score. Once he'd pinned her arms to the floor and told her he could just take it if he wanted and she'd said nothing,

almost hoping that he would. But he pissed out and zipped up his shitty thrift-store jeans and slunk away.

It wasn't the drugs though because she didn't know a drug on the planet that made a tiny golden dog appear and follow you around for half your fucking life. At times she thought maybe she *was* mad, that maybe she had gone too far and peaked into the Uau and this was all her personal nightmare and she was actually rolling around in a pile of trash somewhere with a computer stapled to her forehead. But that seemed too far-fetched, too anti-climactic that the darkness driving all the poor sobs insane was a virtual pet simulator.

It was warm underground, and dry, but she had been soaked in the rain and she shivered. Up ahead was a flickering and she followed it to a group of four other hips huddling around a trash fire. She approached the group cautiously, holding up her hands and walking slowly so they didn't mistake her for a hungry elzi. She saw them tense and then relax. Close to the fire she saw their faces, two boys, a girl, and one that was a toss up. They were older than her, except for the girl, who seemed very young to be hip. She must've ditched foster or a bad sit at home. Ria felt a surge of sympathy.

She took a seat on an old tire close to the fire but slightly apart from the rest. The others said nothing. They stared at the flames. Wordlessly, one of the older men withdrew a flask, took a long swig, and then passed it to his left. It went around and Ria drank gratefully; it was harsh in a good way, and she felt herself warming. She took off her jacket and lay it on a pile of bricks and subway tiles close to the flames.

"Bad nigh'," the other man said. He could've been thirty or sixty. His face was shriveled and most of his teeth were gone. She guessed he'd been using a bit. His words had a chewy, gummy-like feel as though he couldn't quite remember how to form them.

"Lossa rain," he continued. No one could argue with this. Ria stared at the curving wall beyond the fire, enjoying the dancing shadows. It was quiet here; she liked it. She wondered how many other small groups like this were scattered throughout the station. There was a slight tremor, a few stones rolled; some dust fell from the ceiling. A train, probably, from another line, or one of the big dumb waiters bringing food to the distribution points. Could she get to there from here? There must be a way. Her stomach growled. The thought of all that food—still in its neat, pristine packaging—made her mouth water.

The dog was back. He stepped out of the shadows on the wall, stood in mid air and stared down the subway tunnel. Ria thought this might mean something, but she had resolved to ignore the dog. She could have lived with the dog, ignored it completely, if it hadn't started killing people. That had caused her some problems, all her problems, really. The man at Lourdes, what was his name? Dr. Stermdrick? Stern Dick? Why not? He had said that she had started the fire, that she couldn't remember it, that she was blaming her imaginary dog, but that wasn't true! Sure, she had been drinking, but they seemed to think that meant she was drunk. She could pound a liter of vodka and walk a line and thread a needle and she remembered exactly what had happened.

The john had come at her, stuffed her, was going to kill her, maybe. He had his meaty hands locked on her throat, thrashing her, slamming her head into the car door, stars exploding in her face. She'd struggled and flailed her legs but he sat his fat hairy ass on her body and pinned her to the seat. She was ninety pounds with a meal in her and he was a fat fucking gorilla man that felt like a bus crushing her sternum. In the end he had broken two of her ribs and torn something in her gut that made blood show up every day of the month, and that was what forced her into the hospital in the first place.

Then there was the dog, two eyes in the shadows, growing, filling the van. The john letting go, the look of terror in his mongoloid eyes, the gooey sweat on his fat neck and the hole opening in his chest, like a fist-sized cigarette burn, and his scream. He was too big, she couldn't get him off, and

the hole widened and widened and burned away his mass, his chest, his face, his arms dropping off like sausages, and then her squirming out from under his melted belly and running into the night. It was the dog, she knew it was the dog, not her—how was she going to start a fire like that? How could she even get free? They didn't care; they didn't listen.

It was impossible to feel grateful to the dog, even though it had saved her life. It was too much, to burn a man alive that way, even if he did deserve it. It couldn't have scared him away or pushed him off—if you can burn him, why can't you do that? She didn't feel safer after, merely hunted. She had killed a man, apparently; she was insane, dangerous. What would happen the next time she felt threatened? Was the dog going to vaporize anyone that came at her? Could it tell the difference between unease and terror? A good pain and a bad pain? A real threat from some dumb punk trying to snatch her purse? How much did the dog understand her?—because she didn't understand the dog at all.

There was another tremor, greater, and then noises, hundreds of bodies scrambling to their feet, cans and garbage kicked around, and then a mass of people. All around them the elzi were rising from their stupor and shuffling or scrambling or sprinting if they hadn't decayed too far. A herd leapt into the pit of the subway track and began racing south. Another group scabbled for the sewer entrance. The hips thrust themselves up to their feet and looked wildly around for the danger. Ria stayed seated and stared at the dog. The dog stared down the subway tunnel.

“What do we do?” the young girl asked.

“Run,” the man with the flask said, but it was a question more than an answer.

“No,” Ria said, “We can't, not yet.”

She felt that same cold sweat like when she couldn't find booze, and a queasiness in her stomach. All the hairs across her back stood on end, but she knew they couldn't run. There were too many elzi, clogging the exits with their mass, dumb beasts getting stuck and crammed in the narrow exits. If they tried to follow, one of them would touch an implant and then the elzi would rip them all apart.

“Shit,” the man with the flask said. “Shit, shit, shit...”

“What about the tunnel?” the androgynous one said. “We could run down that way. Follow the elzi.”

This seemed like the only answer, but as she thought it the dog turned and looked at her and she knew it was wrong.

“No, we can't.”

“Fuck this.”

The androgynous one ran to the platform edge and hopped down. After a second's hesitation the man with the flask followed far less gracefully, and then the other man. Ria stayed where she was and the young girl's head jerked between her and the others now running down the tunnel. The androgynous one disappeared into the black beyond the firelight and then the young girl sprang after them screaming:

“Wait, wait for me, don't leave me!”

They disappeared.

Ria sat there, staring at the black mouth of the tunnel where they had gone. Her heart pounded a thousand beats a minute. She felt the sweat wetting her clothes again. The scabbled of the elzi began to fade. It was quiet, so quiet she could hear the drip drop of water falling from the ceiling. She was alone, except for the dog. It walked toward her slowly, coming as close as it ever had, touching her, and then not stopping, entering her body. It was a strange feeling, like heat and cold at the same time and a thousand needle pricks on every inch of skin. She looked at her hand and saw that it both was and wasn't, understood that only her eyes could see the hand before her, that the

light no longer obeyed the rules of a dumb universe, but a new set of rules, rules of a magical ghost dog that said, “Back, away, this person is not yours to touch. She is hidden.”

There was a sound, a slithering nail on a vinyl record, a sound that crawled inside her ears and wriggled down her spine and made her want to jam knitting needles in her tits and scream. In the flickering light of the trash fire the creature looked like a train-sized centipede, countless legs jutting out at strange angles, scratching along any surface they could grasp to push the body forward. At the front was a mass of flesh—bodies, at least a dozen torsos, crammed together, and they were alive. They moved together, swaying like seaweed, eyes all closed, and as they passed she saw their mouths all twitching together as they whimpered—a dozen men, women, and children all whimpering together in tenors and basses and sopranos.

The creature stopped and then reared its head, its mass of human bodies, twenty spindly metal legs clawing into the floor and walls and ceiling to force the head up to the fire to bring the dozens of bodies within five feet of her, and in unison their eyes opened and they stared at her, right at her, and she sat, frozen in terror and horror. The whimpering stopped. They reached, arms grasping as far as they could out from the fused lump of flesh they shared, licking their lips. And then they spoke: “Come...come...come...come...” a whisper, all of them over and over in her ears and in her brain: “Come...come...come...come...”

The words trickled through her nerves, nudging her, moving her, she felt herself stand. The arms were welcoming; it was her family, they wanted her, they loved her. She felt it, the warm beam of love from her family drawing her in. She would reach out, touch them, join them.

A jagged pain cut through her, a dagger of ice cutting through the warmth. It was that damn dog! It had taken everything else from her and now it was taking this too! She took another step, and another dagger of ice and then another and two more in her eyes and she saw herself suddenly inches from the grasping hands, the fingertips worn to yellow bone from scratching, the eyes white and dead, the lips cracked and torn and bloody, and she screamed. The hands drew back and the eyes rolled wildly and the mouths shot open and screamed back at her. Then the creature reared up and crashed back onto the tracks, shaking the ground and showering dust and bricks and tile from the ceiling. The legs twitched frantically and it tore down the tunnel, segment after segment of twisted metal, and was gone.

Chapter 4

The Gaespora were a group of scientists who had pushed human experimentation to the point of becoming a new (superior) species. They were invaders from another dimension. They were people born naturally with psychic powers. They were a hoax perpetrated by the American oligarchs. They could have sprung from radioactive dog shit for all Saru cared—the fact that mattered was they had her clit in a vice and were predisposed to squeeze.

The office was nice, she had to admit, top floor of the Vericast building, open air, with an ungodly expensive cloud shear to cut through the smog and bring real, honest-to-God daylight down around her. She had seen the light from the ground of course—the bright, golden beam that swiveled around the big, funky skyscraper in the city center—but she hadn't realized it was the sun. It felt good, the light; it was warm, and gazing up she saw blue. There were birds up here, and not just pigeons and crows—little blue birds and red birds and birds with big funny tufts and brightly colored feathers. They sang and flew from tree to tree, more trees than she had ever seen. She couldn't even believe there were that many kinds of trees in the world—short and fat and tall and with wrinkly bark and smooth bark and apples and long limbs that drooped down; there must have been hundreds. There was a pond too, and the water was clear and reflected the blue of the sky. It was so perfect and beautiful it made her angry. She felt like crying and she didn't know why.

“We had planned to shear the whole city,” ElilE said, making his third attempt at pleasantries. “But the city council would not partner with us. Imagine: sun and sky for all of Philadelphia.”

“Then why didn't you just go ahead and do it yourselves?” she said, taking the bait, even angrier now that she'd spoken. “Who would stop you?”

“We are guests in this world. We act only in partnership with humans.”

“Bullshit,” she laughed (but why did she still want to cry?) The man, ElilE, was definitely human, even if he had a fairy-ass name. Human face: check. Human body: check. He was barefoot like all the other Gaesporans—they had winced as she stomped through the grass in her steel-toed boots—ten human toes: check. He even wore a high-fashion black and silver pinstripe caji suit like any other dickhole bizman...and yet there were things that were odd about him. His eyes, green, normal, but so steady—yes, steady, that was the word. She wasn't a psychologist by any stretch, but she'd talked to a fair spectrum of humanity and could identify some cause-and-effect emotions: I whack your knee with a bludgeon; you scream. I accuse you of fucking your sister; you look shocked—or at least feign it. I drop hints and clues and suppositions—subtle and not—and your eyes twitch or your tongue licks your lips, or you blush or redden or sweat or gasp.

There was none of that with ElilE. He sat cross-legged on a smooth, moss-covered bolder—they'd brought her a chair, hard wood that made her sit too straight—hands on his knees, staring and sometimes giving words. He was still, perfectly still. His breathing never varied, his eyes blinked but it was strangely regular. She decided to risk a scan, a quick visual—camera based—that wouldn't trigger any alarms. He might notice the dilation of her pupils and the processing power might cause her to slur a word or skip a beat, but for all he knew she was drunk and high.

Amazing. Eight breaths a minute in even intervals. Six blinks per minute, again in even intervals. Pulse: forty. He was controlled for sure, but that didn't signify anything inhuman. Good dopple training could get you the same result, or psycho yoga, and of course there were drugs you could take to make your body do anything you wanted—drugs manufactured by the Gaespora.

“Okay, what do you want? Why did you bring me here?”

It was time to get this over with. The chair was starting to hurt her back and the sun was in her eyes—damn it was bright, and it felt like it was burning her skin. She wanted to get back into the cool shade of the city below, away from this wind and bright and the goddamn loud-ass birds chirping everywhere. Also, she was fairly certain that something had crawled up her pants and was biting its way to the money spot.

“You are a private investigator,” ElilE said.

“Obviously you know that already.”

“We want you to find a girl.”

“Kidnapping?”

“We don’t know. She is in danger. There are others looking for her. If they find her they will kill her.”

“What kind of ‘others’ are we talking about? I don’t do riv jobs. I play nice with my fellow PIs.”

“We believe she is hunted by feasters.”

She stopped scratching her thigh. Well that was interesting.

“Sorry, I’m not the one you want. You need to talk to Morgan Friar—he deals with that mumbo jumbo.”

“We have already contacted Dr. Friar. He has refused. You are our second choice.”

If this was a ploy to grab her attention it had worked. Friar refusing a case? *Doctor* Friar? He’d never mentioned he was a doctor. Did he think it was a goose chase? Or was it real, too real, too dangerous? She thought again of the pudgy little man hunting down feasters—creatures, if rumor was to be believed, that made vampires look like fairies.

“Why didn’t he take the case?”

“He would not say.”

“Why do you think he turned it down?”

“We do not speculate.”

“Honey, this whole case is speculation so far. You *believe* she’s in danger? You *believe* there are feasters involved? The only fact you’ve managed to produce is that the best man for the job doesn’t want it.”

Seven blinks—an extra half-blink at the end. Did that signal annoyance? Frustration? Persuasion? She took it as a victory she’d managed to stick a pinhole in his poker face. He said nothing. He closed his eyes. The vast, glassy, sail-like wind shear suddenly stopped—she hadn’t even noticed the sheen of energy across it until it stopped. The wind picked up, the birds chirped more frantically, the black clouds of smog spiraled overhead.

In a fraction of a second, ElilE darted forward, so quickly her eyelids had just reached their peak in surprise as his finger touched her forehead. She blinked; it was night, quiet, the birds chirping softly, the sound of insects in the bushes, a black sky overhead crowded with a billion stars, so bright it lit the world around her—and color, she had never known there was so much *color* in the universe. ElilE sat across from her still, as though he had never even moved. He stared and his eyes reflected the sky—black, so black, with a billion points of light.

“You are a skeptic,” he said, and his voice was different now, not the tenor of a man, but a rustling many-voice of wind in trees and rippling ponds and clicking insects and even a few human sounds laughing on the sidelines.

“You do not believe in us. You think us human—and we are, but only so. Your world and our world are alike but not perfectly. We built this world ages ago, back when we were different from what we are now. We accept your presence here though it was unplanned. We recognize your existence and we are grateful for the shelter you provide, flawed as your doings are.”

He pointed up to the sky and her gaze followed, transfixed.

“Know that as many stars as are in this universe, there are universes within a higher plane of existence, which itself is as common as the universes within it. These universes are not static beings—they live and move and touch and consume one another. Your universe and our universe touch for we have made it so, and we can exist in your universe in the margin of similarity. We live as we can as thoughts within your kind and through thought we drive action and with action we bring your world closer to our own.

“There is another force that has touched your universe, a force which you would understand as evil but we understand as the impetus of hunger. It is a universe vaster than our own collective and far vaster than your own, and it seeks no such union, no shared knowledge, no balance, no compromise, no existence other than its own. It has consumed many other universes and grown in power with each consumption, eventually to stand alone and form the basis of a new universal plane, to ascend in existence and birth smaller existences based upon its own. We do not understand its ultimate motive—if it can be understood—but we know in its motion it will destroy and consume all other universes.

“You have seen this force and named it even; it is the dark place in your shared consciousness, the place you call the UausuaU. It besets your universe as it besets ours, and no action we have seen will stay its course. It grows in power as it turns the margin of similarity towards its own. We grow here, slowly, and as our powers increase we have seen other universes appear, sensing the kill, carving off what they can to strengthen themselves. Far beyond this planet are other organisms, other wars, other visitors to your universe.

“We see a girl. A girl with blue eyes and a dog that is not a dog. We know this creature—have seen it. It is strong and it fights, fighting the UausuaU across the universal plane. We see opportunity in this creature, yet it waits. We believe it waits for you, for mankind, to see if *you* will fight, if this corner of this universe is worth the battle.”

It was day, the sun shone, the birds were back to their annoying chirping and the chair was just as hard as ever. ElIE sat staring at her as he had been. When he spoke his voice was the normal tenor:

“This girl is very important. She is the foothold upon which this creature relies. The fraction of similarity that allows it to exist in your universe. The feasters serve the UausuaU though they may not know it. If they find this girl they will kill her and destroy the margin.”

“Well that’s fucking great,” Saru said. She took out her jacket flask (damn her hands were shaking, had it really just been night? Had they drugged her or hacked her implants?) and found it was empty. She got the hip flask and downed it. “What will you do if she dies?”

“We will do as we have always done.”

“And let the world be destroyed? Assuming I believe your hocus pocus.”

“Not destroyed—consumed. But yes, it is likely that all mass on Earth, at least, will disassociate from this universe and become part of the UausuaU.”

“Jesus Christ. And this is your plan? To hire one detective to track down this girl? Why not put out an APB, get the cops on it, the army, or at least get me a big fat load of mercenaries to come along.”

“There is...danger in that route. It would be a great loss if the girl were to die...but it would be...safer.”

“What do you mean, ‘safer?’”

“The creature that lives in her is powerful. Our understanding of it is...incomplete. We know it battles the UausuaU but its actions are at times unclear. It does not understand humanity well, does not communicate. It could interpret such pursuit as a threat and...overreact.”

“Like, what, kill somebody?” She was fairly certain that however this ended it was going to involve a few body bags.

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