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Apocalypse Now Now

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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Synopsis

Baxter Zevcenko is your average 16-year-old-boy. If by average you mean a possible serial killer, the kingpin of a porn-peddling schoolyard syndicate and the only thing standing in the way of full-scale gang warfare between the two powerful gangs which control Westridge High School. Which may well be what counts for average these days.

Our adolescent Rasputin has a plan that may well change the political landscape of Westridge, that is until his razor-witted girlfriend is kidnapped and all the clues point to supernatural abductors.

Despite his considerable Machiavellian power, when it comes to solving occult kidnappings Baxter has to admit that he's a newbie. So enter Jackson "Jackie" Ronin, Border veteran, acid casualty and supernatural bounty hunter. After all, who you gonna call?

Baxter is plunged headlong into the murky waters of Cape Town's supernatural underworld and along the way meets a transvestite Valkyrie, the Zombie Queen of the Cape Flats and a mountain-dwelling satyr with ADD. Hey, everyone always says Cape Town is cosmopolitan.

What starts as simple a rescue mission soon trips over a refugee glowing man and becomes horribly entangled in a plot involving a brutal supernatural organisation called "The Murder", apartheid-era genetic experimenter and an ancient mechanical mantis exoskeleton with the power to rend the veils between dimensions. All of which has Baxter wondering whether he should have left his sweetheart to fend for herself...

Motivation

With *Apocalypse Now Now* I have attempted to create a uniquely local urban fantasy.

Although often satirical in tone, the story follows Joseph Campbell's monomyth structure fairly closely. Baxter's is a coming-of-age story that sees him leaving his stable existence as a porn peddler and embarking on a journey into being someone that actually cares.

Baxter's character was inspired by an article about the staggeringly high usage of porn by high-school students. The article cast teenagers as passive victims of an increasingly connected society but I wanted Baxter to be an instigator and a manipulator, someone who while not initially being a very nice guy, is far from a victim.

The setting of Cape Town's "Supernatural Underworld" was inspired largely by *Daily Voice* headlines. From sex-offending tokoloshes, to fire demons to snake-men on the Cape Flats, we have a unique urban mythology that is dark, weird and highly politically incorrect. I wanted to reflect as much of this as possible.

Jackie Ronin's is character in an attempt to transplant the hard-boiled noir detective into a South African context. Although I've especially tried not to reference South Africa's political history in my writing, some elements do appear, particularly in Ronin's character. Ronin's struggle is to come to terms with the

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monster created on the Border and references to the Occult Truth Commission and the treatment of the Qawa by humans have obvious parallels in history.

Influenced by writers of gritty urban fantasy such as Neil Gaiman, Richard Kadrey, Nick Harkaway and Lauren Beukes, I hope that I have created an enjoyable ride into an alternate version of Cape Town

There are many questions that run through your head when you find out that you're a serial killer. "Am I more evil than Charles Manson?" is one. "I wonder whether I'll be on the *Crime and Investigation Network*?" is another.

On the whole, though, it's the who, what, when and why of it that really takes up the mental bandwidth. So here goes:

My name is Baxter Zevcenko. I am sixteen years old. I go to Westridge High School in Cape Town and I have no friends. I am serial killer. Did I mean to kill? No. To the families of my victims; I am truly sorry.

People are saying that I'm Satanic and that I was in a cult. This is not true. They just need something to help them create meaning out of my madness. I know you'd like to think you'd have done things differently in my shoes but it's probably not true. In the end we're all victims of our own perceptions, sparky. I hope you can understand that.

1. Raincoats and Skullduggery

"Charlie Delta, that's a big ten-four," Rafe growls into his CB radio. I have ten minutes before I have to make the walk to school. My parents force me walk to school even when it rains. It's raining. The CB hisses, crackles and squelches like the soundtrack to a horror movie about a demonically-possessed computer that considers humanity a lower form of intelligence that must be eliminated.

I'm lying in our living room on the shaggy burnt orange rug that's so old it's been retro twice. Rafe, my brother, has his portable CB radio positioned strategically on the small circular glass table next the TV. Strategic, because he's a master of irritation and the CB radio rattles on the glass creating a near-perfect frequency of brain-death. I push my long dark fringe out of my eyes, straighten my glasses and glare at the back of his skull.

"Turn it down," I say as I dig my fingers into the rug.

He turns his shaggy red-haired head and stares at me with the *knowing-eye*. I feel the rage build.

The *knowing-eye* is a weapon passed down from generation to generation in my family. My grandfather on my mother's side has it. I suspect it's what drove my grandmother to alcoholism and sex addiction before reforming, divorcing granddad and joining a racist commune in the Northern Cape. That and the fact that my grandfather thinks there are giant shapeshifting crows out to get him.

The *eye* skipped a generation and now Rafe, the oldest son, has it. In one single glance the *knowing-eye* can communicate an entire manifesto. "I know I am annoying you," it says. "I have no reason to annoy you, but I will anyway. I am the essence of irritation; the mosquito that keeps you awake at night, the queue at Home Affairs, the taxi that cuts in front of you. I am the knowing-eye. Fear me." All that in a single glance.

Rafe turns the squelching louder. It's like dangling a baby in front of a pitbull. I can't help it. Snarling with rage I jump on Rafe's back and grab his neck in a sleeper hold. We tumble to the floor.

From experience I know I only have seconds to inflict as much damage as possible before my mother hears and comes to break us up. I jackhammer my fists into his kidneys. It's not enough but at least it's something. My mother's footsteps pound down the stairs. We break apart and I pat Rafe on the back as if we had just been play-fighting.

"Baxter, what the hell is wrong with you?" she asks, peeling back the layers of my face with her gaze. Clearly she isn't fooled.

"The eye..." I start, but she raises a finger to cut me off.

"You're sixteen for god's sake. You think picking on Rafe is something a good brother does?" she asks.

It's rhetorical but I can't help but point out her false assumption that I actually want to be a good brother. The crux of the problem is that Rafe has learning difficulties, goes to a special school and as such is excused from such mundane chores as responsibility for his actions.

"I wasn't picking..."

"He can't help it," she whispers to me.

This is a losing hand and I know when to fold. I nod with an exaggerated sigh. My mother and I are just going to have to agree to disagree about Rafe's cognitive capabilities. She thinks he's some kind of supertard who is totally oblivious to the annoyance he directs like a laser beam at me. I disagree. He can help it alright. It's just that his sole purpose on Earth is to drive me clinically insane. He doesn't speak much, but he's something of a savant. Numbers, directions, TV schedules all come to his mind easily and without effort; something that he loves to silently lord above me. What an asshole.

"Apologise," my mother says, arching a thin eyebrow like she's brandishing a whip.

"Sorry," we both mumble and limply shake hands.

I turn, grab my bag and walk into the rain ignoring my mother's offer of an umbrella. The sky is almost the exact grey of the diseased lung of a two-packs-a-day smoker. I know because we saw one of those during our life orientation class on health and lifestyle choices. It makes me want a cigarette. I turn off the main road and make my way into a subway to light one up. I take a drag and look into the dark subway. It makes me uneasy. I've been having weird dreams lately. About ox-wagons, war and slaughter. It's like my sleeping brain is constantly set to the History channel, if the History channel re-enactments were all directed by Tarantino.

I suck my cigarette down and push myself off the subway wall and back into the rain. I start walking fast but then slow down when I see Mikey Markowitz up ahead, a small banana-coloured beacon of dorkiness in his bright yellow rainjacket.

Mikey was my best friend in junior school. He was thoughtful, kind and concerned for my wellbeing. By the time high school rolled around I was rethinking our relationship. It very soon it became apparent that

high-school kids, or at least the ones who looked like their parents injected them with human growth hormone and then beat the joy out of them with a leather strap, could smell the weakness that Mikey secreted into the air. He's a chubby, pink, blonde-haired vortex of neediness that's like shit to the big, violent flies with dyslexia that circle the school. That that was bad for me, so I made a business decision.

If you're climbing a mountain and the guy below you falls and starts dragging you down into a gaping, icy abyss what do you do? You cut him loose. Well high school is a gaping, icy abyss and I had to cut the cord that connected Mikey to me. Still, I feel a guilty twinge whenever I see him sitting alone at lunch-break staring at his cheese sandwich. I slow down almost to a standstill to let Mikey gain distance. No sense dredging up the past.

The rest of the walk is miserable and by the time I get to the old iron gates at the entrance of the school even my socks are wet. Luckily I had the foresight to wrap my briefcase in a plastic bag. It's an old leather case of my dad's and in it is the strategy that could change everything. If all hell doesn't break loose first.

Westridge is an imposing granite structure that has spat forth generations of Capetonians from its iron jaws. Like all prominent high schools in Cape Town's leafy Southern Suburbs we have large lush school grounds, sophisticated computer labs that were out-of-date as soon as they were installed, a debating team, a competitive rugby team and gangs, drugs, bulimia, depression and bullying.

I face the gates and wipe the rain off my glasses. Wet clothes or not, once through those iron pillars I must focus. Some kids worry about being popular or about getting good marks. I worry about maintaining a fragile gang treaty that is on the brink of splintering. "Horses for courses." my dad says.

I stride through the gates and quickly scan the scattershot groups of blue-blazered juveniles that skulk in the corners. Cold, beady eyes regard me from across the Sprawl, our name for the strip of tar playground that runs from behind the redbrick school hall to the janitor's hut at the edge of the lowest sports field.

Important things are happening on this black-and-blue Monday morning. I wonder how the adults could not feel them; the lines of power stretched tight across the playground crackling with the energy of war. It's pathetic to see the parentbots smile and drop their kids off into the seething ocean of chaos and fury, blissfully unaware and slightly high on expensive Italian espresso.

The other members of The Spider are in the usual corner. I cut across the tarmac and raise my hand in greeting to Kyle, Ntombazana and the Inhalant Kid. The Spider is different to most schoolyard organisations. In school, like in prison, if you don't affiliate yourself you're easy prey. Although you're less likely to get ass-raped (unless you go on rugby camp) it's inadvisable to go without a crew who watch your back. The Spider evolved out the primordial pit of the Sprawl; a new form of life that survived not by physical strength but by persuasion and deception.

We found each other by the kind of freak radar that draws together kids that don't really fit in. Me with my congenital eye condition and weird glasses, Kyle the freakishly clever kid, Ty the Inhalant Kid, who has found his life's purpose at the bottom of a paint tin and Ntombazana who is big in a sumo wrestler kinda way. It was like pieces of a puzzle neatly fitting together.

We're a small operation but a successful one, our success hinging on the fact that we remain neutral amongst the axes of power that run the school. On one side is the juggernaut that runs the school: The Nice Time Kids. Led by self-style Warlord Anwar Davids, they're dangerous, organised and the prime suppliers of *tik*. Their management style is like that of the Third Reich - big, cruel and requiring absolute loyalty of their members.

The other dog in the pit is The Form, led by Denton Spillsbury. They run a business of fake doctor's certificates, parental permission slips and leaked exam papers. They're more like Al-Qaeda; a networked, guerrilla-style militia that blends into the general school populace.

The problem is that the Sprawl isn't big enough for both of them. Over the past year the tension has escalated and now they're snapping at each other's throats. Since knives are so cheap and easily available, both gangs carried them. I know Anwar has access to guns too. It's not going to be long before Westridge has its first drive-by shooting. (Kyle calls it a zero-sum game. It's like Highlander; there can be only one. For such a clever guy Kyle doesn't do very well at schoolwork.)

The killing of fellow students isn't what worries me though. The Spider isn't a gang, it's a corporation. We have a unique selling proposition, a great democratic product that along with soccer is the world's favourite spectator sport. Yes, I'm talking about porn.

You'd think that in the age of broadband a pornography vendor would be as out-of-date as a crusty old guy in tie-dye selling LPs at a flea market. But like that old hippie there is a method to our madness. We don't sell a product; we sell an experience.

You're looking for Ron "The Hedgehog" Jeremy's first skin flick? The original *Debbie Does Dallas*? You've come to the right place. We can get them to you by the end of the day. We're the Cinema Nouveau of the porn world. We don't sell crap, we deal in the Altman of anal and the Coen Brothers of the cum-shot. In a better world we'd be part of Westridge's cultural committee.

The impending gang war could destroy us. One student getting stabbed would be inconvenient. An all-out fight could be the death knell for our business. Lockers would be searched, pupils would be questioned and there are too many trails leading to us. The Spider is the only thing standing in between the NTK and the Form. I have no choice but to intervene. But not right now.

The school bell rings and we shuffle into the school hall for our first assembly of the term. Kids jostle and yap like dogs reacquainting themselves with the pack, but quiet down when the alpha dogs enter.

The Form flow into the hall and take their place at the back left of the hall. The Nice Time Kids enter like a phalanx and take their spots at the back right. Anwar Davids, his uneven crew-cut showing patches of his scalp in the artificial light turns his head and smiles, showing the gap between his teeth. The school holds its breath. Slowly he brings his hand up, widens his smile and draws his thumb across his throat and then points. Straight at the solid figure of Denton Spillsbury. Denton extends his large, chubby hand to look disinterestedly at his nails and then leans back and yawns.

The tension is broken as our headmaster, The Bearded One, ascends to the lectern. He raises his hand for silence, even though nobody is speaking. He rubs his mousy brown beard. He begins to speak.

“Welcome back from, ahhh, what I, umm, hope was a stimulating weekend.”

There are titters. Judging from some of the glassy eyes staring up at the lectern it’s more likely that it was a stimulant weekend courtesy of the NTK.

“Ahh it’s unfortunate to start like this but, umm, the police inform me that another body has been found on the mountain.”

There’s a collective intake of breath. Another body meant that the man the police had previously arrested wasn’t the Third-Eye killer. He is still out there somewhere hunting people. Bodies had begun appearing on the slopes of Table Mountain weeks ago. They were gruesomely disfigured, as if they’d been attacked by an animal, but with an eye carved into the flesh of their foreheads.

“I would, umm, ask you to remain aware at all times and report any suspicious activity.” The Bearded One continues to ramble his way through a set of arbitrary announcements and then brings the assembly to a close.

We push our way out of the school hall and into the granite rectangle that is the heart of the school’s hundred-and-fifty years of colonial history.

“Hey Baxter,” Courtney Adams says, brushing a delicate strand of blonde hair out of her face and pouting her pale pink lips in a coquettish smile as I pass. She’s an NPC, a non-playing character, a pawn. Preoccupied with mindless social programming and totally distant from the power centres of the Sprawl. People like her can be used to run interference, used and manipulated, but should never be trusted or considered seriously when planning strategically. I ignore her. It’ll only make her like me more.

I pass Rickett Hendries, the meaty rugby-playing mammoth, who is a minor power amongst the jocks but not enough savvy to do anything with it. I slip a flash-drive filled with Asian girl-on-girl action into his hand. He grins and gives me the thumbs up.

It’s like chess. Jocks, like Rickett and his gang of cheap deodorant-scented Cro-Magnons are knights. You can’t directly manipulate them because they believe that their superior muscle density means they’re in control. But they can always be moved sideways, subtly angled so that they believe that they are the ones doing the moving. Rooks are the big, violent loner kids like Josh Southfield. His dad is in jail for a white-collar crime, he has bad acne and he does badly at school. Moving him is so easy it feels like telekinesis.

I breathe in the smell of chalk, blackboard marker and fear as we walk. The sweet smells of high-school. Metalwork class is the first of the day. Kyle and I slide into class and make our way to the back.

Mr. Olly, our moustached Metalwork teacher, looks like one of the security police who had been granted amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation commission for apartheid atrocities. Most of the classherd comply with the instructions Olly puts on the board, but, in my world, metalwork is for negotiating. I wait until Olly is distracted and saunter over to a bench at the back of the class.

“General,” I say to the youth whose oversized head is the result of a childhood case of Elephantiasis. He looks up to reveal cool, grey eyes. Toby September. Taunted ceaselessly since birth, he’d channelled his

rage into climbing the social hierarchy and is now General of the Nice Time Kids, second only to Anwar himself.

“Zevcenko,” he says, taking his time over my name.

“I need an audience with The Warlord,” I say.

The oversized head nods thoughtfully but when he speaks his voice is acidic.

“I’ll tell the Warlord, Zevcenko, but I would advise against doing anything that will upset the Warlord.”

I smile. It is a veiled threat, but I bow my head in thanks and return to my desk. First objective achieved

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2. Skull Pressure

“Jump, jump, jump.” The low chant from the class grows louder.

Miss Hunter, our Maths teacher, stands at the window quivering. Encouraging a sweet and fragile teacher, distraught at the thought that we don't care about her class and driven to hysteria by consistent and vicious undermining of her authority, to throw herself from the second story is wrong. But it's also fun. Miss Hunter is the kind of teacher who will never last. She believes in our inherent goodness. Which is her first mistake.

Two teachers have already had nervous breakdowns this year. Mr. Henri had run from the classroom screaming after seeing messages about his wife scratched on a desk. Miss Franks had just never returned after that picture of her circulated on the Internet. If she hadn't failed me I might have taught her about information security instead of sending her pictures to TILF.com.

Maths is the first class of the day where the whole of the Spider are together. We sit around one of the desk clusters at the back and begin our meeting as the torture of Miss Hunter grows in intensity.

I nod to Kyle to start.

“Stats say there is a trend toward creature porn,” he says in his mumbling murmur. He slides his phone into the middle of the desk. The coloured graphs on it show a huge spike in creature fetish.

Creature porn is a strange new addition to the porn canon; guys dressed in supernatural fancy dress. The sales were driven by a conspiracy theory circulated on Internet forums that the werewolves, zombies and other humanoid beasts getting it on with humans were real. People will believe anything if it helps them get their rocks off.

“Keep an eye on it; it may just be a fad like the Swedish Sauna orgies,” I reply.

Kyle nods to Ntombazana.

Ntombazana is our security liaison officer, our enforcer, a mountain of Xhosa sturdiness in the gold bomber jacket that she wears over her school uniform. Her large hoop earrings jangle as she speaks. “Increased low-level attacks on the Form by the NTK,” she says in her slurring treacle baritone. “Word is that Denton is organising for a big retaliation.”

Our sales and PR person, the Inhalant Kid, wheezes and takes another long sniff from the bottle of fluid. He is short for his age, unsurprising considering his hobby. He's something of a connoisseur of chemical contaminants. Despite the gaps in his memory and solvent-induced stammer, he is an amazing sales person due to the fact that he has the ability to simultaneously make people feel sorry and scornful of him.

“The meeting with Driekie Venter is on,” he says softly. “He wants to meet you today at eleven.”

Driekie Venter is a possible new distribution partner at Mulderberg Technical High school in the Northern Suburbs. So far we've kept our operation within the boundaries of Westridge, but we are a big fish in a small pond and we need to diversify. Driekie is our link to the predominantly Afrikaans Northern Suburbs. His hatred of English speakers has destroyed any previous attempts to pursue this avenue, but he is slowly coming round. He has the greed hook in his mouth and all I need to do is reel him in.

"Ok, see if you can get me a doctor's note from the Form. Optometrist or something."

The Inhalant Kid pulls a piece of paper from his bag. "Way ahead of you. Turns out you need new glasses."

I smile. "Good work." Then my smile fades. "This is not going to be an easy year," I say. "I don't need to tell you the threat we face. If war ensues and we're caught, expulsion is almost certain."

The Inhalant Kid has switches to wood glue and is sniffs viciously.

"I'm not forcing anybody to continue on our current course of action. If anybody wants out, say so. My voice became more resonant. "We will do something incredible here or we will fail spectacularly." I look at the faces of my team. Not one of them flinches.

"Anwar wants to see you," Toby says as he passes me in the corridor after Maths, "Lunchtime at Central."

I nod. So close now. All I need to do is make it work.

"The English kept my great-grandmother in a concentration camp during the Boer War," Driekie says in his thick Afrikaans accent. He's wearing a tight black WWE t-shirt and has a gold hoop dangling from his left earlobe

We're leaning against the wall of a subway near Westridge. I light up a cigarette and offer Driekie one. He accepts, pushes back his wild blonde hair and tucks the cigarette behind his ear.

He turns, unzips and relieves himself against the wall as he speaks. "The South African English are a rootless, bastard race. The Afrikaans have a culture, a tradition, what do the South African English have?"

"Nothing," I say. "It's a miracle we've even survived this long."

Driekie laughs as he zips up his fly. He wipes his hands on his pants and then pulls the cigarette out from behind his ear. I light it for him.

"We'll supply the merchandise, you market and distribute it in the Northern Suburbs and we split the profits," I say.

Driekie takes a drag of the cigarette and looks at me. "What's the split?"

This is the most dangerous part of the negotiation. The production cost of the porn we'll be giving him is virtually nothing. He shoulders all the risk and the cost of marketing. Of course I don't tell him this.

“Seventy-thirty” I say.

Driekie smiles. “Just like the English, always thinking we’re backward, inbred farmers.” His smile fades. “Fifty-fifty,”

I purse my lips. “Sixty-Forty is really the lowest I can go.”

“You’re taking me for a *poes*, *Engelsman*.”

I sigh theatrically. “The rest of the Spider is not going to like this,” I say. “OK fifty-fifty.”

There is a long pause while Driekie thinks and then finally he nods his head and extends his hand. We shake.

“But *Engelsman*, if you fuck with me I’ll make you pay for everything the English ever did.”

I smile. “Driekie, you have the word of this bastard.”

Driekie snorts and gives me a long stare as if to back up his threat. I return it. He nods as if something about me has been confirmed and then turns to leave. Second objective achieved.

When lunch rolls around I walk slowly across the sandy patch that separates the art rooms from the science labs. In front of me two of the Form are holding down a younger kid and rubbing his face into the dirt. As they lift his head to let him breathe he gives me a pleading look.

The two Form foot-soldiers look at me too. They know I hold some sway with their leader and if I said something it might make go easier on him. But that would be strategically unsound. Denton would suspect I was favouring the NTK. Intervening in everyday Sprawl affairs was a bad idea. I carry on walking.

I get to the edge of the lower sports field and turn right toward the iron-fenced perimeter of the school. In the corner is spot where the iron has been bent to form a gap. I look around quickly and then duck through the hole. This leaves me in an alley next to a bridge that connects the surrounding residential area to the highway.

I walk down the side of the graffitied bridge to a series of abandoned rooms that used to be a Freemason Lodge. This is Central, the NTK base of operations. I knock and pull a face at the creepy carved Masonic eye that watches me from above the door as I wait. The door opens opens a crack. I recognise the face peering out at me.

“Wassup, Russ,” I say conversationally, mostly because I know it’ll piss him off. He joined NTK because he wants respect, but he gets none from Anwar and he damn well isn’t getting any from me.

“Zevcenko,” he says. I wait. He wants me to ask to come in and thus to acknowledge his role as gatekeeper. I don’t because he knows why I’m here and he won’t dare keep Anwar waiting. I begin to

whistle and tap my foot. He panics and opens the door like the minion that he is. Pawns are so predictable.

The NTK rank-and-file are sprawled on couches eating takeaways and smoking *tik* from lightbulbs that they've stolen from teacher's cars. They look up as I walk through, their eyes bloodshot and dangerous. I look curiously at the room like I'm a potential buyer being led through a house by a real estate agent.

Russell leads me to the inner rooms. The room has a black and purple decaying pulpit that stands in one corner. The Masons must have used this room to sacrifice babies or something. No wonder Anwar likes it so much.

Anwar and Toby are on a low, dusty couch in the centre of the room watching a younger kid have his shoulder tattooed. The dog tattoos are a sign of initiation into the gang, a mark of achievement for successfully passing the violent rituals of membership.

The tattoo artist is an old guy with prison tattoos. He works methodically with a school compass and blue ink from a regulation school pen to render the crude drawing of a dog on the clavicle of the NTK's newest initiate. The kid doesn't flinch and Anwar nods approvingly.

When the tattoos are done the artist grunts and shuffles out the door. Anwar says a few words to his new minion and then waves his hand and the kid leaves too. Anwar and Toby stare at me like vultures at roadkill.

"Baxter, Baxter, Baxter," Anwar says. He waves for me to sit on one of the lumpy chairs arranged in front of the couch of power. I sit, forcing my body to remain relaxed and nonchalant.

"You have two minutes," Anwar says.

I snap open my briefcase and pull the folder containing the detailed power-sharing treaty from it. This treaty is a subtle and nuanced blueprint for the future political landscape of the school. Rather than working against each other we can utilise our various competencies for the good of us all.

The alliance with Driekie Venter is the beginning. With Driekie's contacts the Westridge business community could expand into other schools. We would be the United States of Schoolyard Contraband. Each gang had its place. Working together there was nothing we couldn't achieve. I would inspire the gangs of Westridge to take responsibility for their future. I'm like Oprah. If Oprah had weird glasses and sold porn.

Anwar takes the treaty from my hands and walks over the NTK war table and to pour over it. While I wait for him to recognise the sheer genius of my plan I glance around the room and notice a dusty plaque on the wall, another forgotten Mason relic:

"The last of the Sieners died at the hands of the British, their art forgotten but not lost"

The script reads, and beneath it the same all-seeing eye that adorns the entrance. Looking closer I see that the eye is not quite the same. The pupil is not a regular orb but metal shaped in the outline of the African continent. I wonder what art the plaque refers to. I hope it's something lame like pottery or decoupage. My forehead begins to itch and I scratch it absently.

“Baxter,” Anwar says.

I turn to see the Warlord smiling, the treaty cradled in his hands. I allow myself a moment of smugness. Apparently even Anwar’s warmongering mind could see the logic.

“You know I’ve always respected the Spider,” he says.

This isn’t at all true. In our earlier days the NTK had threatened and harassed us until we had imposed porn sanctions on their members.

“But this,” he says the words with such sarcasm that my smugness scuttles away like vermin. “This is an insult.”

I struggle to control myself. “You might be strong enough to defeat The Form but the resulting fallout will benefit nobody.”

“The NTK are not weak, power-brokering scavengers,” he says.

I snap my briefcase shut and rise to leave. “Then I wish you the best of luck, Warlord,” I say with all of the coldness I can muster. In a way I actually mean it. Third objective failed. Luck is all that is going to save any of us now.

3. Lust, Crows & Linda Hamilton

“Sometimes I think women are cyborgs sent back in time to destroy everything good in the world,” my dad says after a long silence. My parents are fighting about something stupid again.

It’s a giant board-game with them. Daily tasks are marked on a “who-is-contributing-most-to-this-relationship” scorecard. My dad unpacked the dishwasher last night, but this was nullified by the fact that my mom had to spend most of the day rearranging their bedroom.

“If you don’t fucking care about this relationship then maybe we should just forget about it!” was the last thing my mom had screamed before my dad slunk into my room to hide. He’s too soft. When they fight my mom will erupt with a string of curses that would make a taxi driver proud. But no matter how much he argues, he never swears. He probably submerges himself in the pool and screams into the blue nothingness when nobody is around.

I’m watching Terminator for the 11th time. My dad sits on the end of my bed and stares at the screen morosely.

“Linda Hamilton was hot in that 80s kinda way,” I offer.

“Yes, she was,” my dad says. We watch the rest of the movie in silence and I let him feed off my carefree teenage energy for a while. Adults are so fucked up. I swear their ‘maturity’ is really just resignation in the face of insurmountable odds.

The credits roll and he gets up. “Thanks Baxter,” he says.

I nod sagely.

I turn on my computer and am checking emails when Esme’s avatar pops up in the corner of my screen.

VampireLust: I’m wetter than a housewife’s cheeks during Titanic

Bax74: Well, I’m harder than a Trigonometry exam, baby

VampireLust: So why don’t you, you know, come over?

Bax74: On my way

I ease my bike out of the garage. My parents are in their room attempting to put band-aids on the third degree burn that is their marriage. They’ll probably end up having gross middle-aged sex to a song by Toto and won’t leave their room for the rest of the night. Bless the rains down in Africa all you want, old people, I’m going to get some real action.

I skirt the edge of the dirty canal which leads behind my house toward the railway tracks. It smells like wet dog and puke. The canal is like a sick swollen artery beneath the botox of suburbs. While rich people watch their flat-screen TVs, the homeless wash in here. While bankers furtively watch

Porntube while their wives call to them from the kitchen, people have sex in the grass that borders the concrete of the Liesbeek. People do drugs here, people die here. This is where the souls of dead crime victims come to be ferried to the after-life, haunted by babies burnt in the tik-fires of their parents. I pull my grey hoodie over my head and rub my face. My weird dreams have been keeping me up at night. I need to get more sleep.

“Jy,” a whisper comes from inside the canal like the sound of a bicycle tyre deflating. I stare down into the darkness and see a man standing slumped against the concrete wall. In the gloom I see that his front teeth are missing and his face is covered in the green-grey ink of prison tattoos.

“Give me an entjie,” he says, putting his fingers to his mouth in the universal gesture for cigarette.

I pull my pack from my pocket and pass one down to him, keeping one foot on the pedal and ready, just in case he is meaning to continue this conversation with a knife.

“You have some work for me?” he asks.

“Doing what?” I say.

That seems to stump him.

“I was in prison for ten years,” he says after a silence.

“You get raped?” I ask. I know it’s a bit insensitive, but it’s the first thing everybody thinks, plus I had given him a cigarette so I didn’t feel like I needed to be polite.

He’s silent.

“There are sounds here at night, coming from the mountain” he says, pointing to the faint silhouette of Table Mountain in the distance.

“The Third-Eye Killer,” I say with a shudder.

He shakes his head. “There’s more than one of them.”

“Could be,” I say. “Lots of psycho people out there.”

He fixes his stone-grey eyes on me. “No, *laaitie*, they’re not people.”

Without a word I push off from the curb and carry on riding. People are so crazy. The best thing is just not to get involved.

I pull my bike into the driveway of fourteen Grove Close and tap on the door of the garage. Esme is here during the week with her mom and her stepdad Olaf but is forced to spend the weekend with her father in Parow. I tap softly on the door and she opens the garage halfway. I slide my bike in next to Olaf’s silver Audi. We sneak through the large, chrome kitchen and out the back door to Esme’s garden apartment.

Despite the chic fittings, Esme's pad is a little different from your average teenage girl. Mostly because she's is a raging klepto. Coffee cups, clocks, jewelry. She steals from everywhere she goes. An Esme Ave road sign, a bowling pin, a dressage championship trophy from the house of a childhood friend; I know all of her talismans and take great pride in my ability to notice when she has stolen something new.

"Thief and thievee have a special bond" she said the first time I came here. "I have a connection with the owners of all these objects. It makes me feel less lonely in life."

"Seriously?" I asked.

"No stupid" she said rolling her eyes. "I just like to take stuff without paying for it."

She doesn't turn on any lights but I can make out her short dark hair and her large green eyes. She goes to Saint Catherine's, a private school that's in the same neighbourhood as Westridge but way out of its league in terms of academic prestige and reputation. I don't mind too much. Private school disdain is kinda hot.

She takes my hand and leads me from the second-floor balcony up onto the flat roof of her bedroom. The moon looks a reaper's sickle and there's a slight chill to the air. She slides in close to me.

"TILF or die?" she whispers into my ear.

TILF or die is one of our contributions to the world. It's a game with very simple rules. You give the name of a teacher to the other person and they have to decide if, in the event of a nuclear holocaust, you would sleep with that teacher to repopulate the world or if you'd rather let yourself and humanity die first.

"Mr. Bailey," I say.

"Die," she says instantly.

"Ok that was an easy one. How about Mr. Roddick?"

"Ew. Die. Actually I'd gouge out my eyes first so that his face wouldn't be the last thing I saw. My turn. Ms. Hunter."

"C'mon TILF obviously."

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

"With that horsey face?" She neighs softly.

We play another couple of rounds and then settle into a comfortable silence.

"Have you ever thought what we'll be doing in exactly ten years time?" she asks, her eyes drawing a bead on me and locking on. I don't get to answer.

You know when you're a little kid and you think clouds are soft and smooth and you dream of rolling around the sky on a layer of warmth? That's what making out with Esme is like.

My mom says the youth is apathetic. She says it was different in the eighties when they were fighting against an oppressive government. They cared then, apparently. Nostalgia for the activist days is one of my mom's lamest qualities

I'm at home for lunch like I am every Wednesday. My mom works a half-day at her NGO and insists I come home so that we can spend lunchtime together.

"I'm worried about you, Baxter," she says. "You don't seem to be interested in doing anything with your life."

Like running a highly successful business for instance? Sometimes I wish the Spider was legit just so I could get her off my back.

"You need to find something you're passionate about."

Total control of the schoolyard porn trade in the Western Cape? I'm reaching for a dream here, mom.

"It's not getting any easier for white males out there, you know. Your generation also needs to learn to take responsibility for what happened during apartheid."

"Correction," I say. "*Your* generation needs to take responsibility for what happened. I was born after apartheid ended." I say. "Besides I'm Polish, does that mean I have to take responsibility for every stupid decision my Polish ancestors made?"

"You're part Afrikaans, you know," she says. "Your dad's great-great grandmother was some kind of religious leader during the Boer war."

Hmm, I must tell Driekie that.

She smiles and touches my face. "I just want the best for you, Baxter."

"Hello skatties," Mr. Du Toit says as Esme and I stroll in holding hands. "Private Lane Four is open." She'd been shot in the face by her ex-husband and as a result only had one eye and the use of half her facial muscles.

But it didn't impede her work much. As owner of the Wash 'N Bowl, Parow's premier launderette and bowling alley, she ran a tight ship. It had been almost impossible for me to bend her to my will and allow minors in the private lanes. Almost.

After I'd set her up an online dating profile and hooked her up with Henk, a tennis coach, she'd been so happy that the Wash 'N Bowl became our little home away from home when Esme visited her dad.

We buy Creme Soda from the vending machine and close the curtain that separates Private Lane four from the rest of the alley. Esme pulls her hipflask from her leather jacket and we decant a copious amount of vodka into the can. Not classy but effective.

“Strip bowling?” Esme says grinning.

Strip bowling is our second contribution to the world. Once again the rules are pretty simple. The ball goes into the gutter: you take off an item of clothing. You lose the frame: you take off an item of clothing.

“You’re on.”

She takes a ball off the rack and makes a big deal of lining up, then jogs down the track and sends the ball bouncing into the gutter. “Oops,” she says pouting and putting a finger to her lips. “Silly me.” She removes her jacket.

I grin send the ball down the lane, only just clipping one of the pins.

“Gosh,” she says, removing her boots. “You’re so good at this.” She’d won the junior bowling championships when she was twelve under her dad’s iron-fisted mentorship. She can beat me blindfolded.

She takes another ball and sends it into the gutter again. “I sure am bad at this.”

She unbuttons her jeans and I watch as she slips her smooth legs from them, leaving nothing but a set of panties and a white t-shirt that.

“Tell you what,” she says, “I want another chance. Double or lapdance?”

“I wouldn’t be a gentleman if I said no.”

She takes aim and then with a heave sends the ball flying into the wall. It thuds against the concrete and then drops into the gutter. She turns, saunters over to me and slides her legs over my lap. “There’s something you should know,” she murmurs as she drops her head to bite my neck. “I’m a bit of a sore loser.”

The tyres of my Dad’s car crunch on the stones of the Shady Pines driveway. I look up at the old, vine-covered building in despair. I have a thousand things to do and visiting old people is not on the agenda.

My dad has brought me to Shady Pines Nursing Home because he believes my grandfather is dying. He wants me to pay my respects to the eldest of the Zevcenko lineage.

Frankly I don’t want to. Grandpa Zevcenko is ‘different’, which is a nice way of saying ‘totally insane’. I haven’t seen him since the Great Family Brawl of 2004 and that I’d really rather forget.

To understand the Great Brawl you need to understand my uncle Roger. My father’s brother is a man who wears a wide-brimmed hat and speaks of the devil as easily as other men speak about sport. Yep, Uncle Roger is a fanatic with burning eyes and a homoerotic love for the biggest Bearded One who patrols the clouds and your thoughts.

When Grandpa Zevcenko brought up the giant Crows, Roger would stir like a great lizard who'd been poked by a sharp stick. Christmas 2004 was one such time.

Grandpa Zev had been enjoying the Johnny Walker a little too much that day but nobody had minded at first. Food had been gluttoned, crackers had been cracked, jokes had been told and everybody was sitting around in the soporific afterglow. An old, drunk grandfather was tolerable. That is until he started talking about the Crows.

Grandpa Zev, a green plastic Christmas hat perched rakishly on his shaggy white hair, stood up and addressed the room. Even at ten I seemed to be the only one who guessed what was about to happen and began to barricade myself into a corner with Christmas presents.

"The thing about the giant crows is that they'll tear out your throat and then delicately drink your blood like they're sipping martinis," he said as if he were an orator giving a speech to thousands. As a mood-killer it was a winner on all accounts.

There was a long silence before everybody tried to divert attention to something different at the same time. There was a lot of noise but only Grandpa Zevcenko's voice could be clearly heard ringing out. "The Crows will gouge out your eyeballs, if you give them half a chance!" he shouted.

Uncle Roger stood up and faced his father. "Dad, there are no such things as giant Crows," he said.

Grandpa grinned the wild, ravenous grin of a madman. "The Crows are more real than your imaginary friend in the sky, son."

At that my uncle took an angry step forward. That was a mistake. Roger is a tall and broad-shouldered man but Grandpa Zevcenko had been a champion boxer in the army and still had a solid right hook for an old guy. He dropped Uncle Rog easily. All hell broke loose. Roger's wife Mariekie tried to intervene but she caught the eldest Zevcenko in the fog of war. Grabbing her by the perm he shoved her head in the granadilla trifle and possibly would have held it there until she'd stopped thrashing had he not been restrained by my father and Darryl, the disabled neighbor, who vaulted off his wheelchair, grabbed him around the waist and pulled him to the floor.

As a ten-year-old I learnt a lot from this experience 1. If you're gonna drown someone in trifle, it's best to do it with no-one else around. 2. My family are a bunch of circus freaks.

"I'm not sure he's going to around much longer," my dad says as I get out of the car. "Use this as a chance to say goodbye."

Granpa's room is sickly custard colour and smells of urine smothered with fake lavender air freshener. Standard issue old-person mohair blankets are draped over dumpy beige chairs and I notice a black and white photo of a man in military uniform next to the bed.

A familiar white-haired figure sits on the balcony looking out over the lawn. It surprises me that I'm nervous.

“I’m Baxter,” I say in the voice I usually use for babies and small dogs.

The figure turns to look at me. “I know who you are,” he says. “I’m old, not retarded.”

Grandpa Zev has aged a lot in six years, his skin is pale, almost translucent, and he is much more frail than I remember. But his eyes still glint with pure, unadulterated craziness.

“How are you Grandpa?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I’m not your grandfather,” he says, “I need to tell you the hard truth about your birth before I die.” He beckons me over with a withered hand and I sit on the seat opposite him on the balcony.

He clears his throat. “Your father was the baby of a hooker I used to frequent. When she died of syphilis your grandmother and I took him in and cared for him as our own.”

I looked at him stunned.

He looks at me seriously for a second and then breaks into a racking cough of laughter.

“I’m just fucking with you Baxter,” he says wheezing with delight. “That’ll teach you to talk to me like I’m an invalid.”

I was worried that there’d be nothing to say, but Grandpa Zev and I have a lot to talk about. He tells me about growing up in Poland and being a lacky for organised crime as a teen. In a wave of spontaneity I tell him about the Spider and the porn business. He nods thoughtfully. “Good business to be in. If we’d have had something like that when I was your age the war would have been a lot more fun.”

“Growing up in Poland before the war, we had our own Sprawl. Jewish gangs, small-time thugs, political youth groups, everybody was trying to control the neighbourhood and you know the most important thing I learnt?”

I lean in closer, eager to hear pearls of wisdom from the oldest, weirdest Zevcenko.

“None of it means shit,” he says with a phlegmy laugh. “The fucking Nazis came in and took it all. And then they got their ass kicked and then it was the Russians. No matter how powerful you think you are, there’s always a bigger fish in the sea.”

He bursts into a riot of coughing and waves a trembling hand at a small wooden cabinet in the corner of the room. “Black bottle,” he says.

I walk over to the cabinet, open it and survey the vast quantities of medical supplies therein. I locate the large black medicinal bottle and take it over to Grandpa Zev. He takes it with a shaky hand, unstops it and takes a swig.

“Gin,” he says. “These fascists won’t let me have a drop of alcohol so I have to hide it”

He hands me the bottle and I take a swig. The liquid burns in my throat, bright like a welding iron.

“Your grandmother always tried to stop me drinking, but then she was always a racist cow of a woman.” He takes another swig. “Me, I’m no racist, what I am is a speciest. There are just some creatures that I don’t think should be on this planet.”

“Like giant Crows?” I ask.

“Yes, like the goddamn Crows,” he says gruffly. “I know I haven’t exactly been popular in the family since my little encounter, hell, I probably wasn’t popular before that, but I can’t pretend I didn’t see what I saw.”

He sighs and the weight of the world seems to slip from his shoulders. “You ever get caught by Crows, kid, this is what you do...”

University of Cape Town

4. The Unbearable Inconvenience of Having a Heart

When your girlfriend gets kidnapped it's a major inconvenience. Firstly because of all awkward, condolences from people that you barely know.

Second, there's the expectation that I'll take time off. My mother tells me in soft, sympathetic tones that I can stay at home. The Bearded One calls me into his office and communicates via "uhhms" and "ahhs" that I must "take it easy." Right. If I wanted time off I'd fake illness or weave a web of excuses that no mere adult would ever be able to untangle. I have business to attend to and sobbing in the corner for disappeared girlfriends is not on the agenda.

The disappearance of Esme went down like this: Last night her mother and Olaf had gone out to a function and left her there watching TV. They'd come back to an Esme-less house. They had phoned her friends. Phoned me too, apparently, but my phone had been off. No Esme.

Then they called the police but had to wait twenty-four hours before filing a report. Now the whole of Westridge has heard about it. More students than I realised know about our relationship and my patience has begun to wear thin with slack-faced well wishers.

The truth is that Esme is a pawn like everybody else. A valuable pawn, one that comes with unique intimacies and affections, sure; a pawn with benefits. But a pawn nonetheless.

I go through my day at school as usual with politics remaining top of mind. I shift and channel the subtle currents and nuances of socio-political life. If anything I feel more in the zone, more alive, more in control. Nothing can stop me now. I'm invincible. I go home that night and sleep like a baby.

The radio switches on at 7:13am and sends Whitney's voice to kick my ass. Not content with ruining her own life with crack, she's taken to ruining mine with the emotional knuckleduster that is "I Will Always Love You".

"Mom," I shout. "MOM!"

She comes running in.

"I think I'm having a heart attack," I gasp clutching my chest.

She sits on my bed and puts her hand to my chest, checks my pulse and feels my head and then smiles at me.

"Baxter," she says. "You never were a very emotional boy. You're more like your father that way."

"It's that bad?" I say.

My mom smiles her infuriating smile again.

"I think you're worried about Esme," she says.

The idea is so ludicrous, so idiotically off-topic and so transparently, pop-psychologically vapid that ...wit might just be true. The idea makes me want to vomit. My mind becomes unhinged, split down the centre with logical, clinical businessman Baxter on one side and feely-emotional, metrosexual Baxter on the other:

BizBax: You've obviously been ingesting too much oestrogen from the plastic in your food, It's affecting your judgment.

MetroBax: It's your girlfriend, Baxter, do you not feel? If you're cut do you not bleed?

BizBax: Cry me a river. Let me tell you a story. When Thomas Farnsworth tried to scale the north face of Everest in 1976, his expedition got stuck in an avalanche. His entire climbing crew was lost and he had to cut up their corpses with a shard of glass and eat them to survive. He lost all his fingers and toes from frostbite, but he was eventually rescued. While gnawing on the gall bladder of a once close friend, do you think he stopped and cried like a little bitch? Umm, errr, no, he didn't.

MetroBax: You made that up, didn't you?

BizBax: The factual inaccuracy does not affect the sentiment which, in case you missed it, is stop being such a goddamn pussy

MetroBax: That night that you were first with Esme. You remember that, tough guy? If you can honestly and truly tell me what you felt, I'll leave you alone to your life, you emotionless cyborg. Just tell me

"Love," I say.

My mother smiles and looks at me quizzically. "Baxter?"

"Love," I say again, "I'm in love. Love. As in all you need is."

My mother beams with all the benevolence and mercy of a medieval Christian mystic. "I knew you were in there somewhere," she says softly tapping my chest.

A fundamental recalibration. A shifting of paradigms brought about by the introduction of new data into what I had previously thought was a closed feedback loop. I thought love was a ridiculous kid's story that only stupid adults believed in. Like politician's speeches and Scientology. But this is different. The shifting of paradigms is finished. The information is assimilated.

Old directive: Prevent gang war at Westridge.

New directive: Save my love from those who have taken her and rip out their still beating hearts. Just try to stop me.

The Van de Westhuizen house is a riot of activity. Relatives and neighbours stand around and pat each other consolingly like great apes. Several policemen are wandering aimlessly around the living room as if expecting Esme to pop out from behind one the giant pastel pink couches.

Esme's mother is perfectly made up and is playing host, as if this were a soiree she'd thrown. "Oh we're trying to be strong, but Esme is our babbbbieee," she says, steadying herself against the large ceramic sculpture of a Dalmatian that squats at the entrance to the lounge. Sandra Van de Westhuizen is a chiseled Aryan specimen that looks like she could headbutt a rhino into submission.

Which, in a sense, is what she'd done. Olaf, Esme's stepdad was said rhinoceros, an Incredible Hulk of a man, which only made his matrimonial humiliation all the more poignant. There was no question who wore the pants in the Van de Westhuizen house.

"Baxter," Sandra says with false enthusiasm, batting her faux eyelashes and touching her freckly, gold cross-adorned chest. She hates me, of course. She told Esme that it's because she thinks I'm a bad influence. But I suspect that my eye condition strikes a deep chord of distrust in her ovaries. I'm just a bad genetic choice for daughter. Sorry darling; evolutionary psychology is just not that into you.

"I know you must feel awful, just awful, but there was really no reason to come," Sandra says. She fake-kisses me on both cheeks and leads me away from her relatives. "We'll let you know as soon as we hear anything, but in the meantime perhaps you can speak to Sgt. Schoeman about Esme's disappearance. Maybe you know something that might help." She ushers me into the kitchen and then returns to the grieving event of the season.

Sgt. Schoemann is big man. No, let's not euphemise, Sgt. Schoeman is fat. Hugely fat. Obese, in fact. To clarify Sgt. Schoemann is the Michelin man of the South African police force, a giant cream doughnut of man that has been forcibly squeezed into his bulging blue uniform. A dark goatee wraps around his lips like he's been huffing on an exhaust pipe. He nods to me and points to the chair across the table from his.

"Run it, don't kick it," he shouts again, before looking at me thinking a moment and then removing the headphones from his ears.

"OK, just clearing the head," he says. "Now where were we?"

"Um," I say.

"Right, kidnapping of the girl, gotcha." He takes a notebook from his pocket and writes something on it. "Name?"

"Baxter Zevcenko," I say.

"Zevcenko, Zevcenko," he says. "Not of the Zevcenko's that used to live in Bergvliet?"

"No," I say.

"Oh wait, that wasn't Zevcenko, that was Zarkowitz. So, what was your relationship to the deceased?"

"She's kidnapped, not dead," I say.

"Right, right," he says and makes a note.

"She's my girlfriend," I say.

“Oh, who’s the stud then,” he says and aims a punch at my shoulder. “So, did you make the double-backed beast with her?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Coitus, sexual intercourse, the horizontal mambo on the dancefloor of love, the-”

“Yes,” I say before he creates a mental image that I won’t be able to get out of my head.

“Niiccce” he says, holding his hand up for a high-five.

I stare at him. He shrugs, makes one last note and then flips the notebook shut.

“Right, I think that about covers it, Boris.”

South African police work at its finest.

The total lack of police interest gives me a chance to slip into Esme’s apartment. Judging by the white powder on the doorframe there’s been a half-hearted attempt at fingerprinting, but the room is otherwise exactly how it was the night I’d last been here.

I look around. Decorative ashtrays, coasters and the bracelet she stole from her extra Maths teacher are all in their usual places. Nothing is out of place. Except, yes, that. A grey tooth that is poking out from beneath the rug. I pick it up.

It’s more like a fang. The one side is serrated and it is warm to the touch. There’s something odd about it. Out of the corner of my eye it looks like it emits a faint light. I know Esme’s room and the tooth is not one of her many ornaments and fetishes. I stare at it for a moment and then slip it into my pocket. This requires further analysis in more studious environment. This requires Kyle.

“I’ve done a thorough cost-benefit analysis,” Kyle says. We’re sitting in lounge chairs next to his green, algae-infested pool. Weeks ago we stole a garden gnome from the next door neighbour’s garden and today have set it up on the decaying diving board to throw stones at. It’s the small things in life.

“Take a look, Bax,” he says. “I think I’ve made a good case.” He’s wearing mirrored wraparound sunglasses and a Hawaiian shirt that make him look like an extra in the sci-fi remake of *Cocktail*. He picks up a shard of rock with one hand and gives me a neatly typed page with the other. I take them and look them over. Truth be told he does make a pretty good case for just leaving Esme kidnapped:

“Point 1: A steady girlfriend at sixteen increases your chances of ending up as one of those people who marry their high school sweethearts and realise in middle-age that they’ve lived a miserable, stunted half-life.”

All too true.

Point 2: “You could ride the sympathy wave indefinitely for maximum personal and organisational benefit.”

One thing I can say for Kyle, he speaks my language.

“Both sound points,” I say.

Kyle nods as if confirming that the case is closed. The problem is that this isn’t a rational problem. It doesn’t take into account the alien love foetus in my chest rakes its claws against my diaphragm. I decide to come out. If I can’t reveal my true nature to my best friend then I can’t do it to anyone. I would have to live a lie, pretending that deep inside didn’t beat the heart of a feeler.

“I never thought I’d say this, but some things can’t be decided by a cost-benefit analysis,” I say. “Like love.”

Kyle stares at me for ages before his dumb grin spreads across his face. “I guess this is what you’d call a defining moment,” he says.

“I guess it is.”

“I’m sorry about that,” he says, nodding at the pages in my hand. “I thought it was what you wanted.”

I sigh. “I thought so too. But what can I say, I love her.”

“You’re a real boy, Pinocchio,” he says in a high-pitched voice.

“Fuck off.” I take the tooth out of my pocket and hand it to him.

“That’s weird,” he says. “Is it glowing.”

“Yep.”

He lifts his wraparounds onto his head. “What kind of tooth glows?”

“A tooth that’s a clue to where Esme is,” I say.

He hands the tooth back to me. “I’ll do some research, see if there’s any kind of tech that can do that. Oh and I got into her bank account. I’ll change the contact details so that I get an SMS if she uses her debit card.”

He picks up his a shard of rock and lobs it at the gnome that’s teetering on the diving board. It misses by miles.

“It must be Anwar,” I say.

“I don’t know Bax,” Kyle says. “Kidnapping is a bit risky, even for him.”

“Think about it,” I say, hefting a smooth stone in my hand to test the weight. “He’s always considered the Spider a threat.” My throw clips the gnome’s hat and it teeters on the board but doesn’t fall.

“Maybe,” Kyle says, missing the gnome by light years.

I pick up a sharp rock and take aim. “If he’s done anything to her...” My throw is dead-on and the gnome explodes like a suicide bomber.

Kyle has his feet up on my desk and is sucking one of those sherbet lollipops that make your mouth go red. The past few days have not been easy. During the days I spend half my time worrying about Esme and the other half looking over my shoulder for the NTK. At night my dreams are of ox wagons and Afrikaaners.

Kyle crunches the lollipop and talks as he chews the pieces. “It might be some kind of UV spray on the tooth.”

“Why would a kidnapper do that?”

He shrugs. “Maybe he’s into rave.” He stands up. “Can I have something to eat? I’m starving.”

“You know where the kitchen is.”

He opens the door and leaves the room to go to the kitchen downstairs, but thirty seconds later the handle of my door turns and he reappears.

“You forget how to make a sandwich?” I say and then see that he’s not alone. Rafe, my least favourite retard, is standing there with him.

“What’s he doing in here?”

Rafe walks over and slaps a newspaper down onto my desk.

“Great so he can read, my hearty congratulations,” I say.

Rafe shakes his head and jabs a finger at one of the smaller headlines: “Yuri ‘the Russian’ suspected of kidnapping and human trafficking.” He moves his finger down to a piece of the article he has underlined in red ink. “Teenage girls are suspected of being kidnapped and forced to work in strip clubs.”

“Jesus, he took Esme,” I say.

Kyle reads the paper. “A Russian mobster?”

“It’s right there,” I say, slamming my hand down onto the paper. “He kidnaps young girls and forces them to work at his clubs”

“But we don’t...” he starts.

“OK, we need a plan,” I say, my mind racing. “If that bastard has Esme...”

Kyle sighs. “We’re going to do something stupid aren’t we?”

“More stupid than kidnapping a senior member of the Russina mafia? No not more stupid than that.”

“Cheerio, chaps,” Douglas says, clutching the two bottles of wine from Kyle’s dad’s collection.

So far our plan to kidnap a senior member of the Russian mafia has gone surprisingly smoothly. It turns out that Yuri’s repeated assertions that he is merely an honest businessman victimised in xenophobic South Africa because of his Russian heritage requires a lot of backing up.

So when we phoned him and asked him to be a keynote speaker at the “South African Business and Technology Forum” he jumped at the chance. Well when I say ‘we’ phoned him I of course mean Douglas, the homeless guy with the toffish accent that we had employed for the purpose.

We’d set up meeting for the following day to “discuss the presentation,” by which of course I mean “tase him, put a bag over his head and torture him until he tells us where Esme is.”

My room has become the command post for this mission. Kyle shows us a map of the unfinished business park where we’ve agreed to meet Yuri. “Target will arrive at sixteen-hundred-hours tomorrow, so we’ll go straight from school to the rendezvous point.”

Yuri probably wouldn’t bring much muscle, legitimate businessmen didn’t usually bring bodyguards, and at most we’d have to deal with one ‘business associate’.

“What if the tasers don’t work?” Kyle says, looking at the small plastic device in his hand dubiously.

He has a point. Fong Kong rip-offs are fine for some things but maybe not for attacking a high-level mobster with a reputation for violence I look at Kyle.

“Uh-uh, no ways,” he says. “You’re not testing them on me.”

Rafe backs away from both of us and looks ready to run.

“OK, relax,” I say to both of them. “There’s chloroform in the science lab. I’ll steal some tomorrow and if the tasers really don’t work we’ll use some of that.”

“We’re not really going to do this, are we?” Kyle says.

“Yes,” I say. “Yes we are.”

5. Crossing the Rubicon

Yuri had not brought anybody with him. Apparently the prospect of being accepted by the legitimate business community had made him ignore his native Russian cautiousness. Unlucky for him because he is now tied up in the shed at the bottom of Kyle's garden with a jump rope.

We'd given him directions to an unfinished office park in Obs and tased him as he wandered around looking for the non-existent 'Clayton Enterprises'.

I'd driven his Audi A5 back to the house and between the three of us we had managed to drag the semi-conscious gangster down to the shed. Kyle's parents were out at a conference and wouldn't be back until they had either solved issues of gender and ethnicity or until they were too drunk to stand.

"I will feed you to my dogs," Yuri shouts so loudly that veins pop out of his sweaty, shaved head and saliva drips down onto his tasteless maroon suit.

He struggles against the rope and rocks back and forth on the chair. Eventually he stops and sits there breathing heavily and looking at us like we're insane. To be fair we must look a little strange. Our efforts to avoid Russian mob retribution consist mostly of wearing the masks of former South African statesmen that Kyle's parents had bought for Halloween.

I'm FW de Klerk, Kyle is PW Botha and Rafe is Hendrik Verwoerd.

"We're crossing the rubicon now," PW says wagging his finger in Yuri's face.

"I will rip your eyeballs out," Yuri screams, rocking the chair back and forth.

Hendrik calmly hefts a half-brick and smacks Yuri in the knee with it.

"What the hell, Rafe?" I say.

Hendrik shrugs.

"Ahhh...Ahhh," Yuri screams.

"We're looking for someone," I say.

The Russian breathes in and out forcefully. I pull a picture of Esme from my wallet and hold it in front of his face. "We know you've taken her."

Yuri looks at the picture and then bursts into an unpleasant bout of laughing. Sweat drips down his smooth, egg-shaped head.

"You think I take her to work in my strip club?" He laughs then winces at the pain from his knee.

Hendrik lifts the brick again but I hold up my hand. "So you've got nothing to do with her disappearance?" I say.

He leans forward. "I kidnap black girls in Africa," he says viciously. "If I want white girls I find them in Eastern Europe. It's cheaper and easier. And besides your bitch, she is not pretty enough."

I look at the photo of Esme. She is pretty but I've been to strip clubs and I know what Yuri means. Those girls are almond-eyed six foot nymphs. She didn't really fit in. "

What about this?" I hold the tooth in front of Yuri's face.

"You mess with the Qawa. They take her then and eat her." He laughs.

"The Qa-what?"

Yuri spits on the floor. "If I help you find your woman you will let me go?"

I nod.

"OK fine. I help you. You think I just work with girls but I am also an entrepreneur in the dog-fighting industry. The audience sometimes likes something a little different; hyenas, baboons...sometimes other things."

"Like what?" Kyle says.

"Just other things. These other things are difficult to come by. I had one and it was never beaten and the other promoters were very jealous. So one of the cocksuckers stole it from me. You understand that I couldn't go to the police with this. So I found someone else to help, someone who knew about these things."

"Who helped you?" I say.

"The bounty hunter," the Russian replies.

Oxwagons again. It's dawn and light is breaking over the bushveld. Hard-looking men are cleaning old rifles while the wounded are being tended to by young barefoot girls I feel a jolt of pain and look up. An old woman is pinching me viciously.

"Concentrate," she says in Afrikaans, "You must learn to see."

"I think I had that one covered at birth," I try to say, but the words don't come out.

I feel good the next morning despite the dreams. Even when Kyle tells me about Yuri.

"Yuri the Russian killed by the Mountain Killer." Kyle reads from the Cape Times. "Police warn Capetonians that the serial killer has made a transition to killing in the suburbs."

"Shit," I say. "You don't think we had anything to do with it?" We'd put a bag over Yuri's head and tased him again then dragged him back to his car and driven it down to the Liesbeeck canal. He was regaining consciousness so we tased him again and then left him there in the front seat and hotfooted it back home.

Kyle shrugs. “Not exactly a major loss to humanity is it?”

“Not even Yuri deserves the Mountain Killer,” I say with a shudder.

“Well, anyway, now that we've crossed Yuri out the equation, what do we do?”

“I'm going to see this bounty hunter” I say.

Kyle shakes his head desperately. “We don't even know who this guy is, Bax.”

“Have you got any better ideas?” I say.

He doesn't.

I wait until eleven and then tell my mom that I'm going to Kyle's for a Saturday morning Playstation session. I head down to Claremont train station with an undefined paranoia nipping at my heels. My forehead has begun to itch and throb, an uncomfortable sensation

The building is a short walk from Woodstock station. It's a decrepit old office block called Flamingo, except the 'a' and the 'm' in the sign have long since fallen off and thus renamed the building 'Flingo'. The dirty revolving door is stuck and I have shove hard to move it the few inches required to gain entry.

The lobby smells of ammonia. Or maybe it's just piss. I press the button for the lift several times and wait. Nothing. I give up take the stairs, stepping over a black cat that's either dead or incredibly lazy. The fifth floor is deserted except for a shifty-eyed cleaning lady playing solitaire in the stairwell. She scowls as I step over her cards. I walk past several doors until I get to number fifty-six. Jackie Ronin, Supernatural Bounty Hunter is stenciled on the wooden door. Scrawled underneath in permanent marker is “Who you gonna call?” and a bad khoki reproduction of the Ghostbusters logo. Underneath that was “Only Jesus Saves” and at the bottom “Cock”. I knock.

“I said I'd have your rent next Tuesday, you Lebanese bloodsucker,” a gravelly voice booms from inside.

“I'm looking for Jackie Ronin,” I call out, trying to sound tough.

“Are you a prostitute?” the voice says. Toughness not achieved.

“I may need the services of a supernatural bounty hunter,” I say.

There's a long pause. “It's open.”

I push the door and enter. A guy, forty-something and rough-looking, is seated on a grubby couch in the middle of the room with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. He's leaning over a Monopoly board and placing a little red hotel carefully on one of the blocks.

“I'll be with you in a sec,” he says. He gestures for me to sit down on one of the dirty beige couches. He throws the dice, gets two ones, swears, and then moves the little silver dog two blocks forward.

“Not going to beat me this time,” he mumbles as he picks up the dice again.

I look around. The 'office' is really more like an apartment; I can see the kitchen through a doorway to my left and a bedroom ahead to the right. Old papers and magazines are stacked in teetering piles around the living room. A badly-preserved moose head is mounted above the television set. It stares at me as I wait for Ronin to finish his game.

Ronin looks like he has grown organically from within this apartment like a mould or fungus. His face is weathered like an old sea captain, long reddish hair streaked with grey tumbling over his face. He has a beard with a single long braid extending from it.

He throws the dice again and gets a five and a three. He picks up the little silver tophat and moves it eight spaces forward. Looks like I've walked in on a crazy old guy playing with himself. The tophat lands on a space that is infested with hotels. Ronin curses and upends the board, sending dice, counters and cards scattering everywhere.

He suddenly seems to notice me and looks at me, his red, caterpillar eyebrows meeting in the centre of his forehead like they're planning a revolution.

"Trying to sell me something?" he says warily.

"No, I need..."

"Fuck it, I need some fresh air," he growls and I follow him as he strides to the window and climbs out onto the rusty fire-escape that clings to the side of the building.

"Hey wait I need to talk to you," I shout after him.

"You have some kind of medical condition that prevents you from going outside?" he says.

"No, I just would prefer that we..."

"You're not one of those bubble boys are you? I saw one of them on TV. The boy that could only live in a bubble because all the germs and shit would kill him."

"No, I'm not a bubble boy."

"Then stop being such a mommy's boy."

I swear and climb out onto the fire escape. The metal shrieks under our weight as we ascend. Ronin clammers up the last stretch of rusty ladder and hops on the rooftop. I follow him, pulling myself up on the cold concrete and swinging my legs over the edge and onto the roof.

The roof is dotted with plants and I notice that some of the taller ones have the familiar six-pronged marijuana leaf. There's a chicken-wire aviary in the corner where a small flock of pigeons are sitting preening themselves.

“You’ve got two minutes. If you try to sell me a cellphone contract or enlighten me in the ways of the Hare Krishnas they’ll never find your body,” Ronin says. He takes off his trench-coat to reveal a dirty wifebeater vest and old-fashioned suspenders that clip into his pin-stripe suit pants. He is heavily tattooed; some kind of military heraldry with a shield and crossed swords on his left forearm, writing in a jagged, arcane script shows over the neck of his vest and a naked woman smiles salaciously from his right bicep.

“Classy,” I say, nodding at the porno ink.

“Wait till you see what she does when I flex,” he says with a grin.

Only now do I notice the sawn-off shotgun that hangs in a long holster at his side. He pulls the shotgun out and lays it reverently on the rooftop. The handle is made of a polished dark wood and the twin chrome barrels are engraved with mythological images. I make out mermaids, dwarves and some kind of weird monster woven together in an intricate pattern.

“Pretty isn’t she?” he says, stroking the weapon, “Her name’s Warchild. Touch her and I’ll rip your pancreas out.”

“Whatever,” I say. I don’t touch the gun.

“So,” Ronin says, stretching his arms above him and looking out at the smog-shrouded silhouette of Cape Town. “What can I do you for, sparky?”

“I’m Baxter Zevcenko,” I say, “I’m looking for my girlfriend.”

He lights another cigarette and drops into a martial arts stance, the cigarette jutting from the edge of his lips like he’s the Keith Richards of kung-fu.

“What are you doing?” I say.

“Dirty Baguazhang,” Ronin hisses, pushing his hands forward slowly and breathing out smoke simultaneously.

“Right,” I say.

“Created at the Purple Cloud Temple in China. Those little bastards had some of the most vicious fighting styles in the world.”

“Those little bastards will probably be ruling the world in a couple of years,” I say. “You might want to try be a bit more PC.”

“Not the Chinese, asshole,” Ronin says. “Dwarves. Purple Cloud Temple was a Dwarven Taoist monastery in the 1300s.”

“Dwarves?” I say.

“Listen, sparky,” Ronin says, stopping his dwarf-fu to look at me. “Get to the point or get the hell off my rooftop.”

“My girlfriend has been kidnapped,” I say.

He nods and continues his Dwarven dragon style. “It happens, kid.”

“But you deal with strange occurrences, right? I say.

“Kidnapping isn’t that strange in this town.”

“This is different,” I say.

He rolls his eyes theatrically. “Give me a break. Your girlfriend has probably run away or, worst case, has been kidnapped by organ harvesters who want to sell her kidney on the black market. Rither way it’s not my problem.”

“I found this,” I say taking the tooth from my pocket.

He grabs the tooth from my hand and turns it over in his fingers. “This changes everything.”

Ronin sits in the swivel chair in his office with his boots up on an old desk. His ragged red head iwvbarely visible through piles of folders that spill yellowed dog-eared paper onto the floor. I can’t help but notice that some of the papers on the floor have the words “final notice” and “unpaid” stamped across them in red.

I move a stack of dusty magazines from a low chair and sit down. Ronin pulls out a small leather bag and extracts a syringe from it. He holds it between his fingers and taps it gently.

"Whoah," I say. "Can't that wait till I'm gone."

He lifts up his wifebeater and jabs the needle in. "It's for diabetes, dickwad" he says.

“Oh, sorry,” I say with an apologetic smile.

He finishes his medical routine then spins in his chair and puts the put the tooth under an old microscope on the shelf behind him He adjusts various dials and knobs as he peers through the eyepiece. “Yep, yep, we’ve got ourselves a genuine Obambo tooth,” he says.

“Obambo?” I ask.

“The glowing ones; called ghosts in most parts of Africa, “he says.

“Wait, what? Ghosts? You’re joking, right?”

He raises an eyebrow and looks across the desk at me. "You came to a supernatural bounty hunter, what did you expect?"

"But ghosts have my girlfriend, c'mon..."

"They're not really ghosts. If they were you'd be shit outta luck because I don't do necromancy or demonology."

"OK," I say, "let's backtrack here a second. If they're not ghosts what are they?"

Ronin sighs. "Always happens. They come to someone that has 'supernatural bounty hunter' on the door. I tell them that a supernatural creature is their problem and they look at me like I'm the crazy one."

"I'm just trying to understand what you're saying."

Ronin raises his hands palm-up like he's imploring the gods for patience. "What I was trying to say was that this is clearly an Obambo tooth. The faint glowing around the edges of the tooth is characteristic of the species."

"So you mean these things glow?" I say. "Like as in emit light?"

"Well aren't you an intellectual of surprising depth?" Ronin says. "Yes, Obambo glow. As in emit twenty-four hour neon ambience." He strokes his long beard braid. "My major concern is that it's common knowledge that they're all extinct."

Common knowledge in his circles, maybe, but not in mine. "So you're saying an extinct glowing ghost has my girlfriend?" I say.

"I'm not saying anything, sparky," he says. "You're saying that you found this tooth, I'm telling you what it is."

"Well if one of these glowing things has Esme, then I need your help," I say.

"Possible, but I'm not cheap, kid," Ronin says, leaning back in his chair and interlacing his fingers across his belly.

"Great, because I'm not poor." I mean it. Spider profits mean that I make twenty times what my folks give me.

He strokes his beard.

"The rent isn't going to pay itself, bounty hunter, and you look like you have more than a few debts to cover."

He snorts. "I bet you're a real little bastard at school."

"You have no idea. So are you going to help me or not?"

“Sparky,” he says leaning across the table. “I think I’m the only one who can help you.”

We pull up to a set of traffic lights and Ronin taps his fingers manically on the steering wheel to the sounds of ‘Surfing Safari’ His powder blue Ford Cortina is as messy as his office and smells of alcohol and cigarettes.

“Just need to finish one last job and then I’ll be on your case like ticks on tourist.”

There’s a hoot from behind as the lights turn green. I look in the rearview mirror and see a guy in an SUV gesticulating wildly for us to move. “Excuse me,” Ronin says and opens the car door.

The bounty hunter walks over to the driver’s side of the SUV, pulls Warchild from under his coat and slides it through the open window. The twin barrels of the gun press into the balding, red-faced guy’s throat. Ronin reaches in with his other hand and pulls a cigarette from a pack on the dashboard, pops it into his mouth and then lights it with the guy’s Zippo.

“You see those lights up ahead?” Ronin asks, pointing at the next set of lights that have turned red. The guy nods weakly. “You would have gained about two seconds.”

The guy gulps and Warchild pushes into his Adam’s apple.

Your ambition is too heavy, you need this SUV to pull it,” Ronin says blowing smoke into the guy’s face.

He pulls Warchild back and slides it under his coat. “If I hear anything more behind me, I’m coming back and performing a buckshot amputation, *comprende?*”

The guy nods slowly.

We drive through Woodstock and onto the N2. The bounty hunter drives with left arm draped over the wheel and his right hand tapping on the top of the Cortina. Houses become increasingly more dilapidated the further we go. Emaciated cows graze on weeds on the sides of the road watched by kids balanced on plastic milk crates. We take a turnoff to the left and follow the road into the township. Ronin stops the car and leans out of the window to hail an old man sitting against the side of a corrugated iron house.

"Sorry *baba*," Ronin says. "We're looking for the First Baptist church."

The old man looks at us with watery eyes.

"First Baptist?" Ronin says.

The old man raises a finger and points toward a *spaza* shop on the corner. We turn the corner at the corrugated iron wall of the *spaza* shop pull up alongside a red face-brick church. ‘First Baptist Congregation,’ a large sign says in bright colours.

The bounty hunter pops the trunk of his car and then gets out and begins pulling equipment from it and pulls out a long, black plastic square that looks like a remote control. He flicks a switch on it and it begins to emit a low beeping noise.

Ronin continues to scrounge in the trunk and drags what looks like a cross between a TV antennae and a trident and hands it to me. I hold the thing in my hands. It's not very heavy, but it's unwieldy. I struggle to get a good grip on it and accidentally slam it into one of the shacks.

"Careful with that," the bounty hunter growls as he hefts a car battery onto his shoulder and slams the trunk closed.

We make our way between the shacks and as we turn a blind corner Ronin slams into the back of someone.

"Jesus," Ronin says.

"No," the man says. "Just one of his humble disciples." He's middle-aged with dark hair broken by patches of grey. His muscles of his face are drawn tight with concern and he tugs incessantly at the priest's collar around his neck.

"You are the hunter?" he asks.

Ronin's mouth curls into a wolfish smile. "The one and only."

"Thank you for coming. I was hoping that the power of Christ would rid us of it his demon but I fear that our Lord is testing us."

Ronin snorts and rubs the back of his hand across his nose. "If we're dealing with an Elemental your Lord is probably sitting back with some popcorn to watch the lightshow."

The priest's brow furrows deeply. "You must help us. This demon is terrorising our community."

"Not a demon, *padre*, if it was your jesus-hoodoo might actually have some kind of effect. Now let's cut the foreplay and get straight to killing the beastie."

The priest nods. He's starts mumbling prayers and I see a line of sweat forming on the back of his neck. We walk through the thin corridor of shacks and sweat begins to form on my forehead too. Although I'm not exactly sure what it is I'm supposed to be scared of. Elemental? I don't have a mental image to associate with that particular piece of mythology.

"Thanks *padre*," Ronin says as we reach an open plot of land surrounded by shacks. "We'll take it from here."

The priest holds up a shaking hand. "Please. Some of the community have gone against the word of God and have hired a witchdoctor. She is a family friend. If you can save her from the demon..."

"A witchdoctor," Ronin says with chuckle. "Well that's about as useful as virginity to hooker but still probably better than getting all worked up and waving crosses about."

The priest frowns again. The bounty hunter claps him on the shoulder and pushes past him. "Have no fear, my good man, Ronin's here."

We leave the priest supporting himself against the corrugated iron wall of a shack and step out onto the dry, open plot of land. Several blocks away I can see the concrete fence that forms a border with the highway. There's a strange feeling of magnetism in the air. My hands tingle and my forehead begins to itch wildly.

Ronin stops and holds his hand out for the trident. "Should get a visual soon."

"What exactly are we..." I start but the atmosphere of the place suddenly seems to drop in pressure. Ronin looks around and then points. I turn to look. Something moves out from behind one of the shacks and my breath catches in my throat. It looks like a bundle of writhing blue flame that shuffles forward in slow motion.

"Pure electricity mixed with equal part bloodlust and hatred. Nasty bastards," Ronin says. "And this one's a biggie."

The thing shuffles forward and I feel the power emanating from it; a blue spark of lust and hunger. The bounty hunter unwinds the cord he has looped around his shoulder and attaches one end to the bottom of the trident and the other to the car battery. "They've been called lots of things," he says as he fastens the cord in place. "Although I've always thought 'township tick' is an apt name."

"Why a tick?" I say, mesmerised by the shifting blue patterns that writhe and twists in the Elementals body.

"Blood sacrifice," he says. "It's the only thing that keeps them here. People make deals with them. They feed it goats, sheep, the occasional thief or rapist convicted in a kangaroo court and it lets them hook power lines into it. Sounds like a good deal when the government keeps promising you electricity but keeps on failing to deliver." He hefts the trident in his arm like a javelin to test the weight. "It's was all hunky-dory until some of their kids wandered into its territory and got devoured. And if there's one thing Elementals find finger-licking good it's young life force. Now they can't stop the thing." He makes an adjustment to the pole. "We can't kill it," he says. "But we can capture it and starve it until it has to leave the physical plane."

I look nervously over to the thing. It's getting closer; a fat tick of current looking for another life to feed on. There's a screech and an old sangoma dressed in deerskin jumps out from behind one the shacks. She calls out to the spark in a high keening voice, a bullhide whip swaying back and forth in her hand as she incants.

"That's the wrong juju mama," Ronin shouts, but the sangoma is fixated on the great beast of electricity that begins to shrug its fiery blue body toward her.

"She's already in its field," Ronin says with a wince. "This is not going to be pretty."

Energy begins to crackle around the sangoma as the Elemental moves closer. Sparks ripple across her skin and her body begins to thrash back and forth as foam bubbles from her lips. With a crack her nervous system lights up like a biological Christmas tree, the pattern of her nerves burning through her skin. She screams as a bolt of energy rips through her and eviscerates her body in a bloody spray.

"Holy shit," I shout shielding my eyes with my hands.

"That's what you would call a sangoner," Ronin replies. He hefts the trident and begins striding toward the thing. After feeding on the sangoma it's moving much quicker as it lurches forward. Ronin walks directly toward it with the trident balanced in his right hand. The Elemental picks up speed as it moves across the dry grass leaving a trail of scorched earth in its wake. Ronin starts to run and the two of them head toward each other like they're playing a supernatural game of chicken. The bounty hunter brings the trident up to his ear and with about ten metres to go lets the thing fly. It spins through the air through the air and hits the Elemental in the middle of its fiery body.

A bolt of energy erupts cutting a wide gash in the shack to its left. My forehead feels like its imploding. I stagger forward holding the space between my eyes. A horrific vision flashes in front of me; an image of Cape Town city burning as a nuclear blast engulfs it with people running from a river of blood and gore that pours down the mountain like lava. Vomit rises in my throat.

Up ahead the thing continues to writhe as energy spills everywhere. Another blast throws Ronin backwards and he lands heavily on the ground. It begins to lose power and slowly the writhing begins to lessen.

Ronin gets up and brushes dirt from his trench-coat. "OK, sparky?"

I nod weakly as I look at the bloody patch where the sangoma and the Elemental had been. I want to say something but I'm not quite sure what. Every time my brain tries to think of something it gets to the image of the sangoma being blown apart and stops.

The priest and a crowd from the township emerge from between the shacks.

"Thank you," the priest says, his eyes wandering to bloody patch on the grass.

"Afraid I couldn't help your buddy, *padre*" Ronin says.

The priest nods and lowers his head. "She didn't practice the work of our Lord, but I still cared for her."

Ronin chuckles. "Wouldn't have mattered if she practised the work of the tapdancing unicorn. She got in an Elemental's electromagnetic field. Boom! Instant sangoma smoothie."

The priest grimaces and Ronin claps him on the shoulder good-naturedly. "C'mon *padre* you've got an immortal soul destined for the pearly gates so what have you got to be sad about?"

The priest pulls a tattered envelope from his pocket and hands it to Ronin without a word.

"Oh, it's just business is it?" Ronin says flicking through the blue bills. "No slaughtered goat or virgins for me to choose from?"

The priest squares his shoulders and looks at Ronin and then turns around and walks back to the small throng of onlookers.

"Next time your God can't help you, you know who to call, right?" Ronin swings around and puts an arm around my shoulders. "Fancy a drink, sparky? I'm buying. Daddy just got paid."

He turns to walk back to the car and then something catches his eye and he turns to walk over to the shack that was ripped open by the blast. I follow him and we peer inside through the shattered wall. A hundred strange little eyes blink up at us.

"Why can't things just be simple for once?" Ronin says. "Looks like we're going to have to call Dr. Pat."

University of Cape Town

6. The Reckoning

Seven sprites sit on my lap peering up at me with saucer eyes. Their little warm, furry bodies rise and fall as they breathe together in unison, like squat, grey, chubby little rabbits that stand upright and have huge dark eyes that make them look like they've taken copious amounts of LSD.

I'm in the passenger seat of a yellow VW kombi. In the driver's seat steering with ringed and braceleted hands is Dr. Pat. The old lady turns her curly white-haired head toward me, her long crystal earrings jingling, and smiles. "It's a good thing Jackson called," she says. "These little dears are in need of some good food and rest." I look down at the creatures on my lap. One is chewing on an old car freshener.

"And how have you come to be in the dubious company of Jackson, dear?" she asks.

"I'm looking for my girlfriend."

Dr. Pat nods absently. "You look like such a nice boy."

I make a noncommittal sound in the back of my throat. We drive for about half an hour and then pull into the driveway of a smallholding in the Phillipi area. The area is wildly overgrown and it takes me a second to see the canary yellow farmhouse peeking out through a blanket of vines and creepers.

"Welcome to the Haven," Dr. Pat says as she parks.

I open the door and the sprites on my lap move as a single unit to hop out of the car. They stand there blinking up at me.

Ronin pulls up in the Cortina. "Right, Pat," he says as he gets out and pulls his pack of cigarettes from his trench-coat. "Get some of your boys to fetch these little bastards and we'll be on our way." Little furry bodies and huge saucer eyes press up against his rear window.

"Jackie Ronin!" Pat says indignantly. "Since when have you been blind to the plight of the Qawa?"

"Since it's tried to kill me seventeen times," Ronin mumbles, but opens the door and grabs an armful of sprites.

Two guys come out of the farmhouse with wheelbarrows and help us unload the sprites from the vehicles.

"What's the Qawa?" I ask Pat, as we wheel a barrow of staring sprites toward the farmhouse.

"Jackie Ronin takes you hunting Elementals but doesn't explain the supernatural ecosystem?" she asks and gives him a dirty look as he passes us to grab more sprites from his car. We hit a bump on the driveway and one of the sprites catapults into the air and lands with a thud on the gravel of the driveway. The sprites wince in unison.

"I'll get him," I say and jog over to grab the furry little creature.

“Let’s get these little darlings inside and then I’ll explain some of the things that Jackson has obviously neglected to tell you.”

We unload the sprites into a spacious pen at the back of the farmhouse. They stand around blinking at one another. “They don’t really do much, do they?” I say.

“Well they don’t really need to, dear, they’re telepathic,” she says.

“They’re..” I start to say, then stop and peer at the furry little beasties.

“Telepathic, dear, apparently more intelligent than dolphins, although you’d hardly know, bless them.”

I stare at the blinking saucer eyes. They stare back. “Come in,” Pat says ushering me into the kitchen of the farmhouse. “I want to show you some of my other friends.” She leads me through a long corridor decorated with floral wallpaper and into the living room of the farmhouse.

“Baxter, meet some of the members of South Africa's supernatural creatures, what the locals call the Qawa”

It’s like we’ve stepped into a zoo. Various enclosures line the walls of the living room. On a perch in the doorway sits a lynx with a jagged scar across its face. Long white tufts sprout from his ears, and large white wings sprout from his back.

“This is Tony Montana,” she says patting the lynx on the head. “Say hello Tony.” The thing hisses at me. “He’s a bit shy. Our fair city has not kind to its more unusual inhabitants and they’re a little wary of humans.” The flying lynx looks like it wants to swoop down and rip out my eyeballs.

She takes my hand in hers and leads me over to a cage where a little goat-like creature is stands in a cage. It is small, stands upright on two legs, is covered in coarse brown hair and is very, very ugly. It glares at us through slitted eyes. Horns curl in jagged spiral from its head and a reptilian tail whips back and forth in agitation.

“There used to be ninety-four different species of Tokoloshe,” Pat says. “Now there are less than seven.”

The creature in the cage snarls and makes lewd gestures and grotesque pelvic thrusts in her direction. “Fukfukfukfukfuk” it chants manically.

“Gorgeous isn’t he?” Pat says.

“Mhmmm.”

We walk around the pens and Pat names the creatures they hold; the Nevri - a red, double-headed viper that can repeat words like a parrot, the Jepsen - a small orange-haired monkey with twelve arms that scuttles around like an insect and subsists entirely on a diet of energy drinks and lizards.

We stop in front of cage that holds a naked woman standing in a clay pot. Her breasts jiggle as she moves and she stares at me with bedroom eyes.

“Nymphang,” Pat says matter-of-factly, ignoring the fact that the woman has begun to writhe in ecstasy in front of us. “Indigenous Qawa flora distantly related to fynbos I believe.”

I stare at the woman running her tongue over her lips. “You mean that’s a plant?” I ask.

“Oh yes dear, what you see is a magickal adaptation designed to lure humans.” Pat lifts a thin wooden rod and pokes it through the bars of the cage. The ‘woman’ splits in half like a giant mouth, revealing a row of serrated fangs that snap the stick.

“You see why we have to keep it in a cage, dear, I’ve lost more farm workers than I’d care to admit.”

“What about an Obambo?” I ask, edging as far from Nymphang as I can. “Do you have one of those?”

Pat turns to look at me with clear, penetrating eyes. “What do you know about the Obambos, young man?”

I shrug. “Not much, but anything you could tell me would be helpful.”

Pat coughs and brushes her curly hair delicately from her eyes. “Obambo are one of the casualties of the war that humanity has waged on the Qawa,” she says. “We’re not kind to our supernatural brethren. From unicorns kept as attractions at carnivals to gryphons forced to pitbulls, we’re destroying them. Many of these face extinction like the mermaids.”

“Mermaids?” I say.

“Oh yes, the mer-people used to patrol this coastline,” she says.

“What happened to them?” I ask.

“You like sushi?” she asks. I can’t tell whether she’s joking or not.

She walks over to the Nevri cage and gently pulls the double-headed snake from it. The dark viper wraps itself around her neck and contemplates me with lazy eyes. “Human mistreatment and the Reckoning have meant that the South African Qawa are fighting for their lives,” Pat says.

“What’s the Reckoning?”

Pat raises an eyebrow “Jackson really hasn’t told you anything has he?” She strokes both heads of the Nevri simultaneously.

“Reckoning!” one of the heads whispers in an eerie, guttural voice.

Pat lifts one of the snake heads up to her face and kisses it on the lips. “Yes, my precious little darling, but I won’t let anything happen to you.” I avert my eyes. I didn’t think there was anything worse than cat-people. Until I met my first monster-person.

"The Reckoning," Pat says, rubbing her face sadly against the snake. "Is terrible, terrible blight that affects only the South African Qawa."

"So there are these supernatural creatures all over the world?"

"Oh yes, dear," Pat says. "Although they exist in small, isolated pockets. It used to be that the sentient Qawa races would visit each other but that hasn't happened in many years."

"Why?"

"Quarantine," Pat says. "They believe that the Reckoning is a disease that the South African supernature has acquired. Who can blame them? They're fighting genocide, they don't need a plague to deal with too."

Pat wraps the Nevri around her forearm. "Reckoning!" it hisses.

"They can't reproduce, you see," she says sadly. "This is the last generation of the supernatural our country will ever see."

"None of them?" I ask.

She shakes her head sadly.

"It's as if they've been cursed somehow. Some believe it's some kind of genetic mutation or the result of electromagnetic radiation, some believe it's the will of God, but none of our Qawa have escaped it."

"Nevri want a cracker," the snake says.

"No dear," Pat says. "You eat small rodents. I really wish Elias hadn't taught you that."

"But why doesn't anybody know about them?" I ask. "Surely this should be front-page news?"

Pat sighs. "We look at tabloid headlines about snake-men on the Cape Flats and laugh. The tokoloshes have been known about for centuries but they're put down to ignorance and superstition. Perhaps it's a good thing though. Every time a human has encountered the Qawa, it was the Qawa who regretted it."

She unwinds the Nevri from her arm and gently puts it back in its cage. "Sleepytime," the Nevri hisses.

"Oh there have been people who have cared," Pat continues. "A village in Peru where humans and Supernature lived together in harmony, a monastery in Tibet where the Dwarves could be ordained as Buddhist monks, even the Sieners here had an alliance with the Qawa during the Boer wars."

"I've seen that name somewhere before. The Sieners."

"They were Afrikaaner mystics with the power of far-seeing. The few myths that I've heard say that the Sieners had an unparalleled bond with the Qawa. But they were all killed by the English in Boer War concentration camps." She sighs again. "The truth is that truth is that humans are bad for the Qawa and in a few years it will be like they never existed."

“The problem with madness is that you don’t know that you’re mad until you suddenly realise you’re lying on the floor chewing on your curtains and wondering why the word ‘jelly’ sounds so strange if you say more than 24 times in a row,” Ronin says as he scoops chow mein into his mouth.

We’re sitting in his car eating takeaways from Mr. Hong’s Chinese Take-Out at the tail-end of Long Street. This part of the CBD is murky and decaying. Girls loiter outside brothels smoking and groups of guys hang around looking for customers, targets or both.

“I took 4 microdots of acid to help me pretend I was mad to get out of fighting on the Border” he says. “Turns out after 4 microdots of acid you don’t really have to pretend. But I was drafted anyway. Apparently psychosis is a desirable trait in a bush war.”

I phoned my parents and told them that I had forgotten that I’m going on a school camp this week and will be sleeping at Kyle’s tonight. My mother complains that I never tell her anything; that she’s interested in my life and that she’s not sure that she can agree to letting me going on a camp at such short notice. I tell her that that’s OK; that I’m happy to miss out on an essential teenage social bonding experiences. That my stunted emotional intelligence will be a small price to pay for her pedantic need to have life happen according to a schedule. She sighed but agreed to let me go on camp. Which leaves me free to come to terms with our total lack of success in finding Esme.

We’ve been trawling the streets of Cape Town and looking up all Ronin’s contacts. It’s been a hard day. Nobody knows anything but it’s been quite an insight into the sweaty, hairy underbelly that is Cape Town’s underworld. We’ve seen advertising execs who deal in illicit organs on the side, junkie ex-journos who have given up the word habit but not the needle and most recently a Congolese midget named Frank who directs sci-fi and fantasy porn. I took his number for future reference.

“Much as I hate to admit it, sparky, we’re at a dead-end,” Ronin says.

“I hire you and after half a day you’re quitting?”

“Easy there,” Ronin says. “Nobody said anything about quitting. There’s one last person who owes me a favour.”

There's nobody under the bridge but a pack of feral cats with green, flashing eyes. They dart across the litter-strewn pavement and disappear into the windy night as Ronin parks the car in a deep shadow and puts his feet up on the dashboard.

“And now,” I say.

“Now we wait for the Six.”

“Who are?”

"Mostly sangomas, witchdoctors, mages, witches."

"Yeah right," I say with a laugh.

"Oh, so I guess you didn't see the Elemental back at the township? Maybe I should let it out to remind you."

"No, it's OK."

"Yeah I didn't think so" Ronin says, checking his watch.

"I thought you said the sangoma back at the township was full of shit," I say.

"That woman had no talent," Ronin says. "A charlatan. If she'd had real power Loyiso would have told me to back off."

"So this Loyiso-" I say.

"You'll see for yourself."

A black van pulls into the vacant lot under the bridge and drives slowly toward us. It stops in front of the Cortina

I start to get out the car but Ronin grabs my arm. "Don't piss Loyiso off. He's the best of the Six but that doesn't mean he's a teddybear."

"Ok," I say, shrugging off his arm. "But just for the record I don't give a shit about your little supernatural fanboy club. I just want to find Esme."

"Well then you better just shut up and follow my lead then hadn't you?"

Both doors of the front doors of the van open and two men get out. A huge, white muscled guy with a crewcut crosses his arms and leans against the van. In the dim glow provided by the streetlights I can see that his eyes are way too close together and that wearing a suit that's so small for him that his beefy forearms jutting from out of the cuffs.

The second guy gets out and saunters toward us. He's much smaller but walks with a swagger, like he's some kind of gangster.

As he gets closer I see that his grey hair is pulled back in corn-rows .

His grey hair is pulled back into corn-rows and he's wearing a suit, an expensive one judging by the cut. Grey and white beads are crossed over his chest like bandoliers. He carries a walking stick that clacks against the concrete as he approaches. He stops in front of us and cradles the stick in the crook of his arm and I see that the handle is carved into the head of a leopard.

"Jackie Ronin," he says in a slow, murmuring voice.

"Loyiso," Ronin says. "How's the favourite son of Mkontho Six?"

Loyiso chuckles. "Not so sure about the favourite part, Ronin," he says, "The Six have never been a happy family but lately it's...." he trails off.

"I've heard," Ronin says seriously. "Is it anything that us mere mortals need worry about?"

Loyiso rolls his shoulders in a noncommittal shrug. "Ah, who knows with Basson? Who's to say why he does what he does?"

"Like apartheid weapons chemistry, for instance?"

Loyiso nods almost imperceptibly. "What can I say? The Six can't afford to hold onto grudges. He did what he did under the old regime. Better to keep him within the fold where we can monitor what he's up to."

"Everybody loves Rottweiler until he turns around and rips out your throat."

Loyiso scowls. "I assume you didn't invite me here to shoot the breeze about the Six's business."

He turns his cool eyes on me and then back to Ronin. "Rent boy?" he says.

"Fuck you," I say.

"Play nice. I wouldn't want to have to get Kobus over there to break your kneecaps," he replies coolly.

I look at the big man leaning against the van. The sangoma leans in to whisper to me. "Half-breed giant. His great grandmother got lonely on the *plaas* and banged one of the mountain giants in the area." I look at the big man again. There *is* something weirdly solid and mountain-like about him. "Great in a fight, not so great if you need help with a crossword puzzle," Loyiso says with grin. He leans on his cane. "But let's talk about what you two have been up to. A dead sangoma in the townships, Ronin? Luckily for you not one of mine."

Loyiso waves to the half-giant Kobus who comes round to our side of the car with a brown folder in his meaty hands. Up close I see just how big Kobus is, a massive granite slab with legs. He hands the folder to the sangoma with a grunt. The sangoma opens the folder and browses through it.

"I know all about your problems, Baxter Zevcenko," he says. "Fortunately for you your girlfriend's kidnapping intersects with something we're working on." He hands us photographs of a group of street people being herded into a van with an octopus logo on it. "Human trafficking operation. Our intel says it not for sex, which makes it unusual. Our guy inside says that there's an Obambo involved but he doesn't know how."

"What's that logo?" Ronin says.

"A corporate; Octogram. They're into a lot of things; mining, pharmaceuticals, weapons. We've been keeping an eye on them for a while, but this is the first time we've actually found something."

“You’ll excuse me for prying into official governmental agency business,” Ronin says. “But why the hell are you involved? It doesn’t sound the Six’s usual beat.”

Loyiso grins. “I’ll tell you why - you’re going to love this - it turns out their base for operations is The Flesh Palace.”

“Aww hellfire and crackwhores,” Ronin hisses.

“I know you and the Queen of the Nightwalkers have a special relationship and we’re particularly interested in what part she’s playing in this.”

Ronin looks like he’s struggling to pay attention. His face has gone pale and he starts to flex his fingers.

“For the past decade the Nightwalker numbers have been dwindling like the rest of the Qawa,” Loyiso continues.

“Now there’s a fucking tragedy,” Ronin says.

“But lately something has happened,” Loyiso says. “The Nightwalkers have their bite back. They’re creating new Nightwalkers.”

“I have a solution for that,” Ronin says. “Kill them all.”

“Problem is that the Flesh Palace is the on the social radar of many of our esteemed politicians and the brass is understandably reluctant to carry out a raid in case we accidentally catch somebody too high up in the food chain. But if an independent operator were to go in there...” He lets his voice trail off and then breaks into a grin.

“So you’re saying that we should go in, do your job for you, and then maybe you’ll create some paperwork about it?” Ronin says.

“Isn’t that the way it always works?” Loyiso says with a smile.

The sun is setting fast over the mountain as we drive through Epping industria. The building are so squat, grey and lifeless that I feel depressed just looking at them. We pass over an abandoned train track and through a dingy street filled with tyre merchants and industrial cleaning equipment distributors.

“Charming,” I say.

“It only gets better,” Ronin growls. He's been in a bad mood ever since we left the bridge. I'm not sure if it's the fact that Loyiso and his secret supernatural government agency are involved or whether it's because we're headed to the Flesh Palace.

The sun has dropped behind the mountain by the time we pull up next to an ugly grey warehouse. An old drunk wanders down the road, stopping near the Cortina to take a leak. Like the Jackson Pollock of

urination he splattered the dark canvas of the tarmac liberally. Ronin shouts at him and he wanders off the pavement onto the street, his belly protruding from above his pants like some kind of hairy farmyard animal coming of his barn to see what all the fuss was about.

We step onto into the pools of murky light on the pavement. My gaze follows Ronin's to the gaudy façade of a club about a hundred metres away on the other side of the road.

"Ok, sparky, I'm not going to bullshit you," Ronin says. "If I step foot into that club, I'm a dead man." He breathes in deep through his nose, holds it for a couple of seconds and then lets the air out in with a whoosh. "If you come with me, you're dead too. Now we've got a choice here. Either we can go in there and try to find the glowing man and probably get killed. Or we can go home, I'll give you back your money and you forget that your girlfriend ever existed."

"We go in," I say without hesitation.

He looks at me intently. "I must admit, I wouldn't have pegged you as the knight-in-shining armour type."

"I'm not."

He chuckles and nods. "Who can understand the cruel commands of the heart, eh?"

"Something like that."

"Well there's are two reasons I'm not just pistol-whipping you, taking your money and forgetting all about this case." He takes another breath, looks up at the sky and lets it out into the night air.

"First, I've never not solved a case. Call it professional integrity, vanity or residual psychosis, but I'm not about to give up my unbeaten record. Two, the sadistic psychobitch you're about to meet is long overdue an execution, one that I'll gladly administer given the opportunity." He pounds himself a couple of times on the chest, slaps his cheeks and then hands me his keys. "Go get what's in the boot."

I grab the keys and walk around to open the Cortina's boot. Inside the boot is a mess but I quickly isolate what Ronin wants from the jumble. Although I could be wrong, I'm pretty sure the Hawaiian boardshorts, the copy of *Eat, Pray, Love*, the cheese grater and the statuette of the Virgin Mary are not what Ronin's after.

Which leaves the bandolier of shotgun shells and a short, brutal sword in a red scabbard. I grab them both and slam the boot shut and take them back to the bounty hunter. Ronin takes off his coat and straps the bandolier across his chest, then pulls the sword from its scabbard and cuts the air a couple of times.

"This is Hagaz" Ronin says as he strokes the blade.

"Do you name all your weapons?"

"Only the ones that have killed beings with higher order brain function," he says.

Strangely that makes me feel better. He slides the weapon back into its scabbard, straps it around his waist and pulls his coat back on.

He breathes in deeply again. "Ready, sparky?"

"Ready."

The place is a frenzy of flesh and fluid. Heavily-tattooed waitresses push through the crowd with trays of drinks, one of them with a long tail jutting from the back of skin-tight, PVC pants. We push through the crowd, past the stage where naked women gyrate on poles for squat, bearded men.

"Dwarven Legionnaires" Ronin murmurs as we pass them. "Don't stare at them. They kill people for less."

I look down as we pass them, which gives me a good view of the grungy wooden floor. Judging by the dark stains, beer isn't the only thing that regularly gets spilled in this place. Topless lapdancers with suspiciously pointy ears proposition us as we walk through the crowd. Ronin grins and winks at them, but squeezes past and heads toward the bar.

"A double Devil's Tail," Ronin says to the bartender. "With extra Devil."

Shadows seems to stick to the bartender and it's only when we're up close that she comes into focus as the most beautiful transvestite I've ever seen. Not that I've seen many, don't get me wrong. Especially ones with wings. She has blue-black skin, platinum blonde hair and large white eyes that have no pupils or irises. A red latex dress sticks to her skin and a long string of pearls hangs between small breasts.

Katinka," Ronin says.

"Jackie boy," she says in a husky voice. "Have you decided to end it all? Death by the Nightwalker Queen?"

"Is that any kind of greeting for an old friend?"

She smiles and leans over the bar to kiss him on the cheek.

"How's the hormone treatment coming, darlin'?" Ronin says.

She sighs and cups her small breasts in her hands. "Expensive, Jackie. Dwarven doctors are a bunch of blood-sucking cunts at the best of times. When it comes to cases like mine..."

Jackie nods. "Dwarves are not really known for their tolerance of the transgendered."

"But they'll forget their allegiance to the dogma of the One Mountain God if you flash enough cash in front of their fat little noses," Katinka says and then spits on the ground. "A curse on those on their whole inbred race." She puts a hand in front of her mouth and breathes in deeply. "I'm sorry," she says. "That was unladylike."

"Never been fond of Dwarves myself," Ronin says. "Well besides Baresh."

"He was different," Katinka says softly. "May he rest in peace." She pats Ronin gently on the shoulder and then turns her strange white eyes on me.

"Are you...an angel?" I blurt out.

Katinka laughs throatily. "Many of my clients think so, sugar, but technically I'm an Osira."

"The Osiraii are like African Valkyrie," Ronin says. "Tasked with fetching the souls of fallen warriors."

"Mucho-butch," Katinka says, looking down at her blood-red nails. "No task for a lady."

"The Osiraii are all women," Ronin says. "The majority of males are killed at birth and the rest are kept as breeding stock."

"But you're a-" I say.

"Yes, darling, no need to rub it in. My mother and sisters sheltered me and pretended I was a girl to the Flock. But I was eventually found out and had to flee."

"These days Katinka keeps the bar for the Nightwalker Queen and moonlights as a body entrepreneur," Ronin says.

"That's what I love about you Jackie," she says patting his cheek. "Always tactful. "Yes, I'm a working girl and my warriors are those slain by 9 to 5s and bitter wives." She takes the cigarette Jackie offers her.

"What about you, candy cane?" She eyes me up and down, her mouth curving in a smile. "What battles are you fighting?"

"My girlfriend," I said. "She's missing."

"Oh they all are, honey," she says tapping her chest "Emotionally distant. Empty inside."

"No I mean she's really gone. Like as in disappeared, vanished."

Ronin is looking around the club uneasily. "Tinks, we need some intel."

"Of course, Jackie," she says. "Anything for you, sugar."

"We're looking for a glowing man," he says. "An Obambo."

Katinka nods. "One of the strangest clients I've ever had."

"You had sex with him?" I say.

"Well let's just say we didn't sit and play Sudoku all night, sweetness," she says. "But it might have been better if we had. He was distracted and kept talking about his dead wife and kid. It's a bit of a slap in the face for a lady with my considerable skills."

"Where can we find him?" I say.

“That’s where you’re just plain out of luck, boys. He used to work here but a while back the Queen took an unnatural interest in him. Haven’t seen him since.”

“And how is her Majesty?” Ronin says.

The usual; cruel, ambitious, horny.”

“Think you can get us an audience?”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that,” Katinka says nodding to something behind us.

We turn. Four guys stand behind us. Their skin is slightly grey and mottled and they smell like an old cat lady’s flat. “Her Majesty wishes to see you,” one of them says in a slow, drawling monotone

“Of course,” Ronin says. “We’d hate to keep her Majesty waiting.”

Katinka reaches across the bar and grabs Ronin’s arm. “Try not to become a fallen warrior ok, Jackie boy?”

Jackie laughs. “She can’t still hold a grudge can she?”

7. The Zombie Horror Ninja Show

We descend a long spiral staircase into labyrinth of rooms beneath the club. The stink of the place is unbearable. The smell that you get when a rat dies under a floorboard? Distill that into its purest form; eau de decay. I gag a couple of times.

A decaying corpse in latex bondage gear grins at me as we pass. It yanks a short chain that's connected to the spiked collar of a large and hairy middle-aged man kneeling at its feet. He yelps.

"Zombie fetishist," Ronin whispers to me.

Naked zombies in cages hang from the ceilings peeling flesh from their bones and throwing it to human punters watching them from the bar below. "Take it all off," a bald, sweaty man in a suit shouts. His tie is loose about his neck and his face is flushed from watching the taboo pleasures of the Flesh Palace. The zombie obliges, peeling off muscle and tendon from her face until only bone remains. The guy hoots and slaps his friends on the shoulders.

We pass more rooms filled with humans and their zombie fantasies. We see a young guy being held down by two zombies while a third rips chunks of flesh from his thighs with its teeth. "Oh, mistress, I've been a bad boy," the man groans. "Eat me, eat me."

A shudder runs through me and I gag again.

"Easy tiger," Ronin says, putting his hand on my shoulder.

I wave him away and carry on walking. We're led through a passage to large set of steel doors guarded by two zombies in military fatigues. They search us for weapons, removing Warchild and Hagaz from under Ronin's coat, and then our escort leads us through the doors and into a large, vaulted room.

Inside, a large carved stone throne sits on a dais that's surrounded by a phalanx of zombie soldiers. Judging by their appearance, our four escorts are in comparatively good nick for zombies. Comparatively these soldiers are lurching abominations. Their eye-sockets are hollow and black and flesh hangs from their decaying bodies in strips.

But the thing lounging on the throne is the worst of all. Her body is red and raw beneath her blood-stained Victorian bodice and skirt, like her skin has been sliced from her with a potato peeler. Her face is white except for dark, suppurating wounds which ooze like tears beneath her eyes. The corrupt decay of her cheeks is really just foreplay for the main event of her face; the grisly, dark eyes. They're like dark pools of tar - pools of tar where the bodies of nuns that have been violated and murdered have been dumped. She smiles and plays with a parasol as we're lead to the foot of the dais.

Ronin bows elaborately and then pushes on my shoulder, forcing me to bow. The Queen lifts her gruesome body off the throne and her zombie guard part to let her through as she descends the dais. She extends her hand toward Ronin and he kisses it quickly. I follow his example and smell the unmistakable stench of death close up. With another lurch in my stomach I realise that the parasol is made from human skin stretched over human bones. The queen of the undead is into arts and crafts. Perfect.

“Ronin,” she says, her voice like the sound of two alley cats fighting. “I told you if you ever came back I’d kill you.” She walks up and down in front of us, spinning her parasol. “And I see you’ve brought a child along with you. A gift of young flesh to buy you mercy?”

“I know mercy’s not your style,” Ronin says.

“You’ve got the Obambo, I want to speak to him,” I say. I know the Queen’s type. She’s just like Anwar; a bully. She isn’t going to let us go, and backing down won’t accomplish anything.

One of the zombies hits me in the back and I stumble to my knees. “You’re making demands of *me*?” the Queen says incredulously. She stands in front of me. “Although it’s true I had your glowing man. “I wanted to add him to my collection of extinct Qawa” She closes her parasol and puts the point of it to my throat, lifting my chin. “But I traded him for something much, much better.” She smiles, showing her black teeth.

"The Six know the Nightwalkers have their bite back," Ronin says. "Sooner or later Loyiso is going to come to see what's going on."

The Queen smiles. "Oh, I don't think that's going to be a problem, bounty hunter." She waves a hand at her zombie guards. "Put them in the cage."

Zombies grab us and shove us out of the throne-room. We’re forced through a low concrete passage toward a semi-circle of light. The zombies drag us through an entrance and into a large room. I look around, shielding my eyes against the fluorescent light. We’re in some kind of arena.

I stumble as we’re pushed forward between elegant circular tables with white tablecloths. People stare at us with eager eyes as we’re lead through the dining area. I look desperately around and see a few familiar faces. There sitting and dabbing her mouth daintily with a napkin is Darleen Matthews, a famous soapie star. Next to her, gingerly scooping brains from a severed human head on a silver platter is Gert Van Zyl, musician, actor and reality TV show presenter.

“We’re being held hostage,” I shout at him. “Help us! Call the cops.”

He smiles and raises his glass to us as we’re dragged past.

We’re led past politicians delicately sucking the marrow out of dismembered pinkie fingers and a several members of the national cricket team sipping blood from martini glasses. The Cape Town elite, it seems, are into zombie chic, supernatural cuisine and gourmet cannibalism.

"Fuck me," Ronin whispers. "The Six should have closed this down a long time ago."

“You’ve got a plan, right?” I say as I struggle against a zombie’s iron grip. “Please say you’ve got a plan.”

“I’m sure I’ll think of something.”

We’re pushed toward the middle of the room where a large cage. A large cage made out of bones.

A zombie open the cage-door and I'm through onto the ground. My glasses fall off my face and skitter across the cage and I scramble quickly to reclaim them.

"You should get one of those straps to hold them in place," Ronin says.

"Jesus, can we talk about my glasses later?" I say as I put them back on.

It's only then that I see that there's someone in the cage with us. He's wearing a top hat and his dark suit is old and tattered and through the frayed elbows and jagged holes I can see his thin, sinewy limbs. His eyes are narrow and dark and his skin is very pale. A long handlebar moustache droops over his restless, twitching mouth. With smooth movements he takes off his coat and top hat and hangs them on a couple of phalanges that juts from the cage. Ronin just stares at him with a look of disbelief on his face.

There's a cheer from the crowd as the Queen enters the arena on a throne carried on the back of humans in bondage gear. She gives a stately nod to the punters as she's brought toward the cage.

"You've aligned with the Murder?" Ronin splutters. "Loyiso will destroy you for this. Get ready for an army of sangomas coming to tear down your evil little kingdom."

The Queen's mouth curls into a terrible smile. "Well, gosh, here I am breaking supernatural taboos left, right and centre. And where oh where is the great and powerful Loyiso?"

Ronin turns to Top Hat who is leaning lazily against the cage. "Friend," he says slowly. "We have no beef with the Murder. Whatever arrangement the Queen has with you, it has nothing to do with us."

"Friend," the Top Hat says sarcastically. "Our agreement is not with the undead."

"Kill them, Crow," the Queen says.

The man turns his dark eyes on her. "I don't take orders from you," he says coldly. What kind of creature defies the Queen of the Undead?

Unfortunately we soon find out. Top Hat pushes himself off the cage and walks toward us. Ronin steps back and rips off his coat and wrapping it around his forearm to create a makeshift shield. As he walks his skin starts to ripple and twist and there's a cracking of bone and sinew as his legs elongate. Skin, bones and feathers begin to suck themselves into a new shape. It looks a bit like a large crow but the wings are thick and leathery and the beak is hooked and serrated. A tail like a scorpion's rises up from its back and two claws erupt from the sides of its head on which a singular slit eye bulges. A pterodemon. A giant Crow. Grandpa Zev was right.

"Holy Aleister Crowley that thing looks evil," I say.

"Well let's just say I wouldn't let it babysit."

Ronin grabs me by the sleeve and pulls me backward as the thing approaches.

“Look for an opening in the cage,” he whispers.

I begin to pull at the cage, testing for an opening or a sharp bone to use as a weapon. The thing shuffles toward us with its wings raised. Ronin circles out of its way and throws an explosive kick at its bloated leg. The Crow barely notices but its retaliation is like a freight train slamming into us. I’m knocked over by a wing. Ronin ducks the other wing but is caught by a slash of the thing’s beak and is flung across the cage. He smacks into the cage with a sound like a flip-flop smacking a wet-sheep carcass.

I push myself quickly to my feet and scramble over to where Ronin is dragging himself onto his knees. A long, ugly gash has opened on his forehead and is dripping blood onto the cage floor. I help him to his feet.

“Any ideas?” Ronin wheezes.

Grandpa Zevcenko wouldn't leave me much when he died. No offshore investments. No bonds, no property. My sole inheritance was advice on how to fight giant crows and I was cashing it in. “Fire,” I say to Ronin. “It's the only thing that can stop it.”

“And you're now the world's leading expert on ornithological demons?” Ronin says groggily.

“Trust me,” I say. I look out through the bleached white bones of the cage and into the eyes of a punter enjoying a meal at a table right in front of us. Human brain, a congealed pink mess surrounded by squiggles of marinade and topped with an artfully carved cucumber. But it isn’t the menu that interests me it’s the tasteful, minimalist oil lamp providing ambience on the table.

I jam my arm through the cage and grab the lamp. The man grabs my hand and for a second we struggle over it. Then I wrench it from his grasp and pull it through the bones triumphantly. Ronin grabs the lamp from my hand as the Crow shrieks and launches itself at us. I scramble out of the way but the bounty hunter waits for the last minute before bringing the burning lamp down on the Crow's head. It ignites and the Crow stumbles forward and smashes into the cage. There’s the smell of flesh burning as oil scalds its single eye. It shriek in pain and lashes out blindly, ripping a jagged hole in the cage.

Ronin grabs my arm and pulls me toward it. We duck the screaming Crow and he pushes himself through the holes in the bones. I struggle after him but am suddenly and viciously yanked backwards. I hit the floor hard and the air is driven from my lungs. It feels like one of my ribs is broken but I don’t have time to check. A hand grabs me by the throat and lifts me into the air.

The blind Crow caws in triumph as its claws dig into my throat. Hanging suspended from the muscular appendage of a birdlike monstrosity whilst the air is choked from your lungs really puts ones’ life into perspective. I see a vision of fair haired children playing happily on playground swings, while a young mother, radiant in the sunlight, laughs with carefree abandon. I’m slightly disappointed when I realise that it’s a scene from a popular washing powder commercial. The jingle plays in my head as I begin to lose consciousness.

Then the vision changes. I see more of the men in top hats at the entrance of the club and pushing through the throng of patrons and strippers. A Dwarven Legionnaire stumbles in front of them and one of the Top hats pushes him out of the way. The Dwarf, bald, bearded and roaring drunk gets up and grabs a bottle, breaking it on the edge of the bar. With a roar he slashes the bottle toward the nearest Top Hat.

The suited man steps nimbly to the side and brushes the Dwarf away as if he were a child. With a sickening crunch he plants a booted foot onto the Dwarf's neck. Nobody else interferes with them as they advance down the stairs. My mind races through the club and I see one of the lapdance booths we saw on the way in. A woman in a hairnet enters one and then goes through another door and down a flight of steps. The vision is so real and pure that I know instantly it's real. Which doesn't really help me much because I'm a couple of seconds away from death.

I struggle against the claw at my throat. Out of the corner of my blurred vision see Ronin crawling back through the hole with a steak knife between his teeth. He climbs up the bones and then launches himself forward, hanging in mid-air for a second before slamming down on the Crow's back. Deftly he pulls the knife from between his teeth and drives it into the Crow's body.

The Crow drops me and lashes out at empty air. Ronin tumbles from its back and lands on the ground next to me. We scramble back to the hole and the bounty hunter gives me a boost through. I crawl over the sharp bones, gashing my arm brutally on the edge of a humerus and then crash onto the table below. It gives way beneath me and I hit the ground the hard. I gasp with pain but Ronin hoists me to my feet. The room of diners looks at us inquisitively, some in the back standing up and craning their necks to get a better look.

"All part of the entertainment, folks," Ronin says.

"Ronin!" a voice behind us screeches. We spin around in time to see wet, black feelers erupt from the Queen's necrotic body. She holds her arms out above her like she's blessing a Black Mass. Long, dark worms slither from her body toward us. They leave a trail of black gore behind them and as they elongate they come into contact with the diners, wrapping around them and pulling them limb from limb.

The punters begin to scream, overturning tables and climbing over each other to get away from the dark, lecherous tentacles that are leaving a trail of blood in their wake. Ronin grabs a well-known news reader in a headlock and uses him as a shield as a tentacle whips forward.

"I know people," the newsreader screams as the wet dark cord wraps around his foot and begins to pull. "Please, I'll get you anything, money, woman, you name it."

"How about some good news for a change?" Ronin says. "South Africa's not all about crime and violence."

The tentacle drags the newsreader from Ronin's hands and twists his head off, sending a shower of blood spraying into the air. I grab Ronin's arm and point toward the Queen's throne. Warchild and Hagaz are tied like trophies to steel spikes that jut from it. I assume that's where our heads were meant to go after Top Hat had killed us.

Ronin leaps over the lashing tentacle and sprints toward the throne. He dodges past two zombie guards, ducks under a lashing tentacle and then jumps with his arm outstretched. His fingers close around Hagaz's hilt and drags it from the scabbard as he rolls to the ground.

"Kill them," the Queen screams. The tentacles slide toward Ronin like fat black anacondas. Ronin slashes one as it rears up in front of him. It begins to ooze black blood but continues to attack. More tentacles slide forward, tangling together to form a huge, wet mass that pushes the bounty hunter back. Ronin hacks at them, blood splashing onto his face as he tries to beat back the relentless attack.

The queen begins to rise up like a huge, hideous spider as her tentacles push forward. One wraps itself around Ronin's leg and drags him to his knees. He hacks viciously at it but another grabs his free hand and begins to drag him into the roiling mass of wet, black flesh.

The bounty hunter stretches the sword behind him as far as his arm can reach and then with a grunt hurls it. The blade spins through the air like a boomerang and neatly separates Queen head from her shoulders. The body stands for a second before collapsing, the black tentacles sagging limply to the floor.

Ronin pulls the tentacles from him and wipes the blood from his eyes. "Looks like you're queen of the deaddead now," he shouts to the headless, tentacled corpse.

He limps over to the throne retrieves Warchild and searches for Hagaz amongst the mass of tentacles, dragging the bloody sword from the wet, bloody mess and then walking slowly back toward me.

A guy stumbles past me and I notice an Octogram lanyard peeking out through his jacket. I stick my leg out and the guy trips, hitting the ground hard.

"Octogram," I say pointing to the lanyard.

Ronin holds Hagaz against the guy's throat. He reaches down to look at the lanyard. "Looks like you're coming with us...Dave"

"We've got to go to the lapdance booths," I say.

Ronin raises an eyebrow. "Let's save the celebrations until we get out of here."

"There are more Crows coming," I say. "There are stairs in one of them that lead to a tunnel."

Ronin grabs Dave by the throat. "Is that true?"

"Chop shop," Dave gurgles. "I've heard there's an exit into the tunnels there."

Ronin looks at me. "Well you're really getting into the supernatural swing of things, aren't you?"

We plow through the disorientated zombies and make for the stairs that lead to the upper level and move quickly through the corridors to the line of lapdance booths.

"That one," I say pointing to one on the end.

Ronin drags open the curtain. A zombie in a thong is gyrating on the lap of young guy with square glasses and checkered shirt.

"Out," Ronin says.

The guy scrambles to his feet and disappears through the curtain but the zombie growls and scratches at Dave's face with her gruesome fingers. Ronin calmly raises Warchild and pulls the trigger. Her head explodes, spraying flesh and bone onto the velvet cushions. The body falls over sideways but continues to claw manically at the ground. We step carefully over it and head toward the stairs.

Ronin shoves Dave first and presses Warchild to the back of his head. We descend carefully in a large smoky room filled with industrial equipment. A group of women are sitting next to a conveyor belt, chatting and smoking as they dissect human corpses and shoves their parts into packets.

"And then her sister says 'Your husband was all too happy to watch me undress'," the hairnet woman says.

The other women shake their heads. "Disgusting," says a pretty younger woman with a scar down the side of her face. She pulls the intestines from a corpse and begins to feed them into a surgical bag marked with the distinctive red octopus.

I clear my throat and ten pairs of eyes turn to look at us disinterestedly. "The dead hookers are upstairs, you peverts," hairnet woman says.

"We're looking for a tunnel" I say.

The woman takes a drag of a cigarette and squashes a bloody heart into a packet. "The Queen know you're here?"

"The Queen is dead," Ronin says with satisfaction.

"Yeah no shit," the younger woman says. "She's a zombie."

"Dead dead," Ronin says, "not undead. Proper dead."

"So you don't have to work here anymore," I say. "You're free."

A large woman with a red cloth tied around her head takes a drag of her cigarette. "Are you going to pay me twenty-five rand an hour, as well as overtime?"

"Ja, you think we want to go back to working at Chicken Ranch with a manager that tries to grope our titties every two seconds?" The hairnet woman says. "No thanks. We may work for zombies but at least the pay is good and they leave us alone."

"We have a TV," the younger woman says. "We can watch *Generations* every day while we work."

"There's a bus that takes us home," the large woman says. "And we always go to a fancy restaurant for our Christmas party."

"But..." I say.

"The tunnel is in the back, perverts," the hairnet woman says.

The women shake their heads in collective disgust and ignore us as we make our way quickly past the production line and into a passageway lined with bottles of chemicals.

Ronin checks the labels. "Highly flammable," he grunts. "Take as many of them as you can carry."

I shove bottles into the pockets of my hoodie and jeans and grab a bottle in each hand. The passageway opens out into a dank tunnel. Ronin drags Dave through, kicks him against the wall and jams Warchild into his mouth.

"We have questions," Ronin says. "Only truthful answers will ensure longevity here today, understood?"

Dave gives a short, terrified nod.

"We don't have time for this," I hiss. "The Crows."

"He'll slow us down if we take him. But we need answers." He looks at Dave. "Quick answers. Let's start with human body parts, why does Octogram need them?"

"We're just a couple of executives out on the town." Dave says.

Ronin cocks both of Warchild's hammers

"OK." Dave whimpers "Please." He takes a deep breath. "The Queen supplies us with biological material that we use for research purposes."

"Researching what?"

"Weapons mostly," Dave says.

"And what do you give her in return?" Ronin says. "Last time I checked the Queen didn't do much pro bono work."

"The antidote," Dave says.

"You're going to have to be a bit more specific. The antidote to what?"

"The Product."

Ronin pushes Warchild against Dave's forehead.

"Oh God," Dave says, his eyes squinting as they look up at the twin barrels of the shotgun that pins his head to the wall. "It's a poison. I don't know any more than that, really I don't. I'm a just a junior executive."

Ronin looks at him for a second and then nods. “I understand. Corporate hierarchy right? You work and you work and what do you get? Nothing. They keep you in the dark; make you do all the work while they’re off running up huge expense accounts?”

Dave nods.

“I believe you,” Ronin says.

Dave sighs with relief. Ronin smiles benevolently. And then viciously slams the butt of the shotgun into his temple. Dave slumps into the dirty grey water.

“That’s what you get for being a yes-man.”

Ronin is chatty as we make our way through the long pipe and into some kind of tunnel system which runs under the club. “Did you see her head explode as it hit the wall?” he says, as if he’s talking about a favourite sports play. “It was beautiful.”

I can’t really keep up the conversation. The tunnel smells like a portable toilet at a rock festival. All things considered, the smell of faeces is preferable to the smell of death, still I can’t keep from vomiting into the grey water which is ankle deep in the pipe.

“Where are we?” I croak, feeling better but still a little queasy. Dim lights dot the dank, lichen-covered walls at regular intervals. I notice a rat up ahead looking at us inquisitively.

“World War Two bomb shelter system,” Ronin says. “The apartheid government extended them to create a kind of emergency escape route during the State of Emergency.”

“How do you know this?” I say.

He shrugs. “The type of things I hunt like deep, dark places.” He says, “it pays to know where the best rocks to hide under are.”

The sun is injecting daylight into the veins of the city as Ronin and I finally scramble out of a manhole several blocks away from the Flesh Palace. We make our way through the streets and back toward the Cortina. We get close and peer around the corner. Several black vans are parked outside the entrance.

“The Six,” Ronin whispers.

“Let’s go ask Loyiso if he’s found Esme or Obambo,” I say, moving forward.

Ronin shoots out his arm and pushes me against the wall as an emaciated man with grey hair pulled back into a ponytail exits the club with another man in an old suit and top hat.

“Basson,” Ronin murmurs as they climb into a van and drive away. “With Sabian Dober.”

8. Trailer Trashed

We're on Ronin's roof drinking sherry from a bottle wrapped in brown paper. Seagulls wheel and pitch above us like tie-fighters. Ronin is eating fish and chips from a grimy newspaper but I don't really feel like eating. My ribs are badly bruised and I can't get the smell of death out of my nostrils.

"What will happen to the rest of the people in the Flesh Palace?" I say. We'd watched as the Queen's blood-covered patrons had been loaded into vans and taken away. Then the last of the Six's agents had exited the building and smoke had begun to pour from the doors. The place was already an inferno as we climbed into the Cortina and driven away.

"They have ways of wiping out memories," he says with a mouthful of hake. "Either that or they'll just kill them."

"I thought they were the good guys."

"Good is a relative term. The Six are a law unto themselves. Loyiso's OK and plays fair but Basson's monster."

"You sound like you know him."

"Ja, well I wish I didn't. When I was drafted in eighty-four my talent for fucking shit up didn't go unnoticed by my commanding officers. I was drafted in a new experimental weapons unit. Thought it was pretty standard until I saw they were making beings not bombs.

"Beings? Like the Qawa?"

"Nah. Sure the government captured a few gryphons and hydras and tried to train them for battle but they were mostly unsuccessful. This was real Frankenstein shit. They were preparing for civil war and they were throwing money into research. Basson is an extraordinary alchemist. He was the National Party's little supernatural golden boy and they made him the head of my unit."

"So what happened?"

"Apartheid ended and I got the hell out of the army. Everybody thought they were going to see Basson jailed for life. But the Occult Truth Commission was a sham. Basson knows too much about the Qawa in South Africa. He was too powerful and too useful for the government to get rid of."

"So they hired him."

Ronin nods. "They thought the safest place to keep him was with the Six, their own little group of magickal commandos." He hands me the packet of booze and I take a swig of the sickly sweet liquid.

"By the looks of it they were wrong."

“Grievously wrong. Loyiso wouldn’t stand for that kind of alliance so there’s a good chance he’s dead by now. Without Loyiso the chance of controlling Basson is slim to nothing.”

I look at the bounty hunter. “What the hell was that thing in the cage?”

“Sorcerer,” he growls. “Legend is that the Murder are an ancient group of Persian alchemists who came to Africa, got on the wrong side of the Mantis God and have been condemned to living as Crows ever since.”

“So what do we do now?”

“We sleep.”

Downstairs I collapse on a couch which smells like cigarettes and dream of Esme. She’s calling to me but I can’t see where she is in the darkness. I’m attacked by zombies and pulled down into a dark hole where giant Crows peck my eyes out. I see a glowing man stroking a surprisingly docile flying lynx named Tony Montana.

With a jolt I wake up with my face stuck in a pool of drool to the leather of the couch. Light is streaming in through the bamboo blinds and I lift my hand to shield my eyes. I feel like death. It hurts when I breathe and I have a nasty headache. I lift my t-shirt. A dark purple bruise stretches from left nipple down the left side of my body. Wincing, I make my way through to the kitchen and take a long drink of water from the tap. I open the freezer and grab a handful of ice, roll up in a dirty dishtowel and press it against my ribs as the bounty hunter walks into kitchen. He’s wearing nothing but silk boxers with Taz, the Tasmanian Devil, on them. He grabs a beer from the fridge.

“Ibuprofen?” he asks, offering me several pills in the palm of his hand.

I nod gratefully and pop four into my mouth and wash them down with more water from the tap. Ronin slugs the rest back with his beer.

“I’ve been thinking about this clusterfuck you’ve gotten us involved in,” he growls. “My initial reaction was to cut you loose and leave town.”

“What about your professional integrity?” I say.

“It’s not worth much when you’re dead,” he says flatly. “But I’ve come to like you, or at very least not actively dislike you.” He claps me hard on the shoulder and shoves a small scroll into my hand. “It came with a pigeon this morning. It’s from Loyiso. Basson’s got him.”

The note describes Basson’s coup d’état. Most of the Six have been killed or have gone over to the dark side. I strain to see three words that are scrawled at the bottom of the page. “Ik Kaggen Ah. What does that mean?”

“It’s an old Qawa saying,” Ronin says. “It’s like saying ‘the end is nigh.’”

“The end of what?”

Ronin shrugs. “If find the Obambo maybe he can tell us.”

“I think I might know where he is,” I say.

“So lovely to see you again so soon,” Pat says. “Come in, come in.” She ushers us into the kitchen and starts filling an old battered kettle with water. “You two look like you’ve been pulled through the briar patch backwards,” Pat says over her shoulder. “If you bring some of your washing I’d be happy to do it for you, Jackson.”

“We’re not here to have tea, Pat,” Ronin says.

“I hope you’re not endangering this boy or taking him to unsavoury places,” she says quickly, bustling over to put the kettle on the gas stove.

I think of the Flesh Palace and wonder if there is a more unsavoury place in Cape Town.

“Pat,” Ronin says.

“If you want Baxter to learn more about the Qawa I’d be happy to teach-“

“That Obambo kidnapped Baxter’s girlfriend,” Ronin says. “For all we know he could have killed her.”

“Tomas? Never!” Pat says shocked and then slaps her hand to her mouth. “I didn’t mean...”

“Pat please,” I say. “We have no idea where Esme is. That glowing man is the only link to her.”

“And we’re not the only ones looking for him,” Ronin says. “The Murder is involved. We just want to talk to him but they, well you know what they do.”

“The Murder?” she says hoarsely. “Why would they want Tomas?”

“Where is he?” Ronin says firmly.

Pat’s old face crumples in defeat. “He’s in the attic.”

I follow Ronin as he pounds up the stairs, Pat clinging desperately to my arm. “Don’t you hurt him, don’t you dare hurt that poor man,” she calls frantically.

Ronin pulls Warchild from her scabbard and slams open the hatch that leads into the attic. I follow as he vaults up the rickety wooden ladder.

The Obambo is tall but thin and has the bone structure of a West African. Oh, and he glows with the light of a small sun. He's sitting with his hands in his lap on an old cast-iron bed in the corner of the room.

"Have you come to kill me?" he says in a low voice.

The bounty hunter levels Warchild at his chest. "Depends."

"It doesn't matter," the Obambo says getting off the bed and kneeling on the hard wooden floor. "Just make it quick."

Ronin's fingers don't leave Warchild's twin triggers as he pulls a vinyl tie from his coat. He wrenches the glowing man's hands behind his back and secures them with it.

Pat grips my shoulder and a small sob escapes her lips. "I'm sorry Tomas."

He smiles sadly. "It is not your fault, Patricia, this is my own doing."

"Open your mouth," Ronin says. "Now."

Tomas looks at us with calm, sad eyes and then opens his mouth wide. The bounty hunter grabs him roughly by the jaw. "Missing incisor. This is our guy."

"Where is she?" I ask.

Tomas frowns. "I do not know who you mean."

I pull Esme's picture from my wallet. "Her. Esme. Where is she?"

He studies the picture. "I am sorry. I have never seen her."

Ronin grabs him by the throat. "Listen, disco ball, we're not playing good-cop-bad-cop with you. Start telling us something or I'm going to start using your blood to make fluoro art."

Tomas looks up at Ronin. "You can't hurt me any more than I've been hurt already."

"You'd be surprised," Ronin says viciously pushing his head back.

"Jackson" Pat screams. "Don't hurt him, please!"

"Magick, the Qawa, the supernatural. It's like one giant disease," Ronin says.

Pat lets go of my shoulder and walks slowly over to him. "Jackson," she says gently. "I know what happened to you was terrible but it's not their fault."

"You know nothing," Ronin says, pushing Warchild against Tomas's forehead.

The Obambo looks up at the gun calmly. "Do it."

“Ronin,” I say nervously, “C’mon stop. We need to find out where Esme is.”

The bounty hunter pushes Tomas’s head back with the gun and the two stare at each other for a long time.

“You better start talking,” Ronin says lowering Warchild

I pull the tooth from pocket and hold it in front of his face. “I found this in her room after she was kidnapped. It’s yours.”

He nods. “Yes, it is mine. They pulled it out, the demon birds.” He sighs. “My kind was slaughtered by the government in Uganda and I was the last. I fled here to South Africa. I was the last of my kind so the Reckoning did not matter.”

He shifts slightly on his knees and Ronin points Warchild menacingly at him.

“Please,” Tomas says. “May I sit?”

“Sure, would you like a cup of tea and a scone too?” Ronin says.

“Jackson,” Pat says.

Ronin sighs and indicates for Tomas to sit. The Obambo shifts his knees out from under his body and awkwardly sits on the wooden floor with his bound hands in front of him.

“I soon realised South Africa was as dangerous as Uganda for one like me. The only place I could find work was at the Flesh Palace.”

“The Queen was always so open-minded and welcoming,” Ronin says.

“That woman...” Tomas says, screwing up his face in disgust.

“She’s dead,” I say, “Ronin killed her.”

Tomas looks up at bounty hunter. “Then I thank you. Life at the Palace was not a good life. Until the Queen bought a new slave from some human traffickers from Congo.”

“Esme?” I ask eagerly.

The glowing man shakes his head. “Lila, a beautiful woman, one like me.”

“Another Obambo?” Pat says breathlessly. “Why Tomas, that’s wonderful!”

Tomas hangs his head. “It was,” he says. “It was paradise. We fell in love. We were happy. The two of us, I think, were the last of our kind.” He looks up at us and smiles. “But then a year ago we had a baby. A beautiful, healthy, glowing boy.”

Pat gasps and it suddenly dawns on me what he’s saying.

“The Reckoning,” I say.

Tomas nods miserably. "At first I thought it was a great blessing. No other one of the Qawa has defied the Reckoning in South Africa."

Pat rushes over and puts her hand on Tomas's radiant neck. Tears stream down her face. "It's never happened before," she says. "Never."

Tomas nods again. "My wife and I were so happy. We thought that perhaps we would leave the Palace and find some other way to live." His glowing face twists with misery. "Then the Queen found out and everything changed." Tomas lifts his bound hands up to rubs his face. "Soon after that the demon birds came and took us away to a terrible, terrible man. At first he just asked us questions. Where had I been born, when and where my son Adam had been conceived. Then he began testing."

"Tomas," Pat says softly and takes his face in her hands.

"I watched as he prodded and poked my wife and son. He cut flesh from them and put it into jars. He forced them to drink poisons and videotaped them as they writhed and screamed and vomited. Adam died quickly, thank God. But Lila was always strong. It took days but I watched as she faded in front of me until eventually her light went out."

Pat sobs uncontrollably and a small, thin wail escapes her lips.

"This man," Ronin says. "What did he look like?"

"Very thin and tall, like a skeleton, with burn marks on his hands."

"Basson," Ronin says grimly.

"Basson," Tomas, trying the name out in his mouth. "This Basson told me that my blood is an antidote to the Reckoning." He looks up at me and his eyes are like little black coals in the furnace of his body. "I don't know why they pulled out that tooth." He looks away from me and little golden droplets stream down his face and spatter the floor.

"You escaped," Pat sobs grasping his hands. "Thank God you escaped and found me."

Right then my phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out and look at the number. It's Kyle.

"You're not going to believe this," Kyle says when I answer. "I've found her."

"Esme? Where?"

"I got an SMS a couple of minutes ago saying she used an ATM," he says. "At a caravan park in Parow. I'll SMS you the details as soon as I hang up."

"I think I might kiss you when I see you," I say.

"I'm going to take that little nugget of homoeroticism as thanks," Kyle says. "We've got another problem though. Rafe knows that you're not on camp."

“Jesus, how?”

“I dunno. But he’s been sending me weird messages.”

“Make Rafe keep it together. If my folks find out I’m not on camp…”

“Yeah I know. I’ll sort it out. You go and rescue your biatch, biatch.”

I hang up and look at Ronin. My phone buzzes with the details Kyle has sent through. “I think we may have found her,” I say.

Ronin is sweating profusely as we climb into the Cortina. “Have you taken your medicine?” Pat asks softly through the window. Her face is tear-streaked and her white hair is frazzled.

Ronin grimaces and pats his trench-coat. “No time. I’ll do it when we get back.”

With a wave, he pulls the Cortina out of the Haven’s driveway and guns it down the road. We’ve decided to leave Tomas with Pat. He promised not to leave and I, for one, believe him. He had just sat there staring at the floor when we left.

The roads are mostly empty and we make it to the Klein Vaarkie Caravan Park & Predator Zoo quickly. We pull into the dirt road that winds through the aisles of caravans and a man waves us down. He’s pudgy, balding, wearing dungarees and up-close I can see that he’s missing part of his ear and has a large hole in his nose.

“Here to visit the Predator Zoo?” he says in a slurry voice.

“No,” I say, “we’re looking for-”

“We have new eagles,” the man says. “Vicious bastards.”

“No, I we just-”

“How about scorpions?” the man says.

“No really,” I say, “We-”

“Pythons get fed at one,” the man says, “you can still make-”

He is cut short by Ronin’s hand clamping on his throat. “Listen *boet*.” The bounty hunter’s voice is strained and sweat drips from his face. “We appreciate the offer, but we’re not here for that, got it?”

The man’s eyes bulge and he breathes heavily through the hole in the side of his nose.

I hold Esme’s picture front of his face. “Have you seen her?”

The man nods slowly and Ronin lets go of his throat. “Where is she?”

“She’s in the Honeymoon Caravan,” the man says rubbing his neck. He hands us a map of the park and jabs a dirty finger to a spot in the corner.

“Thank you,” I say.

“You can still make the python feeding if you hurry,” the man mumbles as we drive off.

We follow the winding dirt road through the rows of the grungy, decaying caravans. The pink caravan we pull up outside of doesn't look like it has moved for decades. Weeds grow from underneath it and pastel-coloured deck chairs are set out on the lawn next to a platoon of ceramic garden gnomes. Ronin slowly opens his door and gets out, leaning on the car and breathing heavily as he indicates for me to wait.

“Are you OK?” I whisper but he ignores me. I watch as he slides his hand into his trench-coat and approaches the caravan door. Screw it, I’m not waiting. I fling open the door and jog toward him. Ronin hears my footsteps and turns toward me with a scowl.

“Never listen do you?” he hisses.

There’s a low creak as the door opens. Esme appears in the doorway like an angelic vision in a yellow floral dress. The light creates a kind of halo behind her head and I feel like dropping to my knees in front of her. Finally. Esme.

“Who the hell are you?” Esme says, regarding Ronin haughtily.

“It’s OK,” I say hoarsely. “We’re here to rescue you.”

She laughs and flicks her hair back. “Do I look like I need rescuing, Baxter?”

A blonde guy with a mullet and wearing a stonewashed denim jacket comes from inside and stands next to her. Ronin points Warchild at his chest.

“On your knees,” the bounty hunter says.

“Tell this fucktard to put the gun away,” Esme says acidly.

“Lovely lady,” Ronin says. “I see why you like her. Down on your knees, boy, don’t make me fire a warning shot into your gut.”

Esme descends the steel steps that lead down from the caravan door and stands in front of me. I want to touch her but her eyes show no intimacy. It’s like there’s a wall of ice around her.

“Tell him to put the gun away,” she says, spitting out each word.

“Just put it away,” I say softly.

Ronin looks at Esme and then at mullet-boy and then slides Warchild back into her scabbard. He sits down onto his haunches, his red hair plastered against his head with sweat. "No sudden moves," he says pointing up at mullet boy. "Or I'll put a hole the size of a pizza in your chest."

"You're safe now," I say gently reaching out to take Esme's hand.

She jerks her hand back out of reach. "This is Niels," she says grabbing the guy by the hand.

"What happened to you?" I say, ignoring mullet boy. "Where have you been?"

"I've been here," she says. "With Niels."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I say. My forehead is throbbing unpleasantly. There's something wrong with this whole situation.

"Let's just get out of here," I say. "I'll take you back to your family and we can talk about this. It's been so crazy. You won't believe the shit I've--"

"I'm staying here," she says firmly. She reaches over and kisses Niels, wrapping her fingers into his mullet and mashing her lips against his for several seconds before pulling away. "I'm staying here," she repeats. "With Niels."

My brain refuses to accept what's just happened. It's like I've just seen a horrific car crash that I can't stop replaying in my head.

"Why?" I say eventually.

Her face curls with contempt. "I'll tell you why. You're not a good person, Baxter. You're self-involved and manipulative and you only do things if you get something out of it," I try to say something but she's on a roll now. "You hurt people, maybe you don't know that you do, but you do. I mention you to somebody, anybody, and they've all got story about how you sold them out or how you got them to do something they didn't want to do,"

"It's part of the business," I croak.

"You sell porn, for Christsake," she says.

"Is it the porn?" I say. "Because the Spider is a small startup. We're flexible we can branch into other industries." What am I saying? Someone stop me before I commit the Spider to selling Amway.

"You're not going to change," Esme says. "You're a terrible person and you always will be."

And that is how you cut someone deep. I have no comeback. I stand there with my mouth opening and closing like a goldfish. Without a word I turn around and walk back to the Cortina. I'm at the door when I remember something. I put my hand into my pocket and pull out the tooth. "What about this?" I shout. "If you weren't kidnapped where did the tooth come from?"

Esme laughs. "I bought it from a curio shop, you idiot," she says. "Where do you think I got it?"

I slide into the car and slam the door. Ronin looks up Esme and Niels for a long time before pushing himself back up to his feet and stumbling back to the car.

"Sorry, sparky," he wheezes as he gets into the driver's seat.

"It doesn't make sense," I say hoarsely. Tears are starting to squeeze out the sides of my eyes and I lift my hand to rub them away quickly. All of this for nothing. It's a lesson I decide feverishly as the car pulls away from the Honeymoon Caravan. A life lesson about the futility of giving a shit.

"What about the tooth?" I say as we exit the park. "Tomas said the Murder pulled it."

"If there's anything I've learnt from working with the Qawa is that they're oily, untrustworthy bastards. Our glowing friend would probably say anything to try to help himself."

"But she said she'd bought the tooth. She doesn't buy things, she steals. It doesn't make any-"

"You need to get drunk. I know a place that'll give you a hangover worse than any heartbreak. But first I need to get back to the Haven and taken my meds. I'm feeling a little under the weather."

'Under the weather' is a understatement. His pupils are shiny and huge and veins are jutting from his neck like fat purple slugs.

"What kind of diabetes do you have?" I say.

"The worst kind," he says as he slumps forward over the wheel and steers the car slowly through the traffic.

I want to help him but I can't stop thinking about the things Esme said. Ronin's wrong, I don't need alcohol I need a frontal lobotomy. That's the only way I'm going to get rid of the image of Esme sticking her tongue down mullet boy's throat or the sound of her telling me I'm a terrible person. I barely notice us driving back to Haven farm. We pull into the driveway. Ronin yanks open the door and almost falls out of the car. I help him out and pull his arm over my shoulder.

"Wait, something's wrong," he says. He points to where a thin trail of translucent blood glimmers on the cobblestones. Ronin keeps an arm around my shoulders and draws Warchild with the other.

The farmhouse door is a ruin of glass and splinters. "Shit," Ronin hisses. He pulls his arm from around me and steadies himself on the ivy-covered wall. We slip into the house.

Ronin keeps the shotgun levelled as creep through the kitchen. The old battered kettle is upturned and chairs have been smashed. There is a long jagged rip on the wal. And there's blood. Red blood, a small pool on the floor and a smear across the pink wallpaper.

“Pat,” Ronin groans.

Tomas’s room is untouched. Perhaps he was downstairs with Pat or perhaps he just didn’t offer the Crows any resistance. But it’s Pat’s menagerie that is the worst.

Toni Montana is lying on the floor with his head twisted at an unnatural angle. The Nevri, one of its heads ripped from its body is wriggling limply in the corner. “Sleepytime,” the remaining head hisses.

A Tokoloshe runs from underneath the table and latches onto my leg. It begins to hump it manically. “Fukfuk,” it shouts, pumping its hips into my jeans.

I shake my leg but that only seems to make it grip onto me harder. I have to resort to kicking the little horned maniac across the room. It hits a wall hard and then gets up and begins to hump a chair leg.

“Sparky.” A voice groans from the kitchen. I walk through to see Ronin crouched on the floor shivering. He looks up at me and his eyes are dark orbs with thin, white slits in them. His neck is swollen and I can see short, coarse hair grown on his face.

“What the f...” I say, stepping back quickly and tripping over my own feet, landing on the floor.

“Medication,” Ronin groans. He reaches into his pocket and the leather case tumbles out.

I crawl over to the leather pouch, snatch it off the floor and retreat to a corner of the kitchen. I unzip the pouch and see a syringe and several tubes of dark liquid. “Fill syringe halfway,” Ronin chokes out.

I carefully remove the syringe, stick it into one of the tubes and pull the plunger so that liquid half fills the syringe.

Ronin lifts his shirt. The coarse black hairs have covered his body and saliva is dripping from his mouth and onto the floor.

“Do it,” he groans. I shuffle over to him on my knees and raise the syringe. In an instant he’s on me, grabbing me by my hoodie and shoving me hard onto the floor. His white slitted eyes are centimetres away from mine and saliva drips onto my neck. It’s then that I notice the teeth. Twin rows of serrated teeth that are inches away from my face.

I jab the syringe into his side and push the plunger, sending the dark liquid into his body. He makes a hoarse choking noise and I manage to push him off me and scramble away as he hits the floor. I push myself to my feet as his body begins to convulse. When he stops I see that the coarse hairs are gone and that his eyes are wide and shocked but they’re blue not white.

“Sparky,” the bounty hunter says.

“Get the fuck away from me,” I shout. I reach across the kitchen counter and pull a long bread knife from the chopping block.

“It’s gone,” the bounty hunter whispers. He pushes himself to his knees and holds his head. He grabs onto the edge of the kitchen table and pulls himself up. “Put it down,” he says nodding at the knife in my hands.

“Hell no, I’m keeping it,” I say.

He shrugs. “Suit yourself.” He walks across to the fridge and pulls two beers from it. He slumps down on one of the remaining chairs, opens the beer and takes a long swallow.

“What the fuck was that?” I say, using my free hand to wipe his rank saliva off my neck.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “That was the Widowmaker.” He points at the chair across from the table. “Let me explain.”

I sit at the table but keep the bread knife close to me. “You move and this is going into your throat,” I say.

“If I feel it again I’ll do it myself,” he says sadly. “I told you about my unit on the Border, right?”

I nod.

“We were basically wranglers for a genetically-engineered weapon, a Qawa hybrid that Basson called Gogs. Big, ugly things, sorta like spiders. They were killing machines. We’d drive them out into the bushveld and let them loose and then clean up after them. Whole villages, sometimes with everybody dead; women, children it didn’t matter. Problem was that they were dumb. They couldn’t think for themselves. They’d run straight into a minefield and get blown up. They were incredible weapons but not perfect.” He takes another sip of his beer. His face looks a lot better but there are still a few ugly purple veins on his temples. “Then one day they wiped out one of our own platoons and Basson almost had the plug pulled on his little operation. He needed a weapon that could think for itself so he created the Widowmaker. A few of us were picked and told we going to be made into officers.” He laughs.

“Amazing what at a little ego-stroking will get a man to do. Instead of making us into officers they fused Gog DNA into us. None of them survived more than a couple of weeks. Except me.” He finishes the last of his beer and slams the bottle down on the table. “But that, as they say, is history.” He gets up unsteadily. “And I need to rescue Pat and Loyiso.”

“You don’t look so good,” I say. “Maybe you should rest.”

He steadies himself on the table and breathes out deeply. “After apartheid ended, our unit was disbanded and I was to be terminated. Not sentenced to death and executed. Terminated. Like a machine that they no longer needed. Loyiso testified on my behalf at the Occult Truth Commission. Pat found me the alchemist that synthesised the drug that stops me from turning into that thing. I owe them my life.” He lays a shaky hand on my shoulder. “It’s no longer your concern. You’ve found your girlfriend. Go home and forget the Qawa ever existed. That’s what I’d do if I could.”

It's true. My mission is complete. I found Esme and she hates me. More than that she's right about me. I'm not a good person, I realise that now. I manipulate people. I use people and I hurt people. Like Mikey Markowitz and NPCs like Courtney Adams. Like Esme. But that's life, right? It's like good-cop-bad-cop in my head.

MetroBax: It's true. I only do things if they benefit me.

BizBax: There's a problem with that?

MetroBax: Pat doesn't deserve this

BizBax: Nobody really deserves to be Crow meat. That's just how it happens sometimes. Seriously there are easier ways to assuage your guilt. Like stopping pirating music. Or recycling.

MetroBax: We feel things now. There's no going back.

BizBax: You know, all I wanted was to be the adolescent porn king of South Africa. Was that too much to ask?

"I'm coming with you," I say as I follow Ronin out of the kitchen door.

"You're not coming," he grunts as he climbs into the Cortina

"You need help. Ronin, you don't even know where they are."

He leans against the steering wheel. "That thing you did back in the Flesh Palace. Seeing where the exit was. What was that?"

It's a really good question. "I have weird dreams. Sometimes during the day I daydream about things." I rub my forehead. "It's been getting worse lately."

"Can you control it?" he says. "Can you see where they are?"

I shake my head. "I don't even know what it is. I can't just use it on command."

The bounty looks at me intently. "Try."

I close my eyes. My forehead is throbbing again but that's not unusual. Taking a deep breath, I try to focus my attention on Pat. I picture her old, kindly face framed by her jangling earrings. I hold the image in my mind and let the rest of my attention drift. There's a quick flash, an image of something but I'm not sure what. I refocus my attention. There's another flash. It's the attic in the Haven. I see Pat talking to Tomas. She touches his shoulder and then bends down to affix a bracelet around his ankle. She lifts a small GPS unit from the bed and turns it on and then smiles at Tomas and nods. The vision fractures and light pours in from all directions. I try to open my eyes but they're stuck together. I scream and clutch at my forehead as something begins to gnaw hungrily through my brain.

“Sparky!” a voice calls from far away.

I groan and open my eyes. My cheek is pressed into the cold stones of the driveway. Ronin is kneeling at my side and shaking me gently. “You OK?” he says.

I push myself onto my elbows. “There’s a tracking device. Pat put it on Tomas when we left.”

Ronin chuckles as he helps me to my feet. “That old gal is a lot craftier than I give her credit for.”

We search the house and find the GPS unit in a drawer in the kitchen. Ronin switches it on as we climb back into the car and a small dot blinks on in the middle of the screen. “That’s on the mountain,” he says with a frown.

“Why would the Crows take them there?” I say.

“There’s an old military base there that our unit used. Basson might have resurrected it.”

“So you’re letting me come?” I say. He looks at me and then reaches over to the glove compartment and pulls out a long-barrelled revolver.

“Well if you’re coming, at least make yourself useful,” he says, handing me the gun.

I take the heavy revolver in my hand. Yes it’s true I am a terrible person. Yes, my girlfriend has dumped me for a life of trailer park inbreeding. Yes, I am voluntarily walking into a war with giant crows. But I’m packing a .45. Without Esme I wasn’t going to be getting lucky, punk. But on the bright side I hopefully I’d get to shoot something in the face.

9. Rip Off My Face and Tell Me That You Love Me

The orange dirt track curls up through the pine forest and past the ranger station with the fat red helicopter that's used to fight forest fires. I start to sweat as the path becomes steeper. We crest a hill and I look down to see Cape Town below us like a giant microchip.

My heart is aching like a fresh bruise but at least I have something other than my existential crisis to focus on. Like the little red dot on the GPS screen.

"We've got to get up above the blockhouse," Ronin says pointing to the small, squat building that we can see on the hill above us. There's a series of caves above it. As far as I remember one leads into the lab. It's not going to be easy to get into without being seen."

"You don't do any..." I say and then wave my hands around in the air a bit. "You know..."

Ronin snorts "Magick? What do I look like Gandalf?"

"A little if I squint my eyes, actually. I just thought that, you know, Loyiso and Basson are all powerful and shit. I just thought..."

"All the mages I've ever known have been paranoid megalomaniacs," he says. "Magick does that to you. It's not all rainbows and stardust, trust me. You follow the path of power and you pay the price, no exceptions."

We continue up the path for at least an hour. By the time we stop at a fork in the dusty orange path my t-shirt is soaked with sweat. Ronin looks at the two paths that cut across the face of the mountain and then takes the left one.

"Hey," I say pointing to the right-hand path. "The GPS says it's that way."

"Detour."

We continue sweating our way up the left-hand path. It's steep and rocky and the sun has begun to beat down mercilessly on us. I stop again and take a sip of water. My forehead is throbbing again and I keep on thinking I see something out of the corner of my eye.

"You OK?" Ronin calls back to me, "I don't want you to die of a heart-attack before we get there."

"And I don't want to be the first of your clients to shoot you for being an asshole," I say.

Ronin pulls down the neck of his wifebeater vest, revealing a large, angry scar on his chest. "You wouldn't be."

I sigh and take another sip of water and then struggle my way up to him. The path stops climbing and flattens out to form a large rocky plateau that stretches like a ledge along the side of the mountain. Ronin steps out onto the ledge and edges his way around.

"Um, are you sure..."

"Just get on the ledge," Ronin says.

I step onto the ledge and follow him flattening myself against the rock face and trying not to look down at the city stretched out below. When I reach Ronin he's standing outside the mouth of the large cave.

"Let me guess," I say. "A dragon?"

Ronin shakes his head.

"A troll?"

"Nope."

"A crashed UFO?"

"Now you're just reaching." He turns to the cave. "Klipspringer. Klipspringer!" There's a shuffling inside and then a young face pops around the edge of the cave and peers at us quizzically. His hair is long and brown and he wriggles his nose, sniffing.

"Surprise," Ronin says.

The boy breaks into a huge smile. "Big Ones," he says with a sigh and steps out onto the ledge with us. Klipspringer is about fourteen. Klipspringer has the body of springbok and the torso and head of a human. His little white tail wags with delight. He trots up and looks at us, his nose twitching with happiness.

"Hey," the goatboy says shyly.

"Hi," I say.

"We need help. Do you think you can help Big Ones?" Ronin says.

The satyr canters up and down. "Yes, yes, yes," he says. "I mean no." Whatever other diseases were affecting the Qawa, goatboy here obviously has a severe case of ADHD

"You cheat," he says to Ronin. "We played chess and you cheated"

"Cheat?" Ronin says, touching his chest in mock-horror. "Me? That's ridiculous."

"You move pieces when I'm not looking," the goatboy says.

"Great," I say. "Guess he doesn't appreciate Ronin rules."

Klipspringer canters up and down. "You go away Big Ronin One," he says. With that he disappears into the cave.

I look at Ronin. "Why the hell do we need that delinquent anyway?" I say. "Let's just go to the lab and sneak in."

"Sneak in?" Ronin says. "With your ninja skills? Against whatever Basson has guarding that place? I don't think so."

I have to concede that point. I'm not exactly Jackie Chan.

"So how's goatboy going to help us?" I say.

"Goatboy there, happens to be incredibly powerful."

"That kid?"

"He's a savant," Ronin says. He doesn't really know what he's doing but when he does it, it's beyond anything that even Basson or Loyiso can do. I want him to help us get in. I want him to transform us."

"Transform?"

"Sometimes I think you're just acting stupid to piss me off," Ronin says, "Transform, magickally transmute into another form." He puts his thumbs together to make a bird shape. "When we're transformed we fly into the base, change back into our human selves, find Pat and get the hell out of there."

Klipspringer pops his head around the cave again. "Shhh, Big Ones," he says sternly. He turns to Ronin. "You cheat, Big Ronin," he says. "You always cheat." His head disappears into the cave again.

"Let me talk to him," I say. "He's about my age." And after all, I had a lot of experience negotiating with teenagers.

The cave is stacked high with a random assortment of rubbish. I gingerly move an old, rusty tricycle out of my way as I make my way into the cave. An abstract sculpture made entirely out of doorknobs wobbles unsteadily as I pass.

The goatboy sees me and hops up and down.

"Hey, hey, hey, Big One" he says to me.

"Hey," I say.

He grins excitedly and trots off into the darkness. I follow him slowly. Plastic action figures hang from the ceiling on pieces of string and old electrical cables. I push a plastic Skeletor with my finger and he swings back and forth from the noose around his neck. Posters of 2 Unlimited, Andre Agassi and Steven Segal are stuck up on the uneven, mildewy wall.

Klipspringer leads me to where an old couch lurks like a large maroon toad. Behind it are several large barrels next to a large generator. "Petrol," Klipspringer says. "I steal it from the big red helimicopters."

Klipspringer trots around the couch and starts the generator. The whole cave is suddenly illuminated with dozens of strings of brightly-coloured Christmas lights.

“Are you alone here?” I ask Klipspringer. “Don’t have any family?”

His face falls and his nose twitches, “Yes, yes, I’m all alone.” he says. Then his mouth curls in a smile. “No, not alone, I have the nipplestars!”

I look at him blankly.

“You’ve never seen a nipplestar?” he whispers. “In the paper book, man, hey?”

I shake my head. He nods knowingly and holds up a hand for me to wait and trots off into his cave. I hear sounds of things being moved and thrown around. He returns with something behind his back. “You wanna see, huh, huh?” he says.

I nod.

“Now are you sure you wanna see?” he says with a grin.

“Just show me,” I say.

He beams and he pulls out a Scope nudie magazine from 1984. “The nipplestars,” he says reverently. He opens the magazine to the centerfold. Her blonde permed hair, high socks and naturally pendulous breasts seeming strange to my refined porn sensibilities. But that isn’t what Klipspringer is interested in. His eyes are fixated on the silvery stars which covered the nipples, put there by the conservative apartheid government to protect South Africa’s delicate white souls. “They shine,” he says in awe. “From their chests.”

I laugh “Those aren’t stars, goatboy,” I say. I scratch a little with my fingernail on the silvery nipple supernovas to reveal the fleshy areola beneath.

“You mean they aren’t real?” he says His nose twitching with disappointment. I feel like I’ve just told a kid there is no Santa Claus. “Don’t worry,” I say. “The real thing is much better.” I take my phone from my pocket and scroll through the images that I’ve saved on it; big women, small women, women of every racial type.

The goatboy wrinkles his nose up. “I like the nipplestars,” he says. I’m about to give up when I scroll to one of the creature- porn images I’ve saved. It’s a goatwoman. She’s topless, her arms crossed beneath her breasts, but the lower half of her body is a tangled mess of shaggy brown hair.

Goatboy grabs the phone. “What’s her name?” he says softly.

I squint at the small print in the corner of the image. “Jasmine.”

“Jasmine,” he repeats with reverence.

"You can have the phone," I say. "But you've got to help us."

He clutches the phone to his chest.

"Do you know the buildings that are further up the path?" I say.

Goatboy's eyes flick back and forth and then he nods once.

"We need you to help us to get into those buildings. We want you to make us into birds."

"Kaaa kaaa," Klipspringer says making the bird shapes with his hands.

"Exactly!" I say. "You make us go *kaa kaa*?"

Klipspringer grins. "No problemo, Big One," he says with a smile. "I have the strongstrong magick."

"You look good," I chitter to Ronin as I rub my face with my brown paws. Being a rat isn't so bad. You can get into small places, you have sharp little teeth and there's none of the abstract anxiety of the human world. You're small, you're dirty and you don't care. But being a rodent is not exactly suitable for our purposes. Klipspringer's strongstrong magick turned out to be a little unpredictable and instead of flying into the base we were going to have to scuttle.

"Damn, that goatboy," Ronin the grey squirrel chirrup. "This is going to end badly." The little bags strapped to our rodent backs have our miniaturised clothes, weapons and flammables in them. Klipspringer told that we had half an hour before everything returns to its former shape and size.

"C'mon, lighten up," I say. "At least we're not going to get executed on sight."

"Just don't eat any suspicious-looking cheese," Ronin chitters. We scamper through the network of dark caves, reaching a large, cathedral-like cavern that's littered with large chunks of shiny quartz. We edge past a vast pool of stagnant grey water and find ourselves in front of an electrified fence that blocks access to a concrete bunker built into the red stone walls of the cave.

"This is where those wings would have come in handy," squirrel Ronin says, baring his little square incisors in anger.

It's true. The fence throbs with electricity and the gaps between it are way too small for us to get through. I'm kinda enjoying being a rodent but a familiar throbbing has started in forehead again. I scratch at it with my little paws. We scuttle around the fence looking for an entry point. There is no way in. But then I see a small patch of fence that runs across a part of the floor that's dirt, not rock. We can dig under it.

"Over here," I chitter excitedly.

"Um, sparky," Ronin says.

"We can dig under it."

"No, just..." His squirrel eyes have become unfeasibly large.

"What? I know you're the badass 'supernatural bounty hunter'" I say, making little air quotes with my paws. "Sometimes I have good ideas too."

"Yeah, you're great," Ronin says. "It's just that there's a snake behind you."

I spin around just in time to see the bullet-shaped head of a Cape cobra darting toward me. My rat reflexes get me out of the way just as the fangs extend and snap into the empty air. I scramble backwards as the sleek, shiny body moves forward. The snake contemplates us with little black eyes.

"They're more scared of us than we are of them," I gasp.

"That's when we're humans, asshole," Ronin says. "Right now we're food." The bullet-shaped head lashes forward and we scatter. "Run!"

My little rat legs plow into the ground as I make a break back through the tunnel. The snake whips its long body around and lunges after me. I scramble over the rocks, running for my little rat life. My forehead throbs mercilessly. If I ever get through all of this I'm going to have a brain scan.

The snake glides effortlessly through the caves. The menacing hiss from behind me spurs me on to feats of super-rodent effort. I rush bushes which jut from the cave wall wincing as sharp little thorns dig into my fur. I make a wide circle around the cave, hoping to find Ronin. It's then that I see it. There in the electrified fencing is a hole. It's a small hole, sure, but I'm a rat.

I vault toward it as the snake rises up behind me and prepares to strike. With sickening certainty I know I'm not going to make it. Those huge, poisonous fangs are going to dig into my little rat body and I'm going to die instantly of shock. It seems fitting that I die as a rat. I'm sure Esme would approve.

Then the squirrel attacks. With a screech of squirrel fury, the little grey bundle of terror lands on the snake and begins ripping at it with its jaws. In a normal Darwinian universe the cobra would win a fight with a squirrel every time. But in this case it is fighting a transmogrified psychotic bounty hunter so I'm guessing the same rules don't apply.

Ronin digs his little teeth into the snake's head. It reels about and clamps its jaws down millimetres away from Ronin's furry squirrel flesh. With a shriek Ronin drives forward and drives his teeth into the soft throat of the angry viper. The snake sways back and forth for a second and then lies still on the ground, its long, lithe body jerking about in death spasms.

The squirrel trots toward me, its face blackened with snake blood. Ronin grins, revealing his bloody little teeth. "Maybe being a squirrel is not so bad after all."

We scamper through the hole and onto the flat, cold concrete. The bunker leads into long, illuminated tunnel. We keep close to the walls as we move forward, keeping a furtive look out for more snakes. The tunnel opens out into another huge cavern which holds a cluster of square, grey buildings. The concrete is wet and smells rancid. I can't help but think of the human colony that has been shuttled into the lab from the Flesh Palace. I just hope we're not wriggling through organ juice.

As we get close enough to the building for my rat eyes to focus properly, my heart base-jumps into my stomach. Two monsters stare blankly out from a guard post at the base of the hill.

"Gogs," Ronin hisses.

Killing machines he had called them back at Pat's. They're bipedal, but hunch forward like chimpanzees, their heads fat and warped with large white eyes. As they move the flesh of their bodies bulges irregularly from their bones like they've been made out of candle wax. Short black hair juts from their faces and bodies. They are disgusting.

We make a large circle around the Gogs and get into one of the buildings by scuttling in through an air duct. Ronin leads, his bushy tail in my face, pattering through the long, metallic chute. The air is humid and the further we get into the maze of the ventilation system, the more it begins to stink of flesh and death.

"We need to find somewhere to change back," Ronin says from up ahead. The smell has become stronger and things begin to get hazy as noxious fumes pour in from the laboratory.

"There!" I say. There's an opening up ahead. I have no idea where it leads but we need to get out of here and fast. If the fumes don't get us, changing back into human form in this tiny space will. Ronin scrambles toward the vent and jumps through. I follow quickly. I can see Ronin's grey tail up ahead as we hurtle down the metallic chute. And then we're in the air. I look down as I tumble through open space and see a small, empty laboratory.

Ronin hits a metal table with a clang, bounces off to the floor. I slam into a row of shelving and claw frantically for a foothold. My paw catches on the shelf and there's a blinding white flash of pain as the nail is ripped out and I tumble to the ground.

It's while I'm lying dazed on the floor that I begin to change back. I feel my body turning to liquid and spilling out over the tiled floor like a spilled soda. I slowly begin to take shape. I can feel my hands ooze together and regain feeling. My body sucks itself out of the ooze and reshapes itself. The oozing, sucking feeling continues. Finally I flex my fingers. I feel whole again. I feel human.

I look down at my hands and see that the nail of my left index finger has been ripped off completely. It hurts like hell and is bleeding all over the white tiled floor of the lab. I swear and clutch my hand as I roll over.

Ronin has finished his transformation too and is crouched on the floor, naked and flexing his fingers. I push myself to my feet. I take my backpack off my shoulders and pull my clothes out. My forehead is still throbbing and the pain from my left hand is making me feel faint.

Ronin is pulling his wifebeater vest on. He finishes dressing and slides Warchild home into her scabbard.

"How's the hand?"

"Hurts."

"Well suck it up, sparky" he says. "Being a rodent was the easy part of this little adventure."

I pull the rest of my clothes on and jam my finger in my mouth to try and stop the bleeding. The metallic taste of blood fills my mouth.

"Here," Ronin says, handing me a dirty cloth from one of the shelves. I wrap the cloth around my hand. The bounty hunter walks over to the door and looks through the glass panel into the corridor. "We're not here to fight," he says as he peers through. "We find Pat. Free her and get the hell out of here."

"What about Tomas?"

He shrugs. "If the disco-ball is not dead he can come too."

"And if we meet any of the Murder?" I say.

Ronin takes off his backpack and hauls out the canister of petrol.

"Then we torch them."

We slide out into the empty corridor and walk quickly toward a door at the bottom of it. He peers through the glass panel. "Gog," he mouths as he slides the knife from his boot.

I shake my head and point back to the way we came. He smiles, draws a finger across his throat and opens the door. So much for not being here to fight.

The Gog hears him and spins around snarling. Ronin is a blur of movement as he snaps his hand out and buries the blade in its thick, bulbous neck. With a bellow of pain it lashes an arm out and grabs him by the coat. He hits it with an elbow and then again. The Gog is bleeding profusely from the neck wound but it slams Ronin against the wall and rakes its claws across his face.

I run toward where the two of them are grappling and try to land a kick on the creature's rippling, black-haired back. My foot glances harmlessly off it but I succeed in drawing the thing's attention away from Ronin for a second. It flings an arm backwards knocks me off my feet.

I land hard on the cement and the breath is driven from my lungs. I cough and try to suck in air. The Gog has pinned Ronin to the wall and is trying to rip off his face with its jaws. He jams an elbow under its throat and holds its gaping mandibles inches away from his face.

I start to push myself to my feet and my hands come into contact with a metal stand for an IV drip. I haul myself to my feet and wrap my fingers around the stand, wrenching it back and forth until the metal pole comes loose.

Ronin has pulled his knife the things neck but it slams his hand against the wall and smashes a large, club-like hand into the side of his face.

Holding the pole like a spear I vault forward and jam the end of it into the creature's head. It splatters and it and the Gog goes down. I stand above it as it struggles to regain its feet. I jab the pole furiously into the thing's body like I'm skiing on a wet, red slope. Gog blood sprays onto my clothes and face. I keep stabbing until the thing stops writhing. I sink to my knees breathing hard.

"C'mon," Ronin says pulling me to my feet. He pulls off his trench-coat and dabs at his lacerated face.

"You OK?" I gasp.

"I'll live."

We reach another corridor. Doors lead off from either side. This place is like a maze. We peek through another door. It opens up to a large laboratory where vats of dark liquid gurgle and spit steam into the air. A stench hits us and I recoil back covering my face with my arm. The place reeks of fat and flesh and oil. I thought the Flesh Palace was bad but this is worse - like a huge takeout grillroom.

I hold my arm across my face and lean forward to get a better look. Scientists in lab coats are attending to Gogs that are in various stages of existence. Several Gog heads are floating in a vat, tendrils trailing beneath them like jellyfish. Siamese Gogs, joined at the spine, are having needles and probes stuck into them. Another, similar to the one we just killed, is being cut and probed - its agonised reactions being recorded by the dispassionate men of science that scuttle around the lab like white ants. Suddenly I feel less elated about killing the Gog. These things don't choose to be what they are. That's what they're made into.

As we turn back into the corridor I'm flung from my feet. I hit the ground hard. My glasses are flung from my face and I try to get up but the world spins around me. I scabble for my glasses and put them back on. There's a large crack down one of the lenses. A Crow has Ronin in its claws and the Gog that slammed me to the ground is looming over me.

"Go," Ronin hisses as he struggles.

I struggle to my knees and pull the revolver out from my waistband. Ronin has managed to pull Warchild from his trench-coat with one hand. The Gog reaches down toward me but Warchild roars and its head explodes in a shower of magenta physiology.

The Crow knocks Warchild from Ronin's hand, and I aim the revolver at the bird and squeeze the trigger.

"Urgh," Ronin shouts as the round clips him on the shoulder. He looks over to where I'm lying.

"Jesus, sparky," he shouts. "Try shooting at the bad guys."

I aim the barrel of the gun more carefully this time, making sure it is dead centre with dark shape before squeezing. The kick jerks my hand back but the blast hits the Crow in the chest. Bulls-eye. The bird shrugs it off as if it were a paintball. I don't see the other Gog until it's right on top of me, its arm slashing down and hitting me in the temple. A multi-coloured shimmer dances in front of my eyes before I pass out.

More oxwagons. An old woman wearing a bonnet sits with me next to a fire. Her face is worn and craggy and there's a silvery sheen to her eyes. "Come here, girl" she says.

She's speaking in Afrikaans but somehow I understand her perfectly. I crouch closer.

She pulls a bundle of herbs from a pouch at her side and pushes the end of it into the fire. A thick herb fragrance fills the air. "Mpepu," she says. "The Bantu sangomas use it to speak to the spiritworld."

I nod, an eager student taking in every word.

"You are Siener, child, one who will lead the Boers to their destiny," the old woman says. "But it will not be easy."

I reach up to adjust my glasses, but they're not there. I look down and see my dirty but solid working hands.

"You must learn to See, child," the old woman says. "You must learn to See..."

"See, see, seeee." The screeches wake me. I open my eyes and see the dull concrete of the ceiling. I try to sit up and then stop as pain lances through my skull. I touch my temple and feel a huge lump.

"See, see, see."

I wince against the pain and force myself to sit up. A guy is crouching on the end of the steel bed. He's thin and pale, dressed in a dirty medical gown and has a crazy look in his eyes. He scratches at the few strands of grey hair sprouting from his head, grabs one and yanks it. Blood dribbles from his scalp as he hands me that the strand.

"No, thanks," I say. "I'm trying to cut down."

He looks at me, looks at the strand of hair and then shoves it into his mouth, chewing happily and then swallowing.

I hold my head and get up groggily. I'm in a cell of some kind. There's a basin in the corner and two steel beds line the walls. A large door is the only exit. The man climbs off the bed and looks at me quizzically.

"Monkey?" he says, turning his head from side to side. "Monkey, monkey, see, monkey, monkey." Then he wets himself.

I quickly climb back up to stand on the bed as the urine pools on the floor.

"Monkey, monkey see, see, see," he says again. From my vantage point I can see scars from incisions that have been made in his head.

There is the sound of keys in a lock and the steel door swings open. A stout orderly with a chubby, kindly face opens the door and backs into the room pulling a tray.

"Nigel," he says to the monkey man. "Time for your meds."

"Monkey, see, see, see," the monkey man says excitedly as he downs the pills that the orderly hands to him.

"And now you Baxter," the orderly says.

"No thanks," I say. "I'd rather save my friends from the Murder."

"Now, now," the orderly says. "What did we say about those delusions?"

He comes to stand in front of me with his hands on his hips. "Are you going to take your meds or are we going to have to do this the hard way?" he says like a testy parent talking to his uncooperative four-year-old.

"How about we do it the get-me-the-hell-out-of-here way?" I say.

He shrugs and quickly grabs my arm. He's surprisingly strong and I can't resist as he slides a needle into my flesh. I black out again.

10. The Parent Trap

“You’re ill Baxter,” the man says, his smile splitting his bearded face like a gaping wound in the body of a quivery white rabbit. I’m sitting on a leather chair in a neat office filled with dark wooden furniture. My lips feel stuck together and I lick them tentatively.

“Have some water,” my captor says nodding to the jug on the table next to me. I reach out a shaky hand, pour myself a glass and slowly sip it. My body feels loose and rubbery.

The man in the doctor's coat looks at me with pale eyes. He is emaciated, his cheeks sucked in - a bulimia victim risen from the dead. He smiles and runs a scarred hand through his greasy, thinning hair which is tied with a rainbow scrunchy at the back to form a little rat-tail. He hardly seems like the insane experimenter type. The worst he seems capable of is trying to pick up school girls at the local coffee shop.

“My name is Doctor Basson,” he says. “I’m going to be helping through this difficult time.”

Difficult time? Since when did the enemy provide counselling?

“Baxter,” Basson says. “I’m concerned that these delusions are going to hinder your chances at coming to terms with what you’ve done. With your permission, I’d like to use this session to explore them.”

“What delusions?” I ask croakily. “The ones where you’re an alchemist that’s creating an army of mutants.”

“Yes exactly,” Basson says. “Those delusions.”

I snort. “You’re a good mad scientist, but you’re a terrible comedian,” I say.

“This Jackie Ronin for instance,” the doctor says calmly looking at his notes. “Tell me about him.”

“Ronin?” I say. “What have you done to him?”

The doctor shakes his head sadly. “Baxter, I know this might be difficult to accept, letting go of hallucinations is never easy.”

I laugh.

“Baxter,” Basson says sternly. “I can’t support your delusional beliefs. It’s my job, as a medical professional, to help you to come to terms with what you’ve done.”

“What I’VE done?” I say, "what about what YOU’VE done."

“How do you think you came to be here?” Basson says.

“We came to rescue Pat,” I say. “And Tomas.”

“And some people got in your way, didn’t they?” the doctor says.

“Mutants,” I say, these...things, your mutants got in our way,” I say. “So we killed them.”

“You killed them, Baxter, you killed them,” the doctor says.

He pulls photographs from an envelope and slides one across the table. I look at it and then look away quickly from the gruesome image.

“Look at it Baxter,” Basson says. “It’s the only way you’re going to going to come to terms with it.”

I look across at the picture again. It shows the image of a decapitated corpse, its head positioned neatly next to its body. The body is wearing a Victorian bodice and the head is dark-haired and pretty.

“Casey Icon, owner of a strip club called the Flesh Palace” Basson says. “You went into the club, into her office and killed her. Why her Baxter?”

“She’s the Queen of the Nightwalkers,” I splutter.

“And these Nightwalkers are...” Basson says.

“Zombies. The Queen tried to kills us but Ronin killed her first.”

“Ah, there’s that Ronin again. He always seems to pop up when you’re having difficulty taking responsibility for your actions.” Basson slides another picture across the table. “Henry Mcqueen,” he says. “Henry was a worker at an old military facility on Table Mountain. I look at the picture. It shows a body that has been mutilated beyond recognition.

“That’s where we are now,” I croak. “That was one of your mutants.”

Basson shakes his head. “No, Baxter. We’re at Stikland Medical Facility. In the ward for the criminally insane.”

My forehead begins to throb. I rub the space between my eyes.

"Your head?" Basson asks.

I nod.

"We think you may have a tumour which has put pressure on your brain," Basson says.

"No," I say. "This is bullshit."

“A *sangoma* in a township,” Basson says, pushing another photograph across the table. It shows another corpse, this one horribly burned.

“An Elemental killed her,” I say desperately. “She got in its field.”

Basson smiles kindly. "An Elemental? Baxter I hope you can hear how ridiculous this all sounds. Elementals, zombies, mutants. It's all an elaborate myth that you've created to justify the terrible things that you've done." His voice is a calm monotone and the fog around my brain made it difficult to think too much.

"Bullshit," I hiss.

"Tell me Baxter," he says. "How did you get into this military facility on the mountain?"

"The goatboy," I mumble. "He turned me into a rat."

"A rat?" Basson says. "Please Baxter think about this. There must be a sane part of you that understands that this is ridiculous."

"A goatboy," I mumble. "There really was a goatboy."

"No," Basson says. "There wasn't. There was no goatboy, there were no zombies and there is no Ronin." You've succumbed to a stress-induced psychosis. One that has led you down a very dark path. One that has led you to becoming the Mountain Killer."

"Me?" I say, the medication making my head feel light. "I'm the Mountain Killer."

"Yes, Baxter," Basson says. "I'm glad you're finally coming to terms with it."

"You're an apartheid chemist," I murmur.

Basson shakes his head. "I'm a psychiatrist and what you're experiencing is called transference. You've projected your guilt onto me." Doctor Basson opens a notebook and peers across at me.

"Now, do you remember anything unusual about the days before all this started?"

"I have been feeling like I've been being watched," I say. "I've been having strange dreams about Afrikaans people."

"Paranoia and delusions of grandeur are common during psychosis. You've developed a Christ-complex, manifested as the need to save first Esme and then this imaginary Pat person."

"Why?" I say. "Why would I make this up?"

Basson raises his eyebrows. "A feeling of inferiority perhaps. Your parents say your lack of friendships have always worried them."

"My parents?" I say. "You've spoken to my parents?"

"Baxter, your parents are the ones that convinced you to hand yourself over to the authorities. Do you not remember any of this?"

I shake my head, desperately trying to remember. "I do have friends," I say.

"Ah, this wonderful schoolyard organisation, you've concocted," the doctor says. "The centre of schoolyard events, respected, feared, wielding influence like a political party. It is a wonderful myth."

He smiles smugly. It annoys me.

"The Spider exists," I say firmly. If that was illusory then everything was.

"Think about Baxter," the doctor says. "What kind of delusion would a lonely, isolated boy indulge in? One where he is the centre of everything, of course. One where his decisions could make or break the future of the school that he attends. One where he matters. The reality; where he is marginalised and bullied is just too painful to accept."

I swallow, a terrible feeling rising in my chest. A lonely, isolated boy.

I've lost track of time. I sit and watch Nigel rip strands of hair from his head and chew them. There are not many follicles left to feed his habit. I absently wonder what he'll start eating when all the hair is gone. Toenails? Skin? Whole appendages?

I stop thinking about that. Even though it's better than thinking about the other thing. The bad thing. I'm not the Mountain Killer. Am I?

"See," Nigel says.

My mind feels fuzzy. Is that the tumour pressing against my brain? "The thing about madness is that you don't know it's happened," Ronin had said. My mind can't handle this anymore.

MetroBax: I'm confused. Something isn't right.

BizBax: The fact that the two of us are talking seems to give credence to the idea that we're two parts of a split personality. Rrrrip, like a piece of paper torn in half. You're the half that's a pussy.

MetroBax: We killed people.

BizBax: It was going to happen at some stage.

MetroBax: Wait, you remember doing it?

BizBax: No, but I mean, c'mon. The violent videogames. The family issues. The anti-social behaviour. Textbook psychopath.

MetroBax: I always thought I would be famous

BizBax: Only on the Crime & Investigation network, neuron-buddy.

The doctor scribbles a few things in his notebook. I'm not sure how much time has passed since I last saw him. Hours? Days?

"I think it would help if you made a statement, Baxter." We've been playing word association games. I've been trying to not say things that sound psychokiller-ish. It's been hard.

I look at him. "What kind of statement?"

"A video diary. It will serve as a record of your progress. You've accepted responsibility for what you've done which is a huge step and I'd like to take it further. Think of it as a confidant. You can apologise to the families of your victims. You can talk about how you feel."

I nod. I do feel like I need to do this. Maybe it'll help me get rid of this nagging feeling that there's something wrong with this whole situation. 'The spectre of denial' Basson calls it. A relic of shattered ego.

The doctor gets up and positions a small handycam on a tripod and fiddles with it for a few seconds. I compose myself. If I'm going to speak about what's happened I have to have clarity. That, unfortunately, is in short supply at the moment. All I have is an overabundance of fuzz.

Basson finishes fumbling with the camcorder and gives me the thumbs up. I stare at the little black and silver cyclops eye. Here I go.

There are all sorts of questions that run through your head when you find out that you're a serial killer. "Am I more evil than Charles Manson?" is one. "I wonder whether I'll be on the Crime and Investigation network?" is another.

On the whole, though, it's the Who, What, When and Why of it that really takes up the mental bandwidth. So, here goes:

My name is Baxter Zevcenko. I am sixteen years old. I go to Westridge High School in Cape Town and I have no friends. I am serial killer.

Did mean to kill? No. To the families of my victims; I am truly sorry.

People are saying that I'm Satanic and that I was in a cult. This is not true. They just need something help them create meaning out of madness. I know you'd like to think you'd have done things differently in my shoes but it's probably not true. In the end we're all victims of our own perceptions, sparky. I hope you can understand that.

I want to say more but I can't. I hang my head. Basson switches off the camera and walks over to me. He puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Baxter..."

I look up to him.

"Why did you did you say 'sparky'?"

"That was what Ronin called me," I say softly.

"So, you've realised something about Ronin?" he says.

I nod.

"And what have you realised?"

I look back up at him with tears in my eyes. "That he's me."

I wake up with someone's hand over my mouth. At first I think that it's Nigel, hairless and ravenous and coming for my eyeballs. But it's not. It's Ronin. He puts a finger to his lips and then lifts the hand from my mouth.

"Ready to blow this joint?" he says with a grin.

There's an awkward silence. I'm not sure what to say to a full-blown hallucination.

"What's up with you?" Ronin says with a frown. "Did Basson cut out your tongue?"

I shake my head.

"Then what is it, sparky?"

"It's just..." I say. "It's just that you're not real."

He takes a little time to process this. His facial expression undulates like the surface of a tidal pool. It's the first time I've seen him speechless.

"What is that supposed to mean?" he says eventually.

"You're a hallucination," I say. "A surrogate created to express the parts of myself that needed expression."

Ronin's mouth twists in a smile. Stutters of laughter begin to throb in his throat. He clamps his hand across his mouth to stop himself from making a noise. Having a part of myself laughing at me is a little unsettling. I'm not sure what to do. Ronin looks so real. Full-on flesh and blood. Not at all the product of a diseased mind. Well except the shaggy red eyebrows. Those are a little over the top. But the rest of him...well...

"Have you been taking anything? Any drugs, medication?" Ronin asks.

"Just my meds," I say, defensively. I need those.

"They're probably filled with magick-enhanced substances that are messing with your head. Are you finding it difficult to think clearly?"

"The grey fuzz in my brain shifts and lurches. "No," I say, uncertainly.

"Listen," Ronin says. "They used some of the same shit in the Border. It makes you unable to make decisions properly. You have to fight it."

"No," I say, holding my head. "You're not real."

The delusion sighs. "I don't have time for this now, I need to find Pat. When I find her, I'm going to try come back for you. You better be ready to leave." He stands up and sidles over to the door. "Sometimes the truth is stranger than delusion, sparky," he says. And then he's gone.

"See?" Nigel whispers from his bed.

"Go back to sleep, Nigel," I whisper. "I was just having a nightmare."

"You're going to be charged with murder Baxter," Dr. Basson says. He pushes a *Sunday Times* across the table to me. "The Face Of A Teenage Serial Killer" the headline reads. Beneath there's a picture of me. I scan the article. It's not very complimentary. "I'm going to testify in your defence," the doctor continues. "But you need to cooperate with me as much as possible."

I nod.

"Have you seen Ronin again?" Basson asks.

I nod again.

"And what was it that he said to you?"

"That you're using magick to mess with my head."

Basson holds his hands up and twiddles his fingers like he's a stage magician doing a trick. He chuckles. "I apologise Baxter, I don't mean to make fun of you. But it just sounds so ludicrous."

I smile.

"If the Widowmaker visits you again, you must tell me right away."

I frown. "Who?"

Basson's face locks into a rigor mortis smile and I know he's made a mistake.

"Ronin," he corrects quickly. "If Ronin visits you again."

My mouth is dry. I roll my tongue along the inside of my lips. "What did you call him the first time?" I say.

"It's just psychiatry-speak," Basson says carefully. The Widowmaker. Somehow I doubt I'd find that in any psychiatry manual. Basson's eyes search mine. I maintain a blank look.

The doctor's eyes crinkle at the edges with a look of understanding. He knows he's fucked up. Which is why he decides to bring in the big guns. "You're in my custody until the trial begins," he says. "As your custodian I believe a visit from your family is exactly what you need."

"They're here?" I say.

"They've refused to leave, Baxter. They're very worried about you and rightly so."

I feel a lump form in my throat. Suddenly I need to see them more than anything.

"Can I see them?" I ask, my voice cracking. "Please I need to see them."

Basson waves toward the mirrored glass and the door opens.

My mother, father and brother enter. I've never been one of those family types. I've always pitied people who make a fetish out of blood bonds, but right now seeing them is the best thing ever.

"Mom," I say.

My mother walks over and takes my hand. "Baxter," she says. "We've been so worried."

My father joins my mother next to me. "Dad," I say, "I'm so sorry."

My dad puts his hands on my shoulder. "We hate the things you've done, son," he says. "But we could never hate you." At that I burst into tears. My entire personality is on the brink of internal nuclear meltdown, I can feel it.

Rafe comes to stand in front of me.

"What's up, retard?" I say affectionately.

He looks at me but there is no knowing-eye. Instead there's a look of anger. He looks across at Basson and then back at me. "Hey," he says brusquely.

And right then and there I know that something is wrong. My relationship with my brother has never exactly been love-hate, it's been more like despise-tolerate. But we have a deep mutual bond, one based on his silence and knowing-eye and on my never-ending, yet futile, attempts to rile him.

For him to react like that violates a fundamental universal principle. Something is not right. My parents continue to talk, but I'm not listening. The only person I'm needing to converse with now is myself.

BizBax: Are we in agreement that something is gravely amiss?

MetroBax: Something is not...

"Baxter, are you listening for fucksake?" My father snaps. Which effectively settles the argument. Seeing Rafe angry may rattle the foundations of my universe but having a father that swears ruptures the space-time continuum.

My dad, the dad I remember, is constant. Everytime we go out to supper he orders the same thing. You could set a clock by his bathroom schedule. So for him to go and swear like that breaks some kind of fundamental universal law. Whoever this balding middle-aged man is in front of me, it's not my dad. In an instant I make my decision. I ignore my 'family' and look across at Basson.

"Let's cut the crap," I say.

"So, are we going to let go of these delusions?" he says.

"Yes," I say. "As soon as you tell me where Ronin is."

The psychiatrist smiles ruefully. "Very good, Baxter, I'm impressed." The orderly grabs my arms and another jab sends me back into oblivion.

I wake up in another room. Leather straps dig into my wrists. I'm bound to a cold, steel chair. I look down realise it's suspended above a vat of icy water.

"What are you going to do to me?" I say as I pull against the straps.

"Psychosis is a terrible thing," Basson says.

"You would know," I spit out. "Let me go." I yank the straps but they just bite deeper into my wrists causing a thin trickle of blood to drip into the water below.

"I am deeply impressed by your ability to separate truth from falsehood," Basson says.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," I say. I crane my neck to try and see where I am. It's a small room with cold grey walls and single bulb that hangs from the ceiling.

"I've watched you for a long time, Baxter," Basson says. "And I've become more and more excited that you might be the one."

"That's right," I hiss. "We're soulmates, destined for long romantic walks on the beach and picnics at Kirstenbosch." I yank again at the straps. "Help," I begin to shout. "Someone help!"

Basson smiles and pulls a lever. The chair falls backwards and I'm plunged into the icy water. I struggle against the straps as I sink deeper into the vat. Deep fault-lines of pain open up in my skull and dark, blotchy spots begin to swirl in front of my eyes. Drowning seems a stupid way to die after everything I've been through. I struggle to think of something profound, something meaningful to think as my last thoughts.

I'm busy composing my last thoughts amongst my rapidly misfiring synapses when a worm pushes through my brain and begins gnawing at the space between my eyes, trying to get out. It's distracting and completely scuppers any attempt at a final haiku.

A brainworm begins to chew through my grey matter and I scream as it erupts through my skull. It's not a worm at all; it's an eye on a thick cartilaginous stalk. Which I can see through.

Awareness cleaves through existence. I can see. Like everywhere. With my eye I travel the facility. I see rooms filled with horror; people being experimented on, things in various stages of transformation. I see dark chambers filled with vats that hold a contaminant. The Product. My mind fractures and splits and I see its purpose. The Product is a poison that causes the Reckoning. Basson gives it to the government to put into the water supply. It's a systematic program to wipe out the Qawa. My mind spirals out of control. I see a giant, glowing insect that speaks to me. I scream and water floods my throat.

"Welcome to the Jungle," a familiar voice says. I open my eyes. My head feels like it's been kicked repeatedly. I touch my fingers to my forehead. Nothing there, thank god. I'm not sure what I would have done if I had encountered an eye on a stalk.

I look up and see that I'm in a dirty chicken wire cage. Ronin is slumped in the corner of the cage looking ragged. The one side of his face has swollen into a large bruise. I have never been so happy to see a delusion in all my life.

"How's the shoulder?" I ask guiltily. He flexes it. "Thank God I'm just a hallucination or it would really hurt," he says.

"I was scammed," I say.

"Yeah, no shit," the bounty hunter says.

"Sorry."

Ronin shrugs, "You figured it out."

I brush my still-wet fringe out of my eyes. "This is insane." I say.

"Well, we knew it wasn't going to be high tea," he says.

"Basson is creating the Reckoning," I say. "The Product is some kind of poison that stops the Qawa from reproducing."

Ronin raises his eyebrows. "That's why Basson was so interested in the disco-ball."

"And my parents are involved," I say. "Except that they're not really my parents. And this thing that I can do with my mind, seeing things, I'm getting better at it."

"Anything else?" he asks.

I think about the mindgames Basson played with me. I think about teetering on the brink of sanity. I think of his waxy, skeletal face grinning at me as I plunged into the water.

“Well, I want to rip off Basson’s head and use it as a bowling ball.”

Ronin grins. “For once you and I are in full agreement, sparky.”

We both turn at the sound of footsteps on the concrete floor. “The Siener and the Widowmaker,” Basson says as he approaches. “My Eye and my Weapon.”

“How about I cut off your Dick and shove it up your Ass?” Ronin spits out.

Basson smiles. “It must have been hard for you all these years. Denying your essential nature. Living in fear that the beast would rise in you and that you’d be unable to stop.”

“How many did you twist and warp?” Ronin says.

“Too many to count,” Basson says. “And I’ve always felt it would be egotistical to do so. But I always remember you Widowmaker.” The alchemist turns to me. “Did he tell you why I called him the Widowmaker? He killed so many men on the Border that I believe they still use the name as a warning in some villages. ‘Be kind to your husband or the Widowmaker will take him’.”

Ronin's eyes narrow and I get the sense that he's judging whether he can rip the cage open with his bare hands. “I thought I'd never get a chance to pay you back for what you did to me,” Ronin says. “But here I am and here you are”

Basson shrugs and puts his hands into the the pockets of his lab coat. “You can try Widowmaker, but I doubt you'll succeed.”

Basson reaches into his lab coat and pulls Ronin’s little leather medical case out. “Amazing to think that someone had the skill to produce a chemical that could thwart your nature,” he says. He unzip it and holding a vial between his fingers.

“Not my nature,” Ronin says. “What you made me.”

Basson smiles and drops the vial. “Same difference.”

Ronin winces as the vial shatters. Basson takes out another vial and dangles it in his fingers. “You'll have an opportunity to become your true self again, you should thank me.” Basson says dropping the vial. As it smashes on the floor Ronin pushes himself to his feet and attacks the cage, his fingers ripping at the chicken-wire.

Basson smiles taking out the third and final vial. “You have always been one of my favourite creations. Pure hatred, Widowmaker, that's what you are.” He lets the vial slip from his fingers.

Ronin screams with fury. He stands back and begins to kick the cage viciously. Basson watches calmly at the bounty hunter smashes his boot repeatedly into the cage to no avail. Ronin finally stops and stands there breathing heavily. “I’m going to kill you,” he whispers.

The alchemist smiles. “No, I don’t think you will.”

Basson turns as others enter the room. Two of the Murder drag Tomas into the room. He looks across at us he's forced to his knees. Two of the Crows more enter with the man we saw outside the Flesh Palace. He's wearing a dark velvet coat lined with fur and is carrying a cane. His face is angular and nut-brown, and a short moustache perches on his lip. Basson leaves us and walks over to the man, stopping to stoop in a low, mocking bow.

"High Chancellor Dober."

"Basson," Dober says, his voice low and coarse.

"I see you have finally reclaimed my Obambo. It proves that you are not entirely incompetent."

"The Murder are not accustomed to being used as hunting birds."

"I'm sure there are plenty of things the Murder are not accustomed to that I'm going to require of you," Basson says. "You'll do them nonetheless."

Dober strides across to stand in front of Basson. One of the other Crows steps forward and puts a hand on Dober's chest. He's bigger than Dober and has long dark hair. He puts a hand on Dober's chest and speaks to him softly in a harsh guttural language. Dober pushes the man's hand away but nods once in Basson's direction.

"The Murder will honour the agreement," the other man says.

"Ah, Gaden," Basson says. "So much more diplomatic than your leader. It surprises me that it was he who was chosen as High Chancellor." The emaciated scientist shows his crooked teeth in a patronising smile.

"I trust you'll still keep to your side of the bargain?" Dober says.

"Oh, yes," Basson says. "Whatever else happens, the Murder will survive, I assure you." He turns to where the Tomas is kneeling. His head slumped forward and his hands are resting on his lap. Basson walks over to him. "As you may have heard, your erstwhile employer, the Queen of the Nightwalkers, has met a rather unfortunate end."

"One down. One to go." Tomas says with smile.

Basson laughs. "Such a tragic narrative you embody. If your blood didn't have such remarkable properties then perhaps things could have been different."

Tomas smiles weakly. "I hope one day someone tries to discover what properties your blood has. By cutting your throat."

"You and my Widowmaker both it seems. I must say it was a pity about your family. On the whole, I find women and children less able to withstand the rigours of scientific experimentation."

Tomas tries to stand but the Crows push him back to his knees. "Just kill me," he whispers.

Basson turns to Dober. "You heard him High Chancellor."

"We want no part of this. We're not executioners," Dober says.

"A conscience, Crow?" Basson says. "How quaint."

"The Murder has made many mistakes," Dober says. "Joining you may turn out to be one of them."

"Perhaps you would prefer to join the rest of the Qawa in succumbing to the Reckoning," Basson says with a smile.

"No!" Gaden says harshly. "We will do this."

Dober turns to look at him.

"Trouble in paradise," Ronin whispers to me.

"The High Chancellor is not feeling well," Gaden says. "I'll do it."

"It must be encouraging for your people that someone is strong enough to lead them," Basson says.

"We've got to help him," I whisper to Ronin.

Ronin raises his eyebrows in surprise. "And how exactly are we going to do that?"

Gaden begins his transformation. There's a cracking of bone and sinew as his body shifts. His wings flow and extend. The terrible arms jut from his head and reach toward Tomas. The Obambo stares sadly at the approaching monstrosity. He lifts his arms in a gesture of welcoming as the giant bird drives its beak into his chest. Tomas's face contorts in pain but he stifles his scream. Gradually the light drains from him and his struggling gets weaker until he eventually he slumps on the ground, dull and lifeless. The bird caws in triumph and rips the dull corpse to pieces with its beak and claws.

Basson turns to us. "An entire species now extinct."

"Just one more reason to kill you," I say.

"My Weapon has already escaped from this cage once," Basson says to the Crows. "I don't want it happening again." He looks at us and smiles. "Take them to the Hellgarden."

"Who's a pretty birdy?" Ronin says to his captor, a large Crow with stooped shoulders and dark eyes. The man doesn't respond. A tunnel leading deeper into the facility stretches before us.

"You are, that's who," Ronin coos. "You're a pretty birdy-" He's cut short as the man slams him against the wall.

"Hiram," Dober says. Ronin begins to choke as the man presses against his windpipe. "Stop."

Ronin's face goes a deep shade of red before the Crow releases him.

"Bad birdy. No cracker for you." Ronin gasps.

"I would advise you to encourage your friend to remain silent," Dober says.

"Like he would listen," I say.

Hiram grabs Ronin by the collar and shoves him along the cold, granite corridor until we reach a large rusted door. "Welcome to the Hellgarden," Hiram says as he unlocks the door and throws us in.

I have a lot of things on my mind. There's the fake parents thing. And the 'Ronin-the-Widowmaker' thing. And also I'm finding it difficult to shake the nagging feeling that I might be a serial killer that's hallucinating all this. The forest of black and twisted trees inside the room is not helping.

The trees sway in a breeze which carries a smell of sulphur on it. I look for the edges of the room, but can't find them. The forest extends as far as the eye can see.

"What is this?"

"It's a gateway," a voice in the gloom to my left says.

I spin round to confront a familiar figure limping toward us.

"A gateway that Basson uses to communicate with his Master," Loyiso says.

The sangoma is hurt. Badly. Half his face is a bloody pulp. His suit is burnt, some of the material stuck to seeping wounds on his chest and shoulders. Ronin helps the sangoma to sit and we crouch next to him on the strange, dark, loamy ground.

"Been having a bit of rough time?" Ronin says.

Loyiso smiles. "You could say that."

"I thought the idea was that the Six were supposed to keep an eye on him," Ronin says.

"We did," he says. "For a while. But the government became too greedy. They wanted new weapons, new magick, things they could sell to Israel and China. We gave him so much leeway that we didn't realise what he was doing. By the time I found out he was working with demons it was too late."

"I thought not even sangomas used demons anymore," Ronin says.

"We don't," Loyiso says. "It's almost impossible to channel them to do anything useful. But Basson started working with the hellrealms and from what I can tell he's in way too deep." He looks down at his hands as if it's the first time he's seen them. "My power was brushed aside easily. The rest of the Six are dead. The question I keep asking myself is why I'm still alive."

"He needs us," I say quietly. "He can't control the power he has properly."

"And just how did you come to this brilliant conclusion, sparky?," he says.

"Because young Baxter is a Siener," Loyiso says.

I nod. It's the first time anyone has said it but I know that it's true. The dreams and visions have been telling me all along. I just haven't been listening.

"A Siener," Ronin says thoughtfully. "Fancy that."

Loyiso puts his hands on each of our shoulders and pushes himself to his feet with a groan. "Kobus is waiting for me. We may have found a way out of here." We walk through groves of the dark, tortured trees. There's a low murmur, like the sound of a crowd whispering. "Ignore it," Loyiso says as he limps forward. We approach a dense knot of trees and the sangoma ducks under the sharp, thorny branches and gestures for us to follow.

"Kobus," he says. "Any change?"

The half-giant is sitting cross-legged staring into a large pit in the middle of the knot of trees. The pit drops into a swirling chaos of fire and Kobus stares transfixed at it as if he were a kid watching the Cartoon Network. He turns to us and shakes his head.

"What is that thing?" I say.

Kobus looks at me as if I'm the half-witted half-giant around here.

"That is a gateway into Hell," the sangoma says.

Of course it is.

"That's our way out of here?" Ronin says. "Out of the Hellgarden and into Hell? Brilliant thinking."

"You want us to escape into Hell?" I say, my voice squeaking, "like as in *the* Hell."

Loyiso sighs and shrugs. "It's one of the hell realms, I'm not exactly sure which one. But what I do know is that Basson has another gateway on the other side of this facility. If we can make it through Hell and to that gateway..."

The bounty hunter crosses his arms and stares at the pit. It's not like him to be cautious, but I can understand. It being Hell and all. The swirling pit begins to change, turning from an angry chaos of red flames into an inky blackness.

"It's changed," Loyiso says, limping forward. "Kobus and I are going." He walks over to the half-giant and puts his hand on his large shoulder. They stand on the edge and peer over, looking more like they're about to bungee jump than leap into the flaming maw of hell. Then they step off and are gone, swept away in the blackness. The edges of the pit begin to change red again and I look at Ronin.

He scowls. "Fine, we'll jump into hell," he says. "But don't come crying to me if you end up being tortured for eternity." He grabs my arm and we stand teetering on the edge. And then we jump.

At first it's misty, like a dense fog bank that's rolled in from the sea. Gradually the mist begins to part like theatre curtains to reveal a man quietly packing his pipe. He's huge and gangly. An old wide-brimmed hat perches on top of his thick green creeper-like hair which winds and curls its way down to the floor. A mushroom grows from his forehead like a bulbous third eye and his shaggy, decomposing hands are covered in moss and lichen.

He looks up at me and his eyes are serene and terrible. "Radial foguzzy serenth" he says, his voice warbling as he speaks, slow as erosion and warm and loamy as decaying plant matter, and it feels like a radio is being tuned in my cerebral cortex. He shakes his ancient head and dirt falls to the floor. "I haven't spoken in a hundred and fifty years," he says finally, revealing a black tongue that covered with toadstools.

"Are you...the devil?" I say in awe.

At that he laughs, a deep rumbling boom that shakes my bones. "Would that I was, young one," he says. "Then perhaps I wouldn't be in this predicament."

I look around. We're on a flat circular disk that is floating in a black sea of nothingness. "So who are you?" I say.

He smiles and lights his pipe. "I am Kaggen the Mantis who fought once fought the Chaos and won. I have a hundred names to each of the people of South Africa who once knew me. To the /Xam, the Nguni, the Swazi I am all but forgotten. But I don't need to tell you, Siener. You remember me."

I look at him and I do remember. Kaggen the Mantis God. I remember sitting in a cave in the Kalahari and meeting him. That was when I was an old man. Wait, what?

"The power of the Sieners is carried in the blood," the Mantis God says. "It can skip many generations but it never disappears. When a Siener comes into his power he remembers the lives of all those of power that went before him."

And I am the lucky Lotto winner, it seems.

"Memory?" I say. "Can't I rather fly or shoot fireballs?"

The ancient eyes drill into me and I regret saying anything. "I mean, those would be more useful," I mumble.

"Your power, Siener," Kaggen says. "May kill every living thing."

He waves his hand and the smoke from his pipe begins to rise and dance in the air. The smoke is everywhere, weaving itself together like the threads of a huge tapestry. Whole worlds form in the air; citiscapes of huge buildings with spires and minarets dissolve into volcanoes erupting on islands to destroy ancient civilizations. I see intelligent life destroyed by robot uprisings on distant worlds.

"When Africa was at the height of her powers, African metallurgists created a machine. A machine built in my image; the image of the mantis. This mechanical mantis was a reality machine that could rend holes in matter and dig into other dimensions. They called it Ik Kaggen Ah, the truth about praying mantis. With it they destroyed themselves." In the smoke I see visions of an apocalypse. African villages incinerated by the atomic power of Ik Kaggen Ah.

"Many are seeking it. The Crows seek it to free themselves from the curse I punished them with. The alchemist seeks it for more power but he does not understand the what he is dealing with. It will only answer to those who know its truth but with enough energy he may be able to bend it to his will. You must destroy it."

"Listen," I say. "I was just looking for my girlfriend. She turned out to be a total bitch, so I think I'm just going to..."

Kaggen raises his hand again and I See. I See dimensions collapsing in on themselves. My Sight rips into matter. I'm on the top of Table Mountain and then I'm soaring. I am the South East wind, the Cape Doctor, whipping mercilessly through the city. Every tree, every blade of grass, every molecule in existence is an extension of my awareness. I swirl above the city screaming with the agony and the ecstasy of it all. I scatter myself into a million different pieces and blow through the minds of the tiny ant-like people that are walking on the streets. I feel their coarse desires, their bright thoughts, their sticky emotions. I draw myself together into a singular thought and scream. Hear that in your third eye, Cape Town.

"Baxter!"

I open my eyes and try to focus them. "Where am I?" I groan.

"In Hell," the voice replies. My vision clears and I see Ronin, Loyiso and Kobus crouching over me.

"We've got to move," Loyiso hisses. "We're fresh meat in Hell and there's nothing demons like more than fresh meat." He looks around nervously. A wave of heat passes over us and my head begins to throb.

Ronin helps me to my feet and I stand unsteadily and look around. We're on the side of rocky mountainside. There's an ugly, yellow gash of a valley below us that stretches toward a distant red horizon. In the distance I can see chain-gangs of people chipping away at the dark, red rock of the mountain. Next to them loom large, horned shapes.

"Demons," Loyiso spits. "Although those are just footsoldiers. We need to get out of the open, fast."

Ronin puts his arm around me and helps me to walk as jog across the rock face and into a shallow gully that puts us out of view of the chain-gangs. Several large black, bug-like creatures hiss at us from the ragged stone walls.

"Lovely place," Ronin says as a scorpion the size of a cat scabbles up one of the gully walls. "Any idea where we are?"

"Looks like Cthnon. It's one of the economic centres of the Hellrealm. Those chain-gangs were digging for quartz to supply its biggest export."

"Torture?" I guess.

Loyiso shakes his head. "Electronics. They trade with the other hellrealms and any other worlds they have access to. Eternal damnation provides a pretty solid workforce."

"So you think Basson is doing all of this so he can set up a sweet home-entertainment system?" I say

"I don't know why Basson created gateways to Cthnon," he replies. "But knowing where we are helps us big-time. We've got a cover now; we're going to be merchants."

Golga, the capital city of Cthnon, is a shithole. Slums stretch out for miles around it, consisting of shacks that house the human slaves that work in the mines and sweatshops of the hellcity. In that way it's not that much different from Cape Town. What are different are the demon overlords.

Demons are the big kahunas here. They come in many different shapes and sizes; big, small, horned, many-legged, winged, spiked and scaled. The common denominator is their hatred of humans and their love of cruelty. Humans lie impaled on poles like fleshy kebabs left to fester in the sun. They groan and thrash and wail, but they don't die. We pass a group of small, winged imps peeling the skin off a woman with their claws. I avert my eyes but Loyiso kicks me with the point of his shoe.

"Keep your face passive," he whispers. "Make it look like you've seen it thousands of times before."

We're challenged by a huge demon with the head of a horse but when it sees that we lack the distinctive red star brand on our forehead that mark the condemned, it waves us past.

We eventually make it into the city proper, which is a complex maze of roads and alleyways lined with shops selling electronic goods. We're assailed by heat and noise on all sides. Merchants haggle with each other and shop-keepers scream at passersby.

Underneath a row of spikes topped with human heads that wail and gnash their teeth, we pass a small flying monkey that's chained to the outside of a shop. It carries a billboard that says "Bloodthirsty AI's Electronics."

Bloodthirsty AI is a demon with an afro of thorns and a huge belly. He grins at us. "TVs, MP3 players, gentlemen? Bloodthirsty AI has it all." Loyiso makes a show of looking over the goods and I find myself looking at an array of cellphones.

"A little young to be a merchant," a smooth voice says and I look up to see a man with a green faux hawk hairstyle grinning at me. He wears a vest with a flaming eagle on it and his arms are tattooed with diving swallows and ships anchors. It takes me a second to notice the horns that jut from his forehead like little black ice-cream cones. He's not a man at all.

"My dad's in the business," I murmur. "I'm just trying to learn the trade."

The demon smiles gleefully at me. "Bullshit."

I feel the breath catch in my throat. The demon seems to enjoy my discomfit. Loyiso appears at my shoulder grinning like a used-car salesman.

"See anything good?" he says to me.

"You're not merchants," the demon says to both of us. "You're intruders. All of you."

Ronin and Kobus join us. "Get ready to run," the bounty hunter says.

"Bloodthirsty AI waddles over. Is there a problem here, Lord Leonard?"

"No, no problem," the faux-hawked demon says. "I've just recognised old friends and have invited them back to my apartments for refreshment." He extends his arm to usher us all from the shop.

Bloodthirsty AI looks to us and then back to the demon. "Very well, my Lord," he says.

"Move," Leonard hisses under his breath. "Try anything and I'll have a dozen screaming Nargs doing things to you that you didn't think were possible."

I don't know what a Narg is, but I don't like the sound of it. We file out of the shop and Leonard leads us through the dirty streets of Golga, his smile fixed on his face.

Lord Leonard's apartments are part of quasi-Tuscan complex in the centre of Golga. The cheery little demon waves to a seven-armed monstrosity in a guard tower and leads us through the neatly-cut rolling lawns. Except for the blood-stained torture pit that nestles next to a Parisian style cafe, this complex could have been in any well-off Capetonian suburb.

"This way, please," the demon lord says, his smile never leaving his face. He leads us up a winding flight of stairs and then into a minimalist open-plan apartment.

"Can I get you anything?" the chirpy demon says. "Tea, coffee, something stronger? Cthnon has a whiskey that will blow your head off." He sees me looking at the bloody, spiked swords, maces and spears that hang in cases on the wall. "Not literally, of course."

"How about we just get to the point?" Loyiso says.

"Of course, of course, sangoma" Leonard says. "Business first."

Loyiso's one good eye narrows. "How do you know who I am?"

Leonard sits down on a long, beige couch and leans back. "Perhaps I should introduce myself first. I'm Leonard, Entertainment Director of Golga."

"Hell has an Entertainment Director?" Ronin asks.

"Of course," Leonard says. "Demons get unruly if they're not sufficiently entertained. The last thing T'laal wants is an uprising. Although, I like to think of myself as less in the entertainment and more in the information trade."

The demon turns head and focuses his little, red eyes on me. "For instance I know that T'laal is communicating your alchemist on Earth."

"Who is T'laal?" I say.

"T'laal. Mayor of Golga, leader of Lucifer's Host and a wholly unlikable character. Even for a demon."

Ronin sits down on the beige couch opposite Leonard. "Why?" he says. "What's Basson got that he wants?"

Leonard smiles. "At least you have a clear idea of how the demon psyche works." The demon smiles widely and I see that he has two rows of teeth. "T'laal wants Kaggen," he says and then snaps his teeth together sharply as if to punctuate the point.

"The Mantis God?" Loyiso says.

The demon stands up quickly and begins pacing up and down the tiled apartment floor. "You may have heard this before in myth, but I'm going to tell you the reality of it. Back in the day when the Earth was young and still suckling at the universal teat there was a war in Heaven. You may have heard of it as a rebellion of angels but in reality it was a guerilla army fighting against the despotic feudalism of the Gods."

"You would say that, demon," Loyiso says.

Leonard shrugs. "You say terrorist, I say freedom fighter. But that's beside the point. Heaven won and it was the Mantis God Kaggen who flung the leader of the rebellion, T'laal, into the deepest, darkest corner of the universe. Contrary to popular belief Lucifer has always been more an administrator than a fighter and with T'laal gone the rebellion crumbled and we were forced to make our home on Cthnon." He smiles and shakes his head sadly. "Unfortunately I backed a losing side. T'laal eventually found his way out of his exile and to Cthnon. By that stage Lucifer was in charge and wasn't willing to give up power but T'laal was too much of a troublemaker just to ignore. So Lucifer made him Mayor of Golga."

He looks out the window over the dirty, bloody city and sighs. "T'laal was champing at the bit for a chance to get at Kaggen and the rest of the gods but Lucifer kept him on a tight leash. Even if he could find a way to get his armies off Cthnon, he was in no mood to get his ass kicked by the heavenly host again."

"Get to the point, demon," Ronin says. "What does Basson have to do with all of this?"

Leonard raises an eyebrow and for a moment I see the demonic part of him in his eyes, a dark, churning rage that is barely contained. I realise that Leonard is far more than just Golga's resident playboy. Then, just as quickly, it disappears and the demon is all smiles again. "I believe Basson has promised T'laal a shot at the Mantis God."

"Impossible," Loyiso says. "Basson doesn't have that kind of power."

"You also said you didn't think he had the power to destroy the Six," Ronin says dryly.

"Fuck you, Ronin," Loyiso says softly.

"And what about you, demon?" Ronin says, turning away from Loyiso. "What do you stand to gain from all of this?"

Leonard smiles. "I am a lover not a fighter, bounty hunter and as much as I stand in solidarity with my demon brethren, I do not relish a universe where T'laal is free to roam and do as he pleases."

"How noble of you," Ronin says.

"Well there is one other thing," the demon says. "As you perhaps know, we demons cannot enter the earthly plane without being invited by a human. So all I ask is that take me with you. For all her visceral pleasures, Cthnon has become a cage for an explorer such as myself." He spreads his arms wide and looks up to the ceiling. "I long to see new vistas and experience new cultures. Maybe I'll even blog about a demon's adventures in the human world-"

"Out of the question," Loyiso says. "There's no way I'm inviting one of the damned into our world."

The demon's face contorts and I see the darkness in his eyes again. "Well, then I'm sure a star brand would look very fetching on your forehead," he hisses.

"Loyiso," Ronin says. "You mind stepping into my office over here for a chat?"

The sangoma scowls and then walks over to stand next to him.

"You too, sparky," Ronin says.

I walk over to join them.

"What are you doing?" Ronin whispers. "That demon could have us roasting over an open fire in about ten seconds if we piss him off. There's no way we're going to find the other gateway without him."

"So you're OK with inviting a demon lord into our world?" Loyiso hisses back.

Ronin shrugs. "Can't be any worse than we've got already."

Loyiso scowls. "Fine," he whispers. "But when I need to hunt him down to send him back you're helping me free of charge."

"Deal," the bounty hunter says with a grin. "If we live long enough for that to happen, it'll be my pleasure."

We turn as a group to confront the demon who is watching us eagerly. "OK, demon," Loyiso says with a sigh. "But don't expect me to show you around when we get there."

We scan the empty the laboratory. Bottles, vials and other equipment lie upturned. It looks like Basson's scientists have beaten a hasty retreat.

Leonard had lead us through the backstreets of Golga, jovially chatting and trading jibes with demons he met in the street. We'd kept a low-profile, staying close to him and not speaking. The demon lord seemed excited as he had pranced through the streets ahead of us. "Now that I'm leaving, I'm starting to think I'll miss Golga," he had said, looking wistfully at the giant spires where lanky, snake-like demons were taking turns to throw humans onto the stones below.

Leonard had led us to a little confectionery shop on the outskirts of the city. "Ah, Lord Leonard," the little baker demon said with a broad smile, "I have some lovely macarons, made fresh this morning."

"Thank you Harris, but we're after communication not confection."

Harris the baker's smile had dropped at that. "That is Lord T'laal's business."

"Well perhaps Lord T'laal would be interested to know about your own communications to other realms," Leonard had said.

The baker had muttered and wrung his hands but had eventually consented to allow us access to the portal. Kobus had gone first and then Ronin, leaving me, Leonard and Loyiso standing at the swirling pit. The demon had put a hand on my shoulder and I felt a deep fear fill me. "You go through and invite me, shaman," the demon had said. "Then the boy and I will come through together."

Loyiso had stared at us for a long while and for a couple of seconds I thought he was going to leave me stranded in Hell. But then he had gone through and I had seen his face in the swirling pit looking back up at us. "Come through, demon," he had said, "I invite you to Earth."

"Well since you asked so nicely," Leonard had said with a grin

Which had left us here in Basson's lab. Leonard looks around, rubbing the small black point of his horns contemplatively. "Well thank you all for your companionship," he says breezily. "But I have a world to explore." With a shriek like sound of metal shearing he disappears.

Loyiso utters a string of Xhosa curses. "Invite a demon into our world," he mutters. "I must have been insane."

We begin to move through the facility slowly and carefully, anxious that'll we'll bump into one of the Crows. But we don't. We don't bump into anyone. The facility seems deserted.

We split up to check the rest of the building and Ronin and I search the room where we were held captive. The bounty hunter almost squeals with joy when he sees Warchild hanging up from a rack on the wall. "Daddy's home, baby," he says as he retrieves the weapon and showers her with kisses. I avert my eyes from this inappropriately intimate scene between man and shotgun.

We're leaving the room as Kobus and Loyiso find us. "Pat?" Ronin says hopefully but Loyiso shakes his head again. "No sign of her. The place is empty."

Ronin swears. "So what now?"

Loyiso touches the side of his battered face. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I think I need a first aid kit."

“Mom?” I say into the phone. We’re sitting around the table in the kitchen of the Haven. Kobus dabs Loyiso’s face with a cloth while the bounty hunter sits on a chair in the corner and drinks cheap whiskey from the bottle.

“Baxter! How’s camp?” my mother says.

“Great, thanks. We went canoeing today,” I say cheerfully.

It’s difficult to talk to her. I saw her in the lab with Basson. Not someone who looked a little like her; her. Loyiso says it was probably a shapeshifter of some kind.

“Mom, you didn’t come to visit me at a hospital recently did you?” I say nonchalantly.

“What?” she says concerned. “Did something happen Baxter?”

“No, no,” I say. “I’m fine. I was just wondering whether anything unusual has happened recently,” I say.

“You mean other than this conversation?”

“No, I mean, don’t worry, never mind,” I say. “Just normal teenage stuff. Hormones and all that.”

“And Esme,” my mother says, “I understand Baxter, this is a difficult time for you.”

I want to laugh. Difficult doesn’t quite cut it as a description of my week. I want to tell my Mom about finding Esme, but it’ll probably make things more difficult. She’d call the cops and Mrs. Van der Westhuizen and I might be forced to come back ‘from camp.’ Better to wait until this was all over at which point I’d either be forced to deal with Esme dumping me or I’d be dead. At this stage I’m not sure which one I’d prefer.

“Baxter, are you OK?” my mom says.

“Yep, I’m great, I’ll see you soon,” I say. “Oh and I love you.” My mother’s stuttering surprise convinces me that it’s the real her.

Loyiso inhales sharply as Kobus winds a bandage around his head.

“Whersh your magick now, sangoma?” Ronin slurs. The whisky bottle is half-full, or half empty, depending on what your views on crazy, drunk, biologically-weaponised bounty hunters are.

Loyiso ignores him so the bounty hunter begins to sing loudly and out-of-tune.

“We can’t do anything tonight,” the sangoma says with a sigh. “We all better get some sleep.”

Kobus and I help Ronin up the stairs and into the attic where Tomas had slept. I look guiltily at the bed. I know there was nothing we could have done for the glowing man but I still feel bad. He didn’t deserve that.

Ronin grunts and opens his eyes. “Heishhparky,” he says.

“You OK?” I ask.

“You gonna help me find Pat, right sparky?” Ronin says. “You gonna use that supersight of yours, right?” He smiles and tries to give me a hug. He smells of whisky and blood so I push him away. He flops back down onto the bed, rolls into the foetal position and begins to snore as I make my way down the stairs.

University of Cape Town

12. Guns, Porn & Steel

The huge chicken blood star is starting to turn black as the blood dries. Loyiso continues to chant in Xhosa as he walks the perimeter of the star, his bare feet leaving bloody footprints as he walks.

Kobus has lugged in a huge rock into the Haven barn from outside and placed it in the centre of the star. The half-giant looks at me and grins stupidly. I look away. I'm not sure I want to do this.

"You can control it," Loyiso had said. "You just need practice."

"It's not that easy," I'd said. The truth is it sucks. My Seeing is not a superpower at all. It's a bad acid trip. "It's not like playing the guitar. I can't just sit in my room and practice until I can play Stairway to Heaven."

"Maybe not," Loyiso had replied. "But I can help you to direct it."

Ronin is sitting against the side of the barn and polishing Warchild with a dirty cloth. As I walk over and sit next to him, he pulls a hipflask from under his trench-coat and takes a swig. His face is sweating.

"You feeling OK?" I ask.

"There's no way for me to get more meds," he says slowly.

I grab the hipflask from his hand. "It looks like we've all got our issues, then," I say as the drink burns my throat again.

"If the Widomaker appears you've got it kill it," he says. "You won't be able to subdue me and I'll kill you all if I have the chance. Promise me."

"I'm not sure if.."

"Promise me."

I look at him. "OK, I promise."

The sangoma approaches us. His hands and feet are stained with blood but his eyes are bright and intense.

"Magick," Ronin says with disgust. "It's a drug and sangomas are the biggest junkies."

I push myself to my feet and Loyiso leads me to the centre of the star and helps me to stand on the big rock.

"Once it starts you have to see it through," the sangoma says. "There's no pause button." He walks back to the edge of the star. He strips off the bright tie-dyed t-shirt he took from Pat's cupboard to replace his burnt suit.

Stands with his arms outstretched, sweat gleaming on his torso he calls to Kobus. The half-giant carries a squawking chicken toward him. The little brown bird struggles in his meaty hands. Loyiso nods once and the Kobus snaps his neck and then raises it to his mouth and bites a hole in its throat.

Blood drips from it as the half-giant gives it to Loyiso. The sangoma holds the bird above him and splashes the blood onto his body. I wrinkle my nose. Whatever else magick is, it sure ain't pretty.

Loyiso starts to chant and I feel the throbbing in my forehead again. It's like the sub-woofer of migraines; low, deep and rumbling. The throbbing becomes more intense and I brace myself for the eye-stalk to burst through my forehead again. When it does I'm ready for it. But that doesn't help at all.

The eye-stalk writhes and whips like a garden hose left on the floor of my head. My brain is flooded with light and I reach my hand out blindly, desperately needing something to grab on to. Then I feel Loyiso. The sangomas power is like a leopard that stalks across the waterfall of light, grabs me by the scruff of the neck and drags me back to lucidity.

I See. I See Cape Town burning in a towering nuclear inferno. I see him. T'laal. The eight-armed, iron-tentacled dictator of this world and all worlds beyond this one. If we don't stop him. If *I* don't stop him.

I see dark warship cresting black waves. A huge, swirling whirlpool next to it seems to suck matter and life into it like a black hole. On the deck is a huge iron cross and on the cross a bird, its wings stretched and impaled. It turns its head weakly toward me. It's Dober.

"Help me," he croaks.

I pull away from him and my sight spins wildly. I'm heading toward the whirlpool, the blackness replacing the light. Everything is disappearing, draining from me. I scream but the leopard is with me again and pulling me away from the black pit. Its teeth dig into my neck and I begin to feel blood pour down my shoulders. I scream again and this time don't stop until everything disappears.

Ronin and Loyiso are pouring over a map of South Africa that's spread across the table and Kobus is jabbing at a colouring-in book with a fistful of crayons.

"The conquering hero returns," Ronin says with a grin. He claps me on the shoulder as I sit down. "How you feeling, sparky?"

"Like I've just been skull-fucked by a demon," I say with a grimace. Ronin laughs and slaps the table.

"How long have I been out?" I say rubbing my eyes.

"About a day," Ronin replies.

"So where do we stand?" Loyiso says. "Did you see anything?"

I look down at the map and my eyes trace the meandering line of the east coast of South Africa.

"There," I say putting my finger down in the Indian Ocean, close to East London. "It's around there."

"On a ship?" Ronin says.

I nod.

"Bingo bango," the bounty hunter says, clapping his hands together. "Let's go get Pat."

"We need weapons," Loyiso says quickly, "I need to preserve my magick for Basson and T'laal."

"Don't you have friends in the military?" Ronin says.

Loyiso shakes his head. "Basson couldn't have done this to the Six without help from the military. We can't risk it."

"I know someone," I say.

They turn to look at me. "We're also going to need to make fire too, household solvents, petrol, things to make Molotov cocktails." Ronin says.

"It happens I know just the guy," I say with a smile.

"Talk to me, brother," Kyle says. "Did you find her?"

"Yeah I found her," I say into the phone.

"And..." he says.

"She wasn't kidnapped," I say. "She ran away from home. Or maybe just away from me."

"Shit," Kyle says, "That sucks. Women are nothing but trouble."

I have to laugh at that. Kyle has never really had a girlfriend. His knowledge of females is limited to what he's seen in the Spider's products.

"I need to call a meeting," I say, changing the subject. Now is not the time to pick at the Esme scab.

"Cool. Where?"

"Central. I need to speak to Anwar."

"OK," Kyle says dubiously. "I've got a problem on this side. Rafe won't leave me alone. He's threatened to tell your folks if I don't take him everywhere with me."

"Goddamn it," I say. "Can't you convince him to stay at home?"

"That's a big negativo," Kyle says, "He's here with me now and he's locked on target"

I sigh. "I guess you're going to have to bring him with you."

"I can't say that I wasn't a little surprised by your phone call," Anwar says. He's alone in the enclave, sprawled on the couch and watching us curiously.

"You taken by surprise? That must be a first."

Anwar nods toward Ronin, Loyiso and Kobus. "The rest of your crew of degenerates I know. Who are they?" He nods to Ronin. That one looks like a homeless mental patient."

"Come say that over here," Ronin growls.

"You better tell your friend to plays by my rules," Anwar says dangerously.

"I apologise," I say. "Things have been a little tense lately."

"Tense," Anwar muses. "Is that why the Spider are arming themselves? I thought you were pacifists."

"This has nothing to do with Westridge."

"Hmm, so you say but you can understand how I might be wary of arming a competing faction with my own weapons."

"I can guarantee that none of the weapons will ever be used against the NTK."

Anwar smiles. "Well, do tell me about this deal you had in mind."

"A cut of porn profits," I say. "Thirty percent of everything. That's including our new deal with Driekie Venter."

Anwar laughs. "Do you think I'm going to take scraps from your table, Baxter? I want it all. You give me the infrastructure and contacts to control the porn at Westridge and convince Driekie Venter to deal with me, and me only. Then you can have as many guns as you can carry. You relinquish it all, Zevcenko, or no dice."

"I need to discuss it with The Spider," I say.

Anwar shrugs. "Go ahead."

I retreat into a corner with my friends. Rafe follows us and hangs around on the edge of the circle we've formed. "Last time I checked you weren't a member of the Spider," I say to him.

He stares at me.

"Why the hell did you come along anyway?"

He shrugs once.

"Just don't interrupt us OK?" I say, which, to be honest, is highly unlikely.

I look at the faces of my friends. "We've worked hard to make the Spider what it is," I say. "Giving it away just like that is not something I would ever do. I'm doing this for someone I hardly even know, which is total bullshit." I rub my eyes with the backs of my hands. "But things have changed for me and I need to do this. I don't know why but I need to."

"Give it to him," Kyle says without hesitation. Ntombazana nods. The Inhalant Kid takes a moment and then nods too.

"You don't need to do this," I say.

"You created The Spider," Kyle says. "And you gave me a place in it. That's was always more important than business for me. Selling porn was ruining it for me anyway."

The Inhalant Kid nods. "I'll do whatever you guys do. You're the only people that don't think I'm weird."

"Ha, you are weird," Ntombi says, punching him on the arm.

"Give him the porn, Baxter," Kyle says.

I turn and nod once to Anwar. He smiles and gets up to key in a pin on the keypad on the wall. There's the sound of a lock clicking. He walks over and pulls one of the Masonic banners off the wall to reveal a huge safe.

"Combat shotguns, assault rifles, Glocks," Anwar says. "A gun for every occasion." If I any doubt about who would win should the Sprawlpcalypse happen, it was instantly quashed.

"A flamethrower," Ronin says gleefully, picking it up and strapping the twin tanks of fuel to his back.

Anwar smiles contemptuously at me. "The death of The Spider and the end of an era at Westridge."

I shrug. "At least I'll have time to join the choir."

"You really went to Hell?" Ntombi asks. We've piled our load of weapons and the flammables the Inhalant Kid brought for us into the back of Pat's VW.

"Well just one of them," I say. "Apparently there are several."

I look at my friends in the rearview mirror. They all look suitably impressed, except for Rafe who is staring disinterestedly out of the window.

"We've got the weapons. The sooner we leave the better," Ronin says as he climbs into the driver's seat. "The sooner we leave the better."

"I'm coming with you," Kyle says from the back."

"There's no way I'm having the computer geek club coming to raid a ship with us," Ronin says.

"Hey, I'm coming too," Ntombazana says. "You trying to stop me, that's racial discrimination."

"Me too," the Inhalant Kid pipes up.

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear," Ronin says. "You're not coming with us."

"Guess you don't want the schematic of the Russian *Titan* destroyer then," Kyle says holding up his phone. "From what Bax described that's what you're attacking."

"How about I crush your testicles and take your phone from you?" Ronin says.

Rafe taps me on the shoulder. I turn around. He scribbles something on a notepad and holds it in front of my face. "Take me with you or I'll tell mom," it says.

"Oh for fucksake, Rafe," I sigh. "How about they come with us until we find a boat?" I say. "They can take the bus back to Cape Town."

"If they get killed, I'm not being held responsible," Ronin says.

"When were you ever responsible?"

"True," he mutters.

I phone my mother to let her know that Rafe will be spending the weekend with me at Kyle's house.

"Are you sure you don't want to come home first?" she says, that edge of concern creeping into her voice again. "You've just got home from camp, you'd probably like a night in your own bed, wouldn't you?"

I do the best I can to deal with her gently. If the worst comes to the worst I can pull the angry teen card, but I'd prefer not to. Eventually she relents. "I'll make you favourite when you get back," she says. I might be dead by then but if not, chicken curry sounds like a good way to celebrate.

"Are you sure Maureen doesn't mind Rafe staying too?" she says. "Maybe I should give her a call to make sure."

"OK," I say. "Phone her and ask her if it's OK that my mentally-retarded brother can stay. I thought it would be nice if I included him, but maybe it's not such a good idea."

"No, no, you're right," she says quickly. "I don't want to feel like I'm babying him."

Kyle, Ntombi and the Kid make similar calls to their parentbots and then we're good to go. Truth be told a bright yellow VW doesn't really make one feel very badass, but the gym bags filled with semi-automatic weapons and incendiaries help cancel out the hippie effect. I swap places with Loysio and squeeze in next to Kyle. The half-giant crams himself, glances shyly at Ntombi and then slams the door shut. Roadtrip!

I'm an old man staring at a cave wall. My grey cloak is itchy and I have to force myself from scratching at the nape of my neck. My throat is dry. This is a normal state of affairs.

I am a Siener. One of an ancient Brotherhood that has ties to Mystery schools that go back thousands of years. There are sorcerers and shaman in this world who can See. Yet where they only scratch the surface of the lens with their spells and charms, we become the lens. We are the Sight.

It hasn't saved us from the English. Still they come and we have been hunted down and murdered. Some of my brothers believe that this is payment for our own crimes. Others believe it is because some of our Order have embraced the African Gods and that our own God is angry.

I know it is fate. We are destined for something that is yet to be revealed. I seek that revelation.

I start the ritual. I strip the cloak from my shoulders and lie naked on the sandy floor. I reach across, my fingers scrabbling for the calabash that has been my only companion. I grab it gently and open it, allowing the many mantises that I have collected to crawl out onto my body. I look down. Some of them are small, others large. Some are the dusty colour of the desert and some are the deep brown of dried leaves. Only one is green, a large majestic creature, her praying hands held in front of her. She regards me with solemn eyes. I reach down and find my knife, the large hunting knife that I took from the dead body of a Boer commando that had been shot by the redcoats.

I grip it in my right hand and then quickly reach across and slice my left wrist. Blood bubbles from the wound. Changing hands I slice my right wrist and then let the knife slide from my fingers. I keep saying the words until the cave shimmers and disappears and I am no longer an old man but a young one sleeping in a yellow vehicle that bumps up and down on a dark road.

"This is your destiny," says the Mantis.

I wake up with a gasp. It's night outside and the van is driving through unfamiliar terrain. I look over the seat in front and see the sangoma at the wheel and Ronin lounging in the passenger seat, his boots on dash and smoking a cigarette.

"Where are we?" I say.

"Close," he murmurs.

We pass through the streets of a small seaside town. It's mostly deserted as we coast down the high street and toward the beachfront. Ronin points into the darkness and Loyiso steers the van down a thin road. In front of us a lopsided circus tent is sprawled on the dry grass that borders the beach.

"Magical delites: You won't beleef your eyes" I read from a sign.

Ronin points to a shifty-looking tavern on the beachfront. A blinking pink neon light on its roof shows a picture of a large Manta Ray.

"Stay here," Ronin says, "It's best if I go in alone." He climbs out and stalks off toward the tavern.

The rest of the Spider is still sleeping but Rafe is wide awake. He looks at me, grins and then opens the van's sliding door and jogs off after Ronin.

"What the hell is he doing?" Loyiso hisses, opening his door.

"Wait," I say. "He's an idiot. I'll go get him, he won't listen to anybody else." I doubt he'll listen to me either but I don't tell him that.

I climb out of the VW and sprint toward where Rafe has disappeared through the swinging doors of the tavern. I get to the doors and push them open.

The tavern is smoky and dirty. Small groups of circus people and sailors cluster around jugs of beer and stare up at a TV that flickers in the corner. They scowl at me as I head toward the bar.

Rafe is sitting next to Ronin with a grin on his face.

"Sorry," I say as I reach them.

Ronin shrugs and takes a sip of his beer. "Too late now," he says in a low voice. "Sailor at 4' o'clock," he says in a low voice. "Has a gun under the table pointed at us."

I turn to look and Ronin clamps a hand on my shoulder. "That doesn't mean look at him, asshole," he hisses.

"So why did you tell me?" I say.

"I just wanted you to know the situation we're in," he whispers.

"But this person you're meeting, it's a friend right?" I say.

"Not exactly," he says. "It's an ex-girlfriend."

"You've brought us here to meet an ex? Are you insane?"

"Common she must have forgiven me by now." He turns on his barstool to face the rest of the punters.

"We're looking for Captain Sue Severance," he announces in a loud voice.

"Good for you," a clown mumbles into his drink.

"Never heard of her," an old sailor says. "No Captain of that name around these parts."

"Well maybe one of you can help us then," Ronin says. "We're looking for a ship."

"Try the marina," the old sailor says.

"No, this is a military ship," Ronin says. "A destroyer, painted all black."

The sailors laugh. "The Dark Lady? She's a myth,"

"That's not what we've heard," Ronin says.

"Well then you heard wrong," the sailor says. "So why don't you take your little friends and get out of our pub?"

"No need to get aggressive, friend," Ronin says. "We were just asking."

The sailor stands up and downs his ale. He has short-cropped hair and is large and muscular "Perhaps you didn't hear me," he says approaching us.

"What you gonna do, Popeye?" Ronin says.

The sailor swings. Ronin ducks under the punch and grabs the barstool, turning it and shoving it into the sailor's crotch. He doubles over and the bounty hunter drives a knee into his face. The sailor drops, blood streaming from his nose.

Ronin pulls Warchild from under his coat and shoves her into his neck. "Now," the bounty hunter says. "For the slow and hard of hearing, I repeat: we're looking for Sue Severance."

"A bit heavily armed for tourists," a husky voice says. We turn to see a woman standing at the centre of group of heavily-armed sailors. They aim their assault rifles at us.

The woman is black with long dreadlocks tied back by a bright scarf. She is about forty years old, beautiful, but with a jagged scar that crosses her face. Her nose is slightly misshapen, like it has been broken more than once. She's wearing a black vest and has a large tattoo of an anchor on her freckled chest which draws my gaze downward.

“What you looking at, boy?” she rasps.. She cups a breast in each hand and jiggles them up and down. “This one's called Port and this one's called Starboard, where would you like like to unload your cargo first?”

I avert my eyes and mumble.

She snorts. “That's the problem with men, all talk, no action.”

“Put your guns down, boys,” the woman says. “I know these pieces of dickcheese.” She looks at Ronin menacingly. “Well, one of them at least.” She waves us over into the back room.

Captain Severance sits down at a poker table with a skeletal old sailor. His few curvy strands of grey hair hang down the sides of his head like seaweed. He slurps at a huge tankard of beer.

"Jackson Ronin," Severance says, shaking her head. "The last time I saw you, you were declaring your undying life for me."

Ronin smiles. "Well I'm not dead am I?"

Severance returns the smile. "Not yet."

"You're looking good," Ronin says.

"Well, you look like shit," Severance says. She's right. Ronin doesn't look well. Since he's stopped injecting, he's slowly deteriorated. His face is pallid and sweaty and his left eye has developed a slight twitch.

"The diabetes is it? I hope it doesn't kill you before I do," Severance says. She looks at me. “Who are your friends?”

“Baxter Zevcenko. This is my brother Rafe.”

"Kids are the only ones that will hang out with you these days?" she says.

“We need your help,” I say.

“That much I know or Ronin definitely wouldn't be here. With what?”

"A friend of mine is being held on that black destroyer," Ronin says, "I need to get her back."

"A friend?" Severance says, arching an eyebrow. "What kind of friend?"

“They've got Pat,” he says.

“Jesus,” Severance says and takes a gulp of her ale. “Who's got her?”

“Basson.”

“A monster with a ponytail,” Severance says bitterly. “I was hoping I would never hear that name again.”

“I need you, Sue,” Ronin says.

She leans back and puts her boots up onto the table. “I needed you once and where were you?”

“Come, sparky,” Ronin says getting up. “We’re done here.”

“I didn't say I wouldn't help you,” Severance says. “I like Pat but I’m not willing to risk my ship for her. The milk of human kindness does not flow from my teats.”

“What do you want?”

Severance reaches beneath the table and pulls two long-barrelled silver pistols from beneath it. I wonder if she's had them pointed at us this whole time. She places them on the table.

“Jesus and Judas,” Ronin says.

Severance smiles. “My salvation and my downfall.”

Great, that's all we need. Another psycho with a weapons-fetish.

“Beautiful pieces,” Ronin says.

“But an incomplete set,” Severance replies. “They have a larger brother that I would love to own.”

Ronin grimaces as if the very thought he's having is giving him physical pain. “Forget it,” he says. “Baresh gave you Jesus and Judas and me Warchild.”

She shrugs. “It’s your choice.”

Ronin clasps his hands together like he's praying. He holds them there for a couple of seconds and then nods. “She's yours,” the bounty hunter says. “After I've used her to rescue Pat.”

‘And anything else we find on that ship,” Severance says.

“Fine, I'm not going to stop you.”

Severance spits on her hand and holds it out. Ronin spits on his and takes it. We've got a ride.

We wait until the sun goes down before moving out. The sailors grudgingly help us to pile our gear into Severance’s boat, a solid-looking fishing trawler called the Salt Dragon. Once inside it becomes apparent that the vessel is no fisherman’s skiv. Gun turrets are hidden beneath fishing nets on the deck and I notice that below deck the hold is reinforced.

There several secret compartments for storing contraband. The sailors make us hide our guns in case we are randomly searched by the coast guard. I stand on the shore to say goodbye to the Spider.

"You're going to be OK, right?" Kyle says.

I nod. "You?"

He nods. "Bus leaves at eight."

I look around. "Where's Rafe?"

"Probably back in the van. I don't think he wanted to say goodbye."

"Typical" I mutter.

Kyle grabs me in a hug. "Don't get killed, Baxter," he says. "Please don't get killed." I smile and pat him on the back. "We've got to rebuild a whole empire," I say. "Getting killed wouldn't be good business."

Ronin taps me on the shoulder. I nod and say my last goodbyes to Kyle, Ntombi and the Kid as we climb onto the deck and make our way up to the bridge. The command centre of the ship is decked out with sophisticated radar and tracking equipment. Sue lounges against the wheel wearing a white Captain's hat and sunglasses and is sucking heavily on a cigar.

"So do we know where we're going?" the sangoma says.

"She's near the Maelstrom," Severance says. "Couple of years back this whirlpool appeared a few miles off the coast. Huge and dangerous. Several fishing vessels were lost in it before the coast guard recommended that ships avoid the area completely. It's a no-go zone now."

She shouts down orders to the sailors and then we pull away from the dock. I watch sadly as the Spider wave from the shore. It may be the last time I ever see them. The Salt Dragon gains speed and I make my way down to the deck and stand with my elbows on the bow, looking as the ship cuts through the dark water.

"Nervous?" Ronin asks. I turn to look at him. He looks worse. His brow is drenched with sweat and he has his trench-coat wrapped around him protectively.

"After this week I don't think anything can make me nervous," I say. I yawn and dangle my arms over the side of the edge.

"Why don't you go lie down below?" Ronin says. "I'll call you when we get close."

"What about you? You look like you could use some sleep."

He shakes his head. "I'm worried what I might be when I wake up."

I'm staring at the ceiling of the cabin when I hear the sound of feet running on the deck. I get up and climb the wooden ladder to the deck. "Incoming," Severance shouts from the bridge. I climb up the steps and see Ronin, Loyiso and Severance staring at the radar screen.

Several shapes can be seen moving toward us. "Planes?" I ask hopefully.

Sue pulls a face. "Not moving like that they're not," she says.

"Get fire," Ronin says. "Quickly!"

We scramble below and frantically find the bags full of Molotovs. I shake Kobus awake. Ronin hastily straps on the flamethrower. Back on deck the sailors have cleared the nets from the deck guns and are watching the skies. I clutch a Molotov in one hand and a short, heavy handgun in the other. We wait in silence.

Heavy machine gun fire breaks the calm. A dark shape wheels in the air heads toward us. Other dark shapes become visible, silhouetted against the night sky. The heavy gun strafes the air but they keep coming.

There's a whoosh as a Crow swoops over us. A Molotov sails overhead but lands uselessly in the water. Another Crow lands on top of the bridge and is met by the chatter of machine gun fire. It absorbs the bullets and caws down at us. I lob my Molotov and it hits the huge bird dead on, smashing and dousing it in flammable liquid. It's only then that I realise that I forgot to light it. I swear and search my pockets for a lighter as the bird hops down from the roof of the bridge and onto the deck in front of me.

I aim the gun and fire into its body but the liquid doesn't ignite. The dark shape looms above me but screams as it bursts into flames. I stumble back covering my face.

Ronin shouts to me and throws me his lighter. I stumble trying to catch it, scrabble on the deck and then grab it. I stuff my hand in my bag and pull out another Molotov. Bird lynching take two.

A Crow dives across the deck and knocks a sailor off his feet. The sailor spins and manages to catch it with a Molotov as he hits the deck. The flaming bird whirls frantically through the night sky and then stops flapping and plummets into the ocean below. There's a cheer from the sailors. One down.

I look up and see Rafe standing on the deck, a look of relaxed concentration on his face and a Molotov in his hand. A vision? Rafe smiles at me. Nope the idiot is really here

"Rafe," I shout. "Get below."

I try to run over him, but as I pass one of the sailors I slip on something on the deck. I look down and see blood. The sailor at me and then down at the gash in his abdomen and then collapses on the deck.

"Rafe, what the hell are you doing?" I shout. "Fight or you're going to get killed."

He looks at me and then takes the Molotov cocktail and lighter out of my hands, lights the cloth and throws it nonchalantly at a bird. It explodes into flames. Rafe smiles at me. Smartass.

A sailor in a yellow anorak runs across the deck, a Crow cawing and whipping through the air behind him. He turns and fires his semi-automatic into it.

“Use fire!” I shout, lighting the cloth of another Molotov.

The Crow hits the sailor with its claws, digging in, and then lifts him from the deck and drives its beak into his head. Blood and bits of yellow anorak spill onto the deck.

I launch my Molotov in midflight but I’ve misjudged the distance and it sails over the top of the bird, hitting the bow and exploding into flame. I try to stop, but my feet get tangled and I fall over myself. A claw lashes out and instinctively I throw a hand up to defend myself, which only serve to present a target. A claw neatly separates the pinkie from my left hand at the knuckle.

I shout in pain as the bird stands over me, its monstrous beak dripping with clown blood. It dips its head to peck at me but is caught in the side by something. It wails and turns to its attacker. Severance laughs manically as she hacks at the bird with a chainsaw that has been doused in petrol and set alight. With a maniacal battle-cry she spins the chainsaw in wide arc and hacks the bird’s head from its body.

I lie there with blood squirting rhythmically from my hand onto the deck. I think about the Yakuza and how they sacrifice a finger as penance to their bosses. I think about accidents with farm equipment. I think about voluntary finger amputation for body modification. Having your pinkie removed by a flying demon is either so much more stupid or entirely cooler than any of those things. I’m still trying to decide which when I pass out.

When I wake up, Rafe is holding my good hand and patting my head with a damp cloth. “Boy,” he says disapprovingly as if I were a naughty kid who had run into the road to fetch a ball and had been knocked over.

Ronin opens the door. “Time to go, sparky,” he says. He looks at me sympathetically, but we both know we’re too far into this. The options are fairly simple at this point: either we’re going to pull off a supernatural coup d’état. Or we’re going to die spectacularly.

15. Assault with Intent to do Grievous Bodily Harm

We skirt the Maelstrom, the Salt Dragon listing hard to one side. The dark green-grey spiral of water spits huge crests of foam out. I can feel the claws of the current pulling at the hull of the Dragon, desperately trying drag us in.

On the bridge Severance has braced herself against the control panel and her lean, wiry biceps bulge as she struggles to keep the wheel steady. "Radar's down," she says, nodding at the screen. "Some kind of interference from the Maelstrom."

I look down at the bandaged stump where my pinkie used to be. I have a morbid fascination with my missing digit. I keep on looking down every couple of seconds on wiggling my fingers. I wonder if I will develop a phantom pinkie.

We had beaten off the bird attack but I know that it's only the beginning. There had only been five birds and one of those had retreated. Three of Sue's crew had died and we had squandered at least a dozen of the Moltovos with wild throws.

Rafe stands next to me and peers at the Maelstrom with fascination.

"Stowaways are bad luck," one of the sailors hisses as he walks past. It's too late to turn back. Whatever happens I'll have him next to me. That makes me feel a little better, strangely.

"Shiver me clitoris, that's an evil vessel," Severance says. We look out of the window at the ship that rises out of the sea in front of us. I catch a glimpse of the iron cross that rises from its deck like a tower but I can't see if there is a bird impaled on it from here.

The Salt Dragon whines with strain but Severance is an expert pilot and has guided the boat past the Maelstrom without a hitch. We accelerate and the Dragon angles through the water, cutting a path toward the port side of long, angular warship. No guns greet us and we can only hope that their radar is suffering from the same kind of malfunction as ours.

We edge in close to the side of the ship and prepare to board. The sailors send motorised grappling hooks spinning over the side of the warship with practiced ease. Somehow I don't think this is the first time they've boarded a ship. A weathered sailor with a knife between his teeth clips himself to the line and pulls himself slowly to the top. After a couple of seconds a body comes sailing over the edge.

I try to make Rafe stay behind but it's no use. He clips himself into the line and won't budge. Ronin, Loyiso, Rafe, Severance Kobus and I follow, leaving two sailors to pilot the Salt Dragon. We clip in and hang suspended as we're pulled to the top. The lines sway in the wind and salty spray from the ocean stings my skin. At the top the deck is slick with the blood of the dead sentry.

"What now, bounty hunter?" Sue hisses

"We go below and search," he whispers back.

"Brilliantly complex plan," she says.

We make our way across the deck and toward the iron cross that juts from the deck. "Sabian Dober," Loyiso says as we get nearer.

We look up at the cross. The High Chancellor of the Murder is impaled on the cross, his wings stretched across and held in place with bolts. The head hangs loosely from the body and blood stains the deck below him.

"Looks like Basson decided to help Gaden toward a promotion," Ronin whispers.

"There," Sue says, pointing into the shadows with one of her pistols. I squint my eyes and make out the faint outline of a metal door.

"Eyes of a hawk." Ronin says.

"And the body of a tiger, bounty hunter," the Captain says, pulling out her other pistol side and cocking the hammer.

"I remember," Ronin says wistfully.

We descend a flight of thin, slippery metal stairs and reach a corridor long, windowless corridor. Doorways open up to both the left and right. I look at the schematic that Kyle downloaded onto my phone.

"We go to the end and take a left," I say.

We're about to continue along the corridor when a member of the crew scrambles out of one of the doorways, almost running into Ronin. Without missing a beat the bounty smashes the butt of Warchild into his sternum. The guy drops groaning and Ronin brings the shotgun down on the back of his head twice in quick succession. Kobus drags the unconscious body into one of the rooms.

"I would have gone for the temple rather than the sternum" Sue says matter-of-factly.

"Back seat fighter," Ronin mumbles as we continue up the corridor.

Rafe walks alongside as if we're in the mall, his shaggy red hair bobbing up and down to some inaudible melody. He's unarmed except for a single Molotov that he carries in his hand like a soft drink. I catch his eye and he smiles and nods.

My forehead has begun to itch and as we progress down the long, corridor. The grey metallic walls have begun to shimmer and they feel like they're closing in on me. I rub my forehead with the back of my hand. Just keep it together Baxter. Just breathe.

Ronin reaches the end of the corridor ahead of us disappears to the left. Gunfire ricochets down the corridor and the bounty hunter reappears and slams himself flat against the wall. "Three of them," Ronin says ducking back. "Heavily armed." Another burst of gunfire sprays across the passage.

Severance holsters her guns, leans against the wall and lights a cigar. "They're wasting ammo," she says. "Wait for the reload." Another burst of gunfire. Sue takes a drag and blows a smoke ring. Another burst. Sue looks at her nails. As the next burst finishes ripping down the corridor she draws her guns, strides

into the corridor and empties both of them. She steps back, takes the cigar out her mouth and blows smoke in Ronin's face.

"That's how it's done, sweetcheeks."

Ronin rolls his eyes at me as we round the corner. The three dead sentries look up with blank eyes. Before Sue shot them they were guarding a corridor of cells with heavy metal doors. Severance digs through one of the corpse's pockets and comes up with a ring of keys dangling from her finger.

The first door we open holds a prisoner but it's not Pat and it's even more terrifying than the crucified leader of the Murder. It's Esme.

She's crouched in the corner and looks a little hysterical. Her hair is wild, several large purple bruises mark her face and neck and she has dried blood smeared around her nose.

"Baxter?" she says hoarsely. "Is that you?"

I'd long gotten over the denial phase of Esme's cheating on me. The anger phase is still very much here though. "Had enough of Niels?" I say.

She looks confused.

"The one you left me for, remember?" I say. "Or have you moved on from him now too?"

"Baxter," she says slowly as she pushes herself to her feet and limps over to me. "I was punched in the face and dragged from my room. Since then I've been half-starved and thrown around by things I've only ever seen in horror movies and nightmares. I've met somebody who looks an awful lot like me and I've lectured to by a weird guy with a ponytail. So I'd appreciate it if you'd save your paranoid angst for some other time and rescue."

"Oh, suddenly I'm good enough because we're rescuing you?" I say.

Esme hits me hard in the solar plexus. I feel a sharp rush of dizziness and nearly vomit. "Listen to me carefully. I don't know anyone called Niels," she says.

It all suddenly makes sense. The reason why Esme looked wrong the last time I saw her is because she was wrong. That wasn't her. It was like my fake parents. The Esme that had dumped me wasn't really Esme.

I wrap my arms around her. I breathe in her hair. This time Esme feels right. "Ok, lovebirds, let's get out of here so you can get a room," Ronin says.

"Who's the Viking?" Esme says.

"I'll tell you later."

It's only after searching several empty cells that we find Pat. "Jackson," she says as Ronin helps her to her feet. "You came to get me!" She is dirty and has bruises on her wrists but her blue eyes are shining.

“Someone had to,” he says with a smile.

“Your medication...” she says touching his pale, sweaty face.

“Had a little accident,” he grunts.

“We’ve got to get you more,” Pat says

“We will as soon as we get out of here,” Loyiso says.

We turn back into the corridor and gunfire thuds into the walls around us.

“That way,” Ronin hisses. We run further down the corridor and turn a corner.

I consult the schematic. “This is the galley. We’ll go through and reach the mess hall on the other side,” I say. “We can double back and exit from there.”

The ship’s kitchen is deserted. Either the kitchen staff had fled when they heard gunfire or proper nutrition wasn’t high on the list of priorities on the Dark Lady. The adrenaline rush that I had ridden for the initial assault on the ship has worn off. I feel exhausted, depleted. I would really rather be at home right now.

We’re edging our way through the stainless steel galley when the door on the other side swings open. A creature snuffles forward, the thick corded muscles in his neck ripple. The creature turns its pink eyes to us and bares its row of teeth. Nice doggie. Sue and Ronin open fire at the same time, Jesus and Judas and Warchild sending rounds thumping into the creature. The snarling creature jumps onto the stainless steel countertop, sending knocking pots and kitchen utensils, skittering across the floor.

Rafe stands next to me looking at the dog with a look of mild amusement on his face. The dog is closing on us. So I what every hero that actually lived to tell their tale has done. I run. I grab Rafe and Esme and pull them toward the door. The huge mutant dog roars and springs forward, knocking me to the ground. Rafe calmly picks up a chopping knife from a sideboard and stabs it into the thing’s back. It squeals as I scramble to my feet and pull Rafe and Esme through the door. The dog lopez after us, wheezing heavily and dripping blood.

I pull my phone out of my pocket to consult the schematic. The screen sports a deep crack from where I fell on it and it won’t turn on. Shit. The ships many passages are like a maze and without a plan there’s very little way of us knowing where to go.

The dog appears through the kitchen door and I’m forced to make a decision. Going right will take us back the way we came, toward the holding cells. Rafe shakes my grips from his arm and trots off down the left corridor.

“Rafe!” I shout. Swearing I grab Esme and follow him.

“Baxter, this is not much of a rescue,” Esme says as we sprint down the corridor. Behind us the dog is catching up surprisingly fast, considering the chef’s knife jutting from its back.

“Maybe you should hang around for a better offer,” I gasp as we watch Rafe turn a corner up ahead of us. We round the corner as Rafe ambles toward a wooden door. He stops at it, turns to look at me with the knowing-eye, and then opens. We reach it and step inside. I know from Rafe’s look what it is. I’m terrified, but it’s a familiar emotion by now. I close the door carefully behind me.

“Don’t worry,” a voice says. “My creatures will not come in here unless I call them.”

Basson is sitting drinking tea at a breakfast table. The chemist’s grey hair is pulled back in a ponytail with a red satin scrunchy and he’s wearing a t-shirt that says, “Information Wants To Be Free.” Gaden and three other Crows stand next to him.

The cabin is large and stately. There are high shelves filled with books and a massive aquarium filled with exotic fish. One of the walls is glass and looks out onto the sea.

“How are the delusions coming along?” Basson says warmly.

“I keep having these violent thoughts that I’m going to cut you up into little pieces and feed you to your creatures,” I spit out.

“Classic projection,” he says. “I think it has to do with your mother,”

“Which one,” I say.

“Touché young man. I hope your alternate parents and girlfriend did not disturb you too much. You needn’t worry about it though. I no longer have any use for them so I sent them back to their own dimensions with their throats cut.”

He laughs. “Luckily there are infinite more versions of them in the multiverse.” He motions an empty chair at the table “Please have a seat.”

“Baxter,” Esme says. I touch her arm. Rafe stands next to her grabs her hand. He smiles idiotically at me.

Basson pours me a cup of tea. The orangey scent of Earl Grey wafts up from the cup.

“The government is helping you,” I say.

Basson smiles. “South Africa has many people it needs to sell weapons to.”

“Gogs,” I say.

“Amongst other things. Our special method of weapons procurement means that the leadership is all too willing to scratch my back,” Basson says sipping his tea.

“And what about T’laal?” I say. “Who scratches your Master’s back?”

“You impress me Baxter, you’ve worked out far more than I expected.”

“You’ve been watching me from the beginning,”

"I would love to say it was just you." Basson says. "But truth be told I've been watching several people; a young sangoma in Transkei, a gifted medium in Pretoria, a schizophrenic in the Northern Cape. All with the ability to See. But with you I became convinced that I had found that one that would help me to complete the activation the Mantis."

"I'm sure the government wouldn't be happy to know that you have Ik Kaggen Ah."

Basson nods thoughtfully. "You're right. Anything that powerful makes most leaders uncomfortable. Fortunately the arms-trade has merely been a means to an end. Thanks to government greed they were unable to guess my true intentions."

"I should have seen it," Loyiso says from behind us. I turn to see the sangoma and Ronin. The bounty hunter has Warchild pointed at Basson.

Basson smiles. "Of all of the Six, it was you I feared would discover my plans."

Loyiso raises his hand and points it at Basson as he begins to chant.

"No trial Loyiso?" Basson says.

A dark bolt of power erupts from the sangomas hand and throws Basson from his feet.

"I gave you more of a trial than you gave the Six," Loyiso says.

"But it was not enough," a voice says from the ground. Basson drags himself to his feet. Loyiso's bolt burned a hole through his chest. In the cavity I can see the remains of his rib cage and heart. He smiles but his eyes are no longer his. He's now a demon. "And now you will help me destroy the Mantis God."

Gaden's eyes narrow. "You?" he says. "The Mantis God is to be given to Murder to break our curse."

"Your deal was with my servant, not with me," T'laal says.

"Looks like we have a Mexican standoff," Ronin whispers. I look at him. His face is dripping with sweat and purple veins have begun to stand out around his eyes.

"The Murder are not cowed by you, demon," Gaden says. "We are not subject to the dictates of Heaven or Hell. We are owed vengeance."

"Then come and get it," T'laal hisses.

The four members of the Murder shudder as they transform.

Energy coils like a whip from T'laal's hand and rips through one of the Crows. It shrieks and spins but the other two dive in to attack. Gaden caws and raises his wings sweeping the demon-possessed alchemist to the ground. He pushes himself to his feet again and sends an arc of power scything across the room.

Loyiso drags Esme and Rafe to the ground. Ronin grabs me by the arm and pulls me behind the table. A Crow sweeps forward and grabs T'laal with the two muscular arms that jut from his head. "Give us the Mantis, demon."

The demon slashes his power across its throat and the Crow drops to the ground. The demon drops to the floor and walks calmly toward a door in the back of the cabin.

“We’ve got to find the Mantis and destroy it,” he says. “If T’laal activates it we’re in serious trouble.” Which is when it happens. Ronin has sweating like he’s been eating jalapenos. He tries to get up but collapse to the ground, wrapping his arms around himself like he has a fever. I notice a coarse black hair has grown from the centre of his forehead. More pops from his chin and then more and soon his face is covered in short little black hairs.

"Ronin," I whisper.

"Move away," he gasps.

I start to edge away but one of the Crows swings toward me. Ronin continues to transform. I watch him in horror as his jaw elongates to create a set of mandibles. His eyes are bloodshot, his lips have gone black and he grips his arms together like he's trying to stop what's happening. His body convulses and foam begins to drip from his mouth. It's no longer Ronin. His eyes are white and writhe like maggots in his skull. He stoops forward and drops onto all fours. He's the Widowmaker.

The Crow throws me to the side and attacks. With a quick sidestep the Widowmaker dodges and his jaws rip into feathers. The Crow screams and tries to push him away. The Widowmaker rips into the Crow again and I notice black liquid dripping from the wound. The other Crows circle around him warily.

I push myself to my feet and sprint after T’laal. As I reach the door I hear footsteps and swing around to see Rafe behind me with a smile on his face.

“Go hide,” I shout. Rafe pushes past me and opens the door. I grab at his arm but he struggles free and drags me into the room. The room is large and has a large window that looks out onto the sea. It’s empty except for Ik Kaggen Ah. The exoskeleton is made from burnished brass and copper and carved with symbols. It is shaped to fit like a suit around the human form. And T’laal is in it.

“You will release the Mantis,” he says. Basson’s dead, eyes stare at me.

I push Rafe behind me. “What if Kaggen beats you?” I say.

The demon laughs. “He has been trapped for centuries with no way to build his power. I will tear him apart.”

“And if I refuse?”

The demon raises a hand and Rafe drops to his knees.

"Right," I say.

T’laal steps out of the Mantis and I climb inside and sit in the driver’s seat. There are levers, wheels and pulleys on the inside of the exoskeleton. I look for the controller. The mouse. The joystick. Nothing.

I pull one of the levers. One of the legs of the Mantis moves. If the control system is at all logical then the other lever must move the other leg. I pull it. The other leg moves.

“Release him,” T’laal growls.

I nod. One Mantis God coming right up. Except it’s not that simple. I could probably work out the control system given enough time. But releasing a God trapped inside? I’d probably need to consult the FAQ and the interdimensional mantis Wiki for that.

“Use your sight, Siener,” T’laal hisses.

I try to slow down my breathing. I look across at Rafe kneeling on the floor. He smiles and looks across at me with the knowing eye. The eye burns into me with the intensity of a laser. I feel my forehead throb mercilessly and then open like a flower opening to the sun. Everything splits into fractals and I see multiple dimensions happening at the same time in front of me.

“Holy mother of god,” I whisper as the world shudders and tears in half.

We’re on Kaggen’s floating disc. But the Mantis God is nowhere to be seen. I turn to look at Rafe. He seems taller here and his eyes shine with humour.

“Rafe?” I say.

“I knew that I was a Siener long before you did,” he says. “And I knew it’s part of why you’ve always hated me. You knew that something impossibly strong bound us together and you didn’t want to be linked to me in any way.”

“I’ve never hated you,” I say and immediately know it’s a lie. I have hated him. Hated him for his quietness and withdrawal from the world and hated him for the way my mother treated him.

“It’s OK, Bax,” he says. “I understand.”

“Why are we here?” I ask.

“To release the Mantis God,” Rafe says.

“But...” I look around.

Rafe’s smile grows and he points at me. I look down and see radiant legs where arms should be. I move my head from side to side and see the light in all directions.

“Basson is T’laal’s channel and you are Kaggen’s,” Rafe says.

Of course. Who else would an ancient insect deity choose to be his mortal channel but a porn-dealing teenager with a congenital eye defect?

“He chose you for a reason, Bax,” Rafe says.

“What would that be?” I say.

My brother shrugs. “I hope he was right because you’re about to fight T’laal.” The world unrips itself and I’m back in the exoskeleton.

Rafe looks directly at me and smiles.

Then I See them. Radiant sigils invisible to the naked eye are etched onto the frame of the mantis. They form a kind of control panel on the inner metal. I reach out my mind and touch one of them. It hums with a deep, subsonic bass. My brain rattles against my skull with the resonance. I touch another one. It's a higher frequency, but it harmonises perfectly with the bass. It's an invisible, space-time Casio keyboard. So I do what everybody without any musical does when they sit down in front of a keyboard. I play Chopsticks.

Reaching out my mind, I search for the subsonic tones that will make up the simple melody. They rumble and hum in my mind. The mantis begins to shift. It moves like it's doing tai-chi, coiling and rolling through the ether, space and time rushing off its body like water.

"Kaggen," T'laal says and then with a smile he disappears from Basson's body. The dead alchemist drops like a rag doll and sprawls awkwardly on the floor.

"That was easy," I say.

Wrong thing to say because all Hell breaks loose. Well to be precise it's not all Hell. Just the mayor of Hell's capital city. Through the windows of the cabin I see the demon rising from the Maelstrom. He's a writing chaos of black limbs, tentacles snaking out to wrap around the ship. If there was ever a time to master the art of ancient exoskeleton riding, now is it.

I reach out my mind wildly to the sigils, like mashing your fingers around on a game controller to try and make your character shoot a fireball. The Mantis lurches like a drunken rollerskater but I manage to keep it under control. So far it's not much of a superweapon.

I'm trying to figure out how to maneuver toward the door when a tentacle smashes through the window and slams into the Mantis. The impact almost makes me black out but manage to get the Mantis back to its feet and aim it for the door again. I reach out my mind and the Mantis leg smashes into the door and knocks it from its hinges. I'm starting to get the hang of this thing.

I lurch through the doorway and almost slam right into Kobus. The half-giant lobs a Molotov at a Crow and then duck behind a bookcase. The incendiary misses the Crow but sets a row of books alight. The Crow sees me and with a shriek dives toward me. I hold the tones together in my mind and focus on the Molotov fire that burns the bookshelf. With my mind I make it rise and spiral toward the Crow like a whip, catching it around the neck and ripping its head from its body like a fiery garrotte. Mantis weapons capabilities activated.

With a lurch I turn the Mantis and see the Widowmaker ripping into the neck of a Gog. He drops the body and turns his white eyes toward me. I raise a Mantis leg in greeting. With a bloodcurdling roar the Widowmaker lumbers toward me on all fours.

"Ronin," I start to say as he slams into the Mantis, throwing myself back against the exoskeleton to avoid his jaws. I reach out with my mind and send the Mantis loping away but the Widowmaker clings to the exoskeleton, the poisonous teeth snapping inches away from my face.

"Ronin, stop!" I shout but there's no recognition in the writhing white eyes. I promised him I spin the Mantis round and lash with a leg, slamming the Widowmaker to the ground. His jaws snap against the leg uselessly. I raise the Mantis leg above the bounty hunter like a dagger.

Ronin would do it for me, I know. He'd blow my head off with Warchild or snap my neck with Dwarven kung-fu. But I'm a bad person, so I don't need to keep my promises. I drive the leg down through the Widowmaker's shoulder, pinning him to the cabin floor. With a wrench I snap the end of the leg, leaving him squirming but unable to move.

There's an earsplitting ripping sound as the roof of the cabin is torn off the ship. I look up to see T'laal above us. Tentacles thrash down in the cabin. Kobus steps out from behind a bookcase and launches a Molotov at him. It explodes and douses him with fire. I use my mind to wrap the fire around him in a blazing inferno. For a few moments it looks like it's having an effect. But that hope is soon dashed. It's not hurting him. What it has done is turn T'laal into a flaming demon-octopus. Great move, Baxter.

I look at the sigils on the mantis. Controlling fire is great, where are the missiles? Where's the photon cannon? A tentacle snakes out and I'm thrown against wall. I'm trying to get up when I'm lifted into the air.

T'laal wraps the mantis on one of his huge tentacles and then plunges me into the dark sea. The shock of the water is almost too much. I feel like I'm having a heart attack. My lungs begin to explode as T'laal pushes me deeper and deeper into the dark ocean. I suddenly feel calm. The lack of oxygen has heightened my concentration. I look at the luminescent sigils as I'm taken down into the depths, and I understand. I understand how the Mantis works, how to operate it. I focus my mind and then let it go. The Mantis and I blink out of existence, taking T'laal with us.

16. Apocalypse Now Now

We're in the Cape Town CBD. I see the familiar skyscrapers framed by the mountain. I see the three tampon-shaped towers looming above Vredhoek. I see Cape Town train station next to us, grey and yellow trains clattering on the tracks. I see the two suns setting over the top of the mountain, one large and yellow and one smaller with a purple-tinted hue. Wait, what? We're in a Cape Town but not my Cape Town. I've used the power of the Mantis to hop to another version of my reality. And I've brought T'laal with me.

The demon Octopus stands level with a skyscraper and looks down at me. Alternate reality Capetonians run screaming, trampling each other in their effort to get away from this huge demonic force. But I don't run. I have control of the exoskeleton. Basson had only had the tip of the iceberg, this thing is so much more than he suspected. With my Sight I understand it. All the power I've ever wanted is right here in these sigils. With this kind of power this whole world, all worlds, could be my Sprawl.

I reach out my mind and touch the necessary sigils. The Mantis begins to lurch, shift and gain in size. Grow grow gadget Mantis. I grow until I stand facing T'laal. Gargantuan Demon Octopus versus giant Interdimensional Mantis Exoskeleton. Fight!

T'laal lunges forward but I sidestep and drive a giant Mantis leg through one of his tree-like tentacles, pinning it to the tarmac below. The demon screams and lashes again, wrapping another tentacle around a train that is just leaving the station. He pulls it into the air, swinging it like a grey and yellow metallic whip. The driver's carriage hits the Mantis in its oblong copper head and I'm sent sprawling backwards into a skyscraper behind me. Glass from a hundred windows shatters and I find myself staring into an open plan office where people look up from their cubicles in disbelief.

I resist the urge to apologise and spin the Mantis around. The tentacle that was pinned to the ground has been ripped off and blood flows down Adderly Street like a red tidal wave. T'laal lurches up and throws himself forward hitting me with the bulk of his huge body. I'm flung backwards and land heavily on a delivery truck, crushing it. I try not to think of the person that might have been inside it.

I bring the Mantis back to its feet and quickly instigate evasive maneuvers as the Octopus begins launching cars at me with his many limbs. I dodge a luxury sedan and crash through the streets, hiding behind a large investment bank. I'm breathing heavily. Despite the obvious power of the Mantis, I'm obviously no match for T'laal in a street fight.

So I do what I'm best at. I run. I quickly cross between buildings and pass behind T'laal, dodging as tentacles shoot out toward me. I try not to think about it as my giant Mantis legs crush cars beneath me as I run. These are people that are just trying to make their way home. But I'm trying to save the whole goddamn universe.

T'laal stretches out his tentacles and lurches forward surprising fast. My plan is to outrun him and tire him out before turning and fighting. My mantis legs won't get tired and hopefully the cardiovascular fitness of giant demon octopii is nothing to write home about.

As I crunch my way over cars and trucks, I realise the fatal flaw in my plan. I'm controlling the Mantis with my mind and my mind is getting tired. My temples begin to throb with the strain of making the

Mantis exoskeleton run. The Mantis begins to slow down and I have to force myself to concentrate to keep it going. T'laal is gaining behind me. I turn and with my mind I uproot several minibus taxis and send them sailing toward him. He bats them out of the way a contemptuous flick of a tentacle. The effort of launching cars has tired me even further but I continue to keep the Mantis stumbling forward.

T'laal gains on me and grabs one of the Mantis's legs with one of his slimy limbs and with a jerk sends me sailing into the air to crash through the faux Renaissance vaulted roof of a nearby mall. I crash through and wince as I see two chubby shoppers with ice-creams crushed beneath me.

I push my exhausted mind to pick the Mantis up and erupt out of the ruins of the mall as T'laal looms above me. I manage to push past his tentacles and drive a metallic leg at the gloopy tissue of his head. He twists and the leg grazes him creating a deep gash. I pin two of his tentacles down and make the Mantis rear up, ready to drive its legs through his brain.

That's when I'm hit by the missiles. The natives of this alternate Cape Town have obviously tired of the two behemoths wrecking their city and have retaliated by sending several attack helicopters at us. I'm thrown backwards as the missiles slam into the Mantis.

The helicopters surround us and machine gun fire chatters, sending bullets glancing perilously close to where I sit in the Mantis cockpit. Missiles slam into T'laal and he responds by grabbing two choppers and slamming them into the earth. He whips a tentacle around his head destroying another two helicopters in mid-air. The remaining two execute a wide evasive arc and retreat back toward the mountain.

T'laal, his head scorched by missile blasts, grabs the Mantis by the head and slams me into the earth. The force of the shock is immense and I'm temporarily bewildered. T'laal picks me up like a pro wrestler and throws the metallic body of the Mantis across several Northern Suburbs neighbourhoods.

Black spots swarm across my vision like amoeba. My neck feels numb and I struggle to move it. It isn't broken but I wonder how close it came. I struggle to concentrate my mind but know if I don't I'm going to be dead in seconds. I push the Mantis to its feet, getting it caught in several layers of razor wire. I look around. I'm been thrown through the outer wall of the nuclear power station at Koeberg.

As I turn around I'm again hit by a tentacle which sends me slamming into the power station. I turn the Mantis and see that I'm right next to what must be the main reactor. T'laal blocks out the twin suns above me. I lie there in the Mantis exoskeleton and close my eyes. I've done all that I can. I've been swallowed by Cape Town's supernatural underworld, digested and excreted. I've given it my best and it wasn't enough. I stop struggling. I let my mind drop from the controls of the Mantis. It's been great but after sixteen years I've come to the point where it's time to say sayonara to this mortal coil. I let go completely. And then I See.

I See what I can do. I reach out my mind to the reactor next to me and with a single thought I ignite it. At the same time I focus every inch of concentration left available to me to create a bubble of force around me.

The reactor ignites and an immense blastwave spreads around me. I'm shaken around like a doll in a tsunami of fire. I'm swept along on a radioactive wave that rips through the city. Trees, cars, houses and people cease to exist around me.

The wave flings me across the city and sends me sprawling against the mountain. Struggling to keep the bubble of force around me, I bring the Mantis to its feet and climb to the top, standing on the flat surface of Table Mountain and looking down. The city is aflame. Skyscrapers collapse into themselves. The water of the bay is alight which sends massive plumes of steam into the air. It's the South African Armageddon, Apocalypse Now Now. And I caused it.

T'laal is lurching his way toward me. His skin has been flayed from his body and most of his tentacles have been scorched into stumps. He's nothing more than a transparent mass of tissue, a radioactive nervous system that moves painfully across a burning city. A nervous system with one motivation that drives it: destroy the Mantis.

He moves toward me and my mind is powerless to stop him. He reaches out his one remaining tentacle and pulls me to him. We are locked in a deadly embrace on top of Table Mountain. I look at the pathetic, burnt Octopus and marshal the last of my strength. I extend draw the Mantis's forelegs back and then arc them forward like pincers. They slice into T'laal emoliated head and cut it in half. A fountain of gore erupts from the cavity and streams down the side of the mountain like lava.

Fire laps at the edges of my protective bubble as I stand looking over this decimated version of Cape Town. "I'm sorry," I say and then feel stupid. Somehow I don't think these Capetonians need my platitudes after I have brought nuclear Armageddon upon them. I focus my mind again and try to remember what I had done to jump dimensions. I close my eyes and create an image of the Dark Lady in my mind. I need to make sure that I get my dimension, not just one similar to it, so I focus on the one thing that I care enough about in my version of reality. I focus on my version of Esme.

I'm back on the deck of the Dark Lady. I see Rafe and Esme. Esme turns to me as I appear and I smile. It's her. It's my Esme. She runs toward me but I shake my head and she stops. There's something I have to do first.

BizBax: You've got to admit it; this Mantis is a seriously pimping ride

MetroBax: You know we can't keep it right?

BizBax: Maybe we could keep it in the garage and take it out on weekends, like a vintage Porsche.

MetroBax: I hope that's a joke

BizBax: Even I can see that idea, however awesome, wouldn't work

MetroBax: Do you know what this means? We finally agree on something

BizBax: If you start crying I'm going to give us a brain haemorrhage

Think of smoking dark chocolate-flavoured heroin cigarettes while inhaling pure sunshine through your pores and having sex with the entire world that screams your name in adoration and worship. Think of having that for eternity. That's what having complete control of the Mantis is like. It's the most powerful thing imaginable. And then think walking away from that. Impossible! Unthinkable! But that's what I do.

It's not because I'm a good person. It's precisely that I'm not a good person that I do it. If I keep the Mantis I won't use it for good. Oh sure, maybe at first I'll try to do good things. I'll try for universal peace and all that. But pretty quickly I'll start being power-hungry and evil. A universe with Baxter Zevcenko as the supreme ultimate ruler? Nobody wants that, least of all me.

I dig my mind into the exoskeleton and begin to unravel it. Particles begin to unwind as I reverse the magick African metallurgists created thousands of years ago. I see windows to other worlds begin to close and I'm sad. It would have been cool to see some of those versions reality without bringing a nuclear winter down onto them. I know I can't. The longer the exoskeleton exists the more of a risk it is. I step out of the Mantis and watch as it crumbles into dust.

"Baxter," Esme says. She pulls me to her and kisses me on the lips. It's not the honey-sunshine-heroin power of the Mantis. But it's pretty close.

16. Let it Burn

"You have learnt well, child," the old woman among the ox-wagons says to me. The smoke rises from the fire and I look out as the sun begins to rise over the veld.

"Why me?" the young girl me asks.

The woman smiles. "I asked the same question when I was your age. There is no answer. In the same way that some are born with brown hair or blue eyes, you are born with the Sight. That is the only the answer you will ever find."

"What now?" I ask.

. "The rest is up to you," she says and together we watch the sunlight bring morning to the veld.

Kyle and I are sitting on the roof of one of the prefab classrooms when Anwar is stabbed. We watch the leader of the NTK walk haughtily across the Sprawl without any protection. That's Anwar's way. He wants to show everyone that he's not afraid of anything. Which doesn't stop a group of the Form from surrounding him and sticking a knife in his belly.

He collapses swearing as his assailants run off. We watch him roll into a ball on the tar, muttering and cursing. It's two hours after school has ended and there is nobody around except us.

"We need to get this on video," Kyle says, searching his pockets for his phone as Anwar rolls onto his back groaning.

"We could sell it," I say.

"Denton will pay a lot for this," Kyle says, finding his phone and aiming it at Anwar. "But we might make more if we put it on Youtube."

I sigh. "You know we have to help him?"

Kyle turns to look at me. "I think you've lost the entrepreneurial spirit, Bax," he says and flicks his camera closed.

"I know," I say wearily.

We climb down the drainpipe and walk over to where Anwar lying. His looks like oil on the tar. "Come to gloat, Zevcenko?" he hisses, clutching at his belly.

"Actually we thought we might help you," I say.

Anwar tries to laugh and then grimaces. "If you think I'm going to give you the porn back, you're an idiot," he says. Typical Anwar. He'd rather die than relinquish even an inch of his territory.

"We don't want it."

"We don't?" Kyle asks.

I shake my head. "The Spider is done with the porn business."

Kyle takes out his phone and points it at Anwar. "Snuff films, Bax, please tell me we're moving on to snuff films."

I push Kyle's phone down. "Nope."

Anwar manages a contemptuous smile. "Your little girlfriend has made you soft, Zevcenko."

I stick out my foot and jab my hard school shoe into the knife wound. He breathes in sharply and closes his eyes.

"I'm not a fucking saint," I say. We call the ambulance. It arrives quickly and the medics strap Anwar down and lift him into the back.

"I suppose you want me to thank you," he says from behind the oxygen mask.

"Your happy smiling face is all the thanks I need," I say. He manages to lift a hand and give me the middle finger as the medics close the ambulance doors.

"We're in serious shit," Kyle says as the ambulance pulls away and out of Westridge's iron gates. "What should we do?"

"Let it burn," I say.

The rest of the week is chaos. Lockers are searched. DVDs, harddrives and cellphones filled with porn are found. Kids squeal like little pigs. The Spider is immediately implicated. I request a private meeting with the Bearded One and arrive at his office with a plan.

His bearded face is red and grave. "This err umm is very serious, Baxter," he says.

I nod. I know what kind of trouble I'm in. But it's time for one last manipulation.

"I umm ahhh never expected this from you," he says. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Yes," I say, "I do. First of all, I don't want forgiveness. I merely provided a product for which there was a demand."

"I've seen some of your product," the Bearded One says. "It is disgusting."

I shrug. "One man's art is another's man's moral panic."

The Bearded One slams his hand down on the table. I've never seen him this angry. Which is exactly where I want him. "You are going to tell me everything I need to know about you and your accomplices," he says. "I'm warning you Zevcenko."

I smile. Compared to demon lords and giant crows, bearded headmasters are pretty low on the list of things to be afraid of. "No," I say, "I'm not. The Spider is me and only me. Everybody else that has participated is merely a pawn in my game."

"Everybody involved needs to face the consequences," he says with a frown.

"Think about," I say. "Either the press will report that Westridge is running rampant with knifemen and porn syndicates or that one rogue pupil, driven to the brink by social awkwardness and an eye condition, is responsible for it all."

"Even the stabbing?" the Bearded One says suspiciously.

I shrug. "I have a motive. Anwar was a threat to my business." It's a stupid move, I know. But if it takes the heat off the rest of the Spider, well...

He rubs his beard thoughtfully. "You realise that your punishment will be far more severe if you insist on maintaining that you're the only one responsible."

I nod.

"Right," he says. "We have a deal." Demons, weapons chemists, headmasters; they're all the same. Once you isolate their core motivations you're halfway there.

I'm expelled with criminal charges pending. My parents are predictably appalled. I'm subjected to several emotionally draining episodes where they beg me to tell them what they did wrong when I was a child. I'm unable to give them satisfactory answers. They're horrified by my missing finger and begin to believe I've become involved in some kind of self-mutilation cult. They make an appointment for me with a psychiatrist. I promise myself that I'll lie about everything.

Esme climbs up the drainpipe and slips into my room that night. "Thought it was the least I could do after you came to rescue me," she says as she pulls my top off.

"I thought you'd dumped me," I say as I unbutton her shirt.

"If I dump you, I'll tell you about," she says. "And include a spreadsheet list of all the things you've done wrong."

I laugh as she kisses my neck.

"You came to get me," she says looking into my eyes. "Bax that means a lot." She pushes me down onto the bed and straddles me. "You're a knight in shining armour," she whispers into my ear.

"Not even close," I murmur as she slides down my body.

It's weeks before I'm allowed to leave the house without supervision. My first excursion is to the beach. I trudge down the stairs to Clifton 2nd beach, my flip-flops slapping the concrete in an irregular rhythm. I push my sunglasses down onto my nose as I reach the soft, white sand and scan the area. I see a familiar figure standing at the water's edge. He's wearing his army boots and trench-coat with silk cartoon boxers and no shirt underneath.

“Alright, sparky?” he asks as I approach and pulls a hip-flask from his pocket.

I nod. “You?”

He opens his trench-coat to show me the empty scabbard.

“You’ll find another gun, Ronin.”

“It won’t be the same,” he sniffs and lifts the hipflask to his lips.

“And the other thing?” I ask.

Loyiso's power had helped keep the Widowmaker in check until we had gotten him to Pat's. It had taken several days of medication before he had started to return to his human form.

"You promised you would kill the Widowmaker if it came to that," he says handing me the flask.

"I lied," I say and take a sip of the burning liquid. "Lucky you."

"If you call a constant fear of returning to an unthinking bestial state lucky," he says.

We drink in silence for a while.

“I was expelled from school,” I say.

He shrugs. “I don’t have a high school education.”

“Yeah and look how you ended up,” I say.

He chuckles. “Loyiso’s going crazy looking for that little demon asshole Leonard. He’s forcing me to honour my promise and help him. You could always join Jackie Ronin and Associates Supernatural Bounty Hunting Service. Your supersight would really take the grunt work out of it.”

“Yeah, if I felt like almost getting killed again,” I say.

“C’mon, we could be like Batman and Robin,” Ronin says.

“You want me to dress up in tights, old man?”

“Dress up however you want, but you’re not getting a gun,” he says grinning

“I used to have partner with the Sight, you know?”

“Baresh,” I say.

Ronin nods. “Grumpy little fucker. But I guess you try being a gay, black Dwarf during apartheid. He’s the reason I became a supernatural bounty hunter. We worked together in Joburg and he taught me everything I know. When he died I got out of Jo’burg, in case any of his Dwarven friends decided to blame his death on me and set up shop here. Cape Town’s first and only Supernatural Bounty Hunter. I’m serious, think about it. Fighting supernatural crime and saving Cape Town from beasties, demons and freaks.”

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“Sounds alright,” I say

“Alright?” Jackie asks, fixing me with his blowtorch eyes. “It’s life-affirming is what it is.”

And you know what? Maybe it is. Hear that in your third-eye.