

Shadow of a Dead Star

Book One of the Wonderland Cycle

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To Ben, yes, you DID tell me so.
You were right.

To Carol, Verity and all those readers
who made this work possible...
Mother loves you all.

To Christina, without whose faith
I would not have finished this at all...
the best is yet to come.

Part One: Wonderland Calling

Chapter 1

When the call came in over the Bureau net, Walken had been sitting in his parked car listening to the rain. On nights like this, when the breath of the Sound condensed the mist into silver sheets of cool, drumming water, he found his thoughts directing inward more than usual. The rain drove his thoughts, the rain let him focus. He had a lot to think about on nights like these.

Seattle was a town in the middle of yet another cycle of reinvention. Over the past two hundred years the city had burned, expanded, gone through civil and economic collapse and dragged itself out of those ashes as well. Somewhere in the process it had lost its soul, though the city wasn't special in that case. The whole world was soulless in Walken's estimation. Commercialist, amoral, ambitious without cause - these were the symptoms of the sickness that pervaded the world around him and most everyone seemed to have bought in. Nobody seemed to care very much at all.

So why did he?

He couldn't say as to the precise moment that he had grown his conscience, strange as it was. Walken had been like everyone else once, after all. He'd joined Baltipol because it was a corporate job and he had intended to make Executive of Pacification by the time he was thirty; now he was working for the Fed. The badge in the pocket of his long coat identified him as an investigator of the United States Industrial Security Bureau. He was the technology police; the Man. As the call came over the network on his car's console terminal, he resolved to do the Man's work. Walken looked to the display as dispatch sent over the details and he

sighed as he looked at the data that spilled over the terminal's screen. Wonderland again.

Nothing good ever came from Wonderland.

That thought pulsed repeatedly through Walken's mind as he drove. The call that came in was marked AX219, the code reserved for a very specific source of criminal behavior. *Trafficking, Illicit Technological Device(s), Nation Code 219*. 219 was the code for Great Siam, which came into being when a militarized Thailand annexed its neighbors. Everyone on the streets called it Wonderland. It had become the single biggest hive of advanced, illicit technology on the planet thanks to the criminal labs that helped prop up the junta that ran it. Wonderland was a nightmare place where black magic was worked every day in laboratories that rivaled those of the corporate blocks.

Walken leaned into the driver's seat and let the car drive for him, listening to the rain wrestle with the hum of the hydrogen engine for supremacy. Four years ago he had been doing the narcotics beat. Now he worked for the Bureau, far away from the world of corner pushers. But you never got away from vice in this game. Not ever.

His destination was Seattle-Tacoma Transorbital, which even now landed ramjet-laden angels from all over the world. The Bureau had gotten a tip that an incoming cargo flight was smuggling a trio of Princess Dolls and wanted Walken to intercept. Dolls were usually made from street children, snatched off the street and chunks of their brains replaced with specialized hardware. They were illegal, perverse and way too goddamned popular with wealthy citizens and visitors in the city.

But a single Doll could cost as much as a small apartment building, never mind three of them and the slip-job into the country would have been no mean feat to arrange. He could already smell the tide of paperwork to come.

The sky darkened with the stain of night as he drove on. Up ahead the black spire of the Sea-Tac terminal was thrown into sharp relief against the fading evening by a halo of ground lights. Walken sat up in his seat and dialed the Bureau office through the terminal.

"I thought you'd have gotten there by now." The voice that rumbled from the car's speakers was rough and yet somehow brilliant, like silver gravel. "You waiting for a parade?"

A smirk tugged at Walken's lips and he rubbed at his forehead, peering at himself in the rearview: brown eyes under dark, heavy brows and a short fringe of equally dark curls. His face was pale and lean, with frown lines etched into his skin. It made him look much older than he was. "A beautiful night for a crusade, sir," he said with a thin chuckle. "Perfect sky and everything."

"Don't be a smartass," was Arthur Wolsey's grunted reply. Wolsey was his supervisor back at the Bureau, the big fish of their pond. Wolsey was the great eye staring down at him from atop the pyramid.

"You're the boss." Walken wrinkled his nose and peered out through the windshield as the car trundled along, graceful as a whale, down the offramp. The truth was that he'd chosen his pace based on nothing more than his own intuition. His own conscience. He had always relied on it, the voice in the back of his head, like a little ghost whispering to him the right way to go. It rarely failed him.

Wolsey knew this and his voice rang with disapproval. "Just you make sure that you don't miss the flight," he growled.

Walken nodded vaguely. He scanned the weeping sky one last time, poisoned gray-silver clouds hung against a slate-colored background darkening with oncoming night. He thumbed the car over to manual control and took the wheel.

"Don't worry, sir," Walken said to the console. "I wouldn't miss my own party."

"Yeah," Wolsey rumbled in grim reply.

Walken took the long way around, making a brief tour around the terminal lot before heading out toward the runways. He used a maintenance gate that Bureau hackers had isolated from the airport network. Soon the terminal was behind him again and the vast, pale ribbons of the runways stretched out before him.

Walken put the car between a pair of hangars near the edge of Runway 14 and waited. The plane had mercifully refrained from arriving early. He scanned the scene for obvious signs of trouble and finding none fired up the car's sensors. It took three passes before he was finally satisfied that he was alone.

His fingers danced across the liquid crystal panel set into the dashboard, connected to the Bureau net and checked to see if someone was be watching the flight on the airport network. Nothing. No suspicious persons visible through the camera grid, nobody riding the nets. Not one goddamned peep.

Walken checked his watch with pursed lips, waiting for the flight's approach while occasionally checking the scanner. He watched the display tick away until finally the time came, marked by his watch's tinny beeping and looked up through the rain-beaded windscreen at the black spike that now pierced the clouds.

The plane was long and slender, a flanged needle driving down toward the earth as it made its approach. The gun wedged against his ribs seemed to grow heavier as the plane descended; that was never a good sign. His nerves bristled. "Flight Seven-Two-Seven-Four inbound," he told the console. "Sensors read zero - doesn't look like there's anybody here."

Wolsey answered. "All right," he replied. "Maybe they got tipped off. Go ahead and set up. I'll have the flight put down right there."

Five minutes later the plane had touched down. It cooled at the end of the runway, silent and blind with no windows where the cockpit should have been. There wasn't a single living soul on board, only the AI that served as pilot and cargo steward. No doubt the AI would be hacked to blind itself against any attempted retrieval.

In the air the plane had been almost painfully graceful. Up close however, its grace had been lost and it looked more like a clumsy rendering of the ethereal thing it had been. On the ground it was phallic and angry, standing on thin struts as it towered over Walken and his car. Walken saw how its shoulders sloped out over the ramjet blisters, how they swept forward into narrow wings silhouetted against the fading rain. His nose wrinkled; technology was often like this for him, so lovely at a distance only to disappoint him up close. Unlike those around him, he was no worshiper at the altar of progress.

Presently Walken busied himself with his work. He pulled a sniffer out of its case in the trunk and set it up on its tripod. With it he could scope a Doll's augmented brain activity straight through the plane's hull. Visions of little girls in boxes or stuffed into crawlspaces hung in his mind as he started the sniffer up.

He swept the sniffer's blunt nose back and forth across the plane's belly with a practiced hand while keeping an eye on the display. One sweep, then again. Nothing. The distinct tang of ozone filled his nostrils as rain ionized in the wake of its searching beam. Crew vehicles approached now and his frown was thrown into sharp relief by their lights as he tried the sniffer again.

Where the Hell were they? Walken's brows knit, plastered against his face by the drizzle. He stared into the monitor as if it

were a wishing pool, eyes searching, straining for the luminous pulses he had been so sure he was going to see. The tip had come from one of the Bureau's most reliable Wonderland sources, one who had ended up getting thrown under a city bus not long after the plane had gone airborne. For a moment he was afraid that they might have been dumped on reentry over the Pacific, but the sheer cost of the three girls - he'd refused to call them 'units' as they were referred to in reports - made that very unlikely.

He swept the sniffer through again, tightening up its focus and was finally rewarded by the telltale blip of pale blue light on its display that marked what he had been looking for. It was in the tail section, jammed under the shadow of downswept canards, in the heavily shielded avionics bay. That was clever, he thought. It was a perfect location to stow contraband. He'd been lucky to find them with the sensor beam.

It didn't take long for Walken to flash his badge and direct the crew into opening the bird up. Red-suited technicians swarmed the plane like ants on an apple, opening up the accessway. The crew chief was a guy named Marcus, a good-looking man with coffee-colored skin and silver temples. He unsealed the maintenance hatch for Walken and pulled down the collapsing ladder to allow him access. Walken was about to start up the ladder when Marcus moved to follow him.

"Don't do that," Walken told him, standing on the bottommost rung.

"Why not, Agent?" Marcus' brows lifted a bit. "Regulations say that I have to be on premises in case of an emergency situation."

"This is a federal crime scene, sir."

Marcus snorted. "Not yet it ain't," he replied. "You break something up there and it's a whole night of overtime for me and my boys. I'll come back down if you find something, Agent, but un-

til you do I need to be on hand. Besides," he said, a grin blooming across his face, "I'm the one got the passcodes."

Walken peered at him in annoyance, but he nodded. Dolls weren't dangerous in and of themselves. "All right," he sighed after a moment, turning back to start up the ladder. "But once the bay's open, don't go inside or touch anything. All right?" Marcus shrugged assent and followed him up the ladder.

Soon the two of them were crouching in the compartment ahead of the avionics bay. Walken had abandoned the sniffer for his sidearm, a caseless Nambu nine-millimeter with burst capability and a selectable magazine full of tranquilizer flechettes and sealed copper-azide explosive rounds. The frags were for the Dolls themselves, should they not be sleeping already, but the explosives were for anything defensive that might have been shoved in there with them. As Marcus punched a sequence of numbers on the keypad built into the bay hatch, Walken brought the gun up into a ready position and braced himself.

"You ready?" Marcus asked him. His finger hovered over the hatch panel and at Walken's nod he punched the release. The door hissed open as he stood clear.

The bay beyond was the size of a large walk-in closet. It was completely dark; the only light came from the banks of avionics gear that was crammed into the walls, alight with luminous motes of green and amber.

"Get some light in here," Walken rumbled, the Nambu in his hand tracking shadows. Behind him he could hear Marcus draw a breath before fumbling with the controls. Tension stretched his shoulders taut as he waited for the shadows to be banished.

The lights came on and from behind him Marcus made a soft noise. There were three coffins leaning against the back of the bay, made of what Walken guessed was rubberized steel. Un-

marked and featureless they loomed as monoliths before the two men, unknown and forbidding in their silence.

"All right," said Walken and he took a step toward the containers. He swept the gun's muzzle beyond, spotted nothing out of the ordinary. Could they really just be here without defenses? "Go ahead and make your report to the terminal, Marcus. I've found what I was looking for here."

"Great," Marcus murmured and took a few steps backward on the deck. He didn't leave just yet; Walken could feel him hovering back by the hatch, no doubt wanting a peek at what lay within the coffins. Well, that was all right. If he wanted to play tourist, he was doubtless insured.

Walken reached for the first of the coffins and his hand found the handle recessed into its lid, which was cold and slightly tacky from its coating. Amid the clunk of magnetic tumblers he turned the handle toward the open position and took a step back.

Although the coffin's lid weighed at least two hundred pounds it moved smoothly on concealed hinges, revealing what lay inside.

As pale and as peaceful as a corpse, a little girl lay snuggled in the coffin's padded interior. She couldn't be older than eight.

Someone had put the little girl in a sexed-up version of a traditional white European wedding dress, complete with lace gloves, veil and train. The bodice was cut low for cleavage she didn't even have and the front of the dress's belled skirt was peaked high to show her thin legs clad in fishnet hose and garters. The towering heels of the pumps she wore would not have looked out of place in a strip club.

Her face was as peaceful as if she were dead. It was tiny and round, but the sweetness of it had been hidden away under the artfully-styled waves of her black hair and the garish colors of her very modern makeup. Presented thus, she might as well be a

shop front mannequin. She was a parody of everything she might have been had she not been put through the atrocity mill.

Walken heard Marcus mutter from behind him. "Jesus. Is that what you were looking for?"

"Yeah." Walken reached into his pocket for his button phone, slipped it into his ear and after connecting its mic to the line of his jawbone gave a command to dial into the Bureau net. "Walken here," he rumbled coldly when Dispatch answered. "I've found the delivery." He didn't wait for a response; he hung up, knowing that even as he did so the Dispatch ops would be summoning Civil Protection and forensic techs to secure the area.

He moved to unseal the hatch of the next coffin and then that of the next; they revealed two other Dolls in identical dresses, though these girls were slightly older than the first.

"Seems a waste to put a kid in a dress like that," Marcus said behind him. His tone was soft, almost reverent and at first Walken almost thought that he felt as badly for the girls as he did. But as he was carefully looking over the three little Dolls, pity and revulsion painting a black streak down the back of his throat, Marcus disappointed him. "Those are Dina Berans."

"What?" Walken looked hard at him from over his shoulder and Marcus flinched. The anger Walken felt, not only at the state of the Dolls but at the apparent lack of concern toward their state held by the other man, made the bitter taste in his mouth even worse.

"Dina Beran," Marcus repeated as if this should answer everything, taking a step back against the accessway and spreading his hands. "The dresses. They're from this year's collection. My girl, she's been going on about them since they came out. They cost a hundred thousand each, you know?" He was about to say more, but something caught his attention. "Hey, what's that the little one's got with her?"

Walken looked at the youngest of the three and frowned again. She had a small shadow tucked under her arm, previously hidden by a fringe of lace. The tender warmth of youth had been obliterated to allow the perverse canvas made of her to shine and, as if in recognition of this fact - or perhaps in celebration of it - a teddy bear in a groom's tuxedo had been tucked under her arm. Something was embroidered in neat cursive letters on its lapel.

Walken pulled on a pair of filmy gray evidence gloves from his pocket and reached for the bear. What he saw written on its jacket made his face harden and the noxious sewer of anger inside of him surge to the top of his throat.

"What's it say?" Marcus's tone was guarded this time.

Walken took a deep breath; his hand clenched around the bear, crushing it in his fingers. "'Daddy'," he rumbled and his voice was as cold as the blood that now ran in his veins. "It says 'Daddy'."

Chapter 2

Walken said very little while on the scene. After cordoning off the area he reset the sniffer and made sure that neither the coffins or their cargo were trapped against further tampering; once he was satisfied there was no danger he waited for Civil Protection and the Bureau's technicians to arrive. He stayed with the Dolls up until the CivPro rep called up and growled at him for not being outside to greet him. Walken didn't care; CivPro might be the police, but they were corporate contractors. They charged the city by the hour anyway.

During his tenure with the Bureau Walken had seen some of the worst shit he'd ever thought possible. Working the Wonderland beat was like falling into a well to nowhere. You tried very hard not to think about it. It was the same with the cops, he knew, people who saw terrible things all the time on street level. You got up, got back on the horse and moved along to the next abomination while savoring the peaceful hours in between.

But corporate cops didn't have to deal with the special kind of terrible that Walken and his kind were treated to. The perversities that *they* witnessed were of a kind he had come to hold as distinctly pedestrian. His lot, by contrast, was to serve as a witness to sins that would kill faith in many human creatures. His own had long been worn at. He often felt it nearly giving way.

Tonight's episode had proven to be especially corrosive. While with the Bureau, Walken had seen plenty of sex crimes committed in the course of the so-called 'Wonderland beat.' Some had applied to children. On occasion some of those children had been killed, sometimes very messily. And yet these had been affairs to be glimpsed and moved on from as CivPro took over, sor-

did matters for the sordid hands of corporate police. It was something to be acknowledged but never visited.

The Dolls were different. They weren't just victims of the Wonderland trade — they *were* the Wonderland trade. He had watched as they were unloaded from their coffins and placed in isolation capsules, watched as they were carried into the back of a waiting ambulance where they'd be taken back to the Bureau office for analysis.

Walken knew what they'd get after that. They'd each get fifty cc's of neurotoxin when the Meds were done with them and they would sweat out the last bit of their sad, pointless lives as anonymous victims. It wasn't mercy to the Bureau as much as it was policy, the disposal of contraband. It was the same policy for firearms disposed in an impound smelter. The parents they had left behind — if they had ever known them at all — would never have known what happened to their daughters. Walken thought that if there was anything merciful at all involved in this whole terrible business, it would be that.

In the meantime Wolsey had sent him to see a man named Anton Stadil. Stadil, an Albanian, had been a big wheel in the industrial game out that way around the time of the European War. Whatever had happened to his industries during the war wasn't clear, but he had disappeared for the duration of the conflict only to surface again as an entrepreneur in the States. His current claim to fame was a particularly lucrative club on the waterfront, tailored toward the rich-and-pervy set, called the Ballroom.

The Ballroom was a rich front, but the Bureau had long believed that his real business was in illegal goods. Civil Protection had never been able to make anything stick to him and the fact that he wasn't known to deal in Wonderland tech made him pretty difficult for the Bureau to pin down as a priority. Some people called him the 'Lucky Angel' after his ability able to keep himself

out of the prison pit on wings made of expert attorneys and lots of cash.

Stadil was a beast who knew a lot of things and the Bureau wanted to harness him. The best they had been able to manage was to pick up certain obscure yet valuable pieces of information from him at a premium rate. Though he didn't deal in the stuff himself, Stadil often had connections that intersected with Wonderland interests; given that the Bureau's informant on the Dolls had been tossed under a Phuket City transit bus mere hours after giving them up, finding the Dolls' source meant a great deal of work cultivating new sources.

Given the amount of work that would involve, the Bureau decided to take the express route. Stadil would have to do.

Wolsey reasoned that if Stadil had any knowledge of the Dolls he would pass it off for easy cash. If he were somehow involved, Walken should still be able to tell. Either way, Wolsey and the Bureau would get what they wanted from the situation. *Everyone's happy*, Walken mused grimly as he muscled through traffic down the coastal highway. He watched the streetlights swing by throwing chalky haloes over the passing traffic, phantoms haunting the same of highway. *Everyone's happy but those girls in the meat bus. Everyone's happy but me.*

The Ballroom was on the other side of the Field, what people called the largest concentration of warehouses in the area. It was a vast floating construction tethered to the shore south of Alki Point, a vast expanse of cargo barns and warehouse structures stretching out into the Sound to the south of the Puget Trans-Sound Bridge. Part nightclub, part sex club, the Ballroom was a Bacchic temple that catered to everyone who could afford it.

It had once been a corporate warehouse, one of the big, hardened concrete vaults used for bulk merchandise, but Stadil had bought it years ago and had spent a lot of money to have it

redone into a shape more fitting his needs. Walken had never seen the place, but he had heard it was impressive. As he navigated the maze of warehouses he was not disappointed.

He caught glimpses of it as he approached, viewed through the spaces between buildings. It was a bizarre half-molten thing, a concrete ziggurat sloping upward from the ground like wax left a little too long in the sun. It was as if the whole thing had risen, failed and then sort of coagulated in spite of gravity. The sight of the structure, impressive and out of place as it was, made Walken inexplicably uncomfortable.

The car threaded its way through the Field and eventually into the Ballroom's shadow. Walken parked it in an alley behind a line of warehouses facing one side. Night was falling; the lot on the Sound side of the pier was already full of limousines and sleek sedans, the angular wedges of sports cars, indicating that business was already well on its way. *I guess there really is no rest for the wicked*, Walken thought as he sat watching people clad in the dubious skins of this year's fashions queue into its waiting doorway.

He sat in the car for a while and stripped his pistol in the back seat, waiting for the time to be right. It was a graceful thing, the Nambu, with a sculpted grip and a long muzzle. The whole gun was made from ceramic and polycarbon for lightweight carry. It felt like a toy in his hand as he took it apart, cleaned it and put it back together again in an act of seamless meditation.

An hour later, just as evening had cured into night, the time came. Walken finished re-assembling the Nambu one last time and tucked it into his coat, swinging easily out from under the car's gullwing door. The club pulsed with light as he stood before it. Every step of the ziggurat was illuminated with bright blue xenon bulbs hidden in their recesses, making the Ballroom glow like something out of myth on the edge of the water. As Walken start-

ed off toward the place he tried to imagine what it must look like from farther down the Sound. Babylon came to mind.

Bouncers of all stripes gave cops attitude. *It's something in their DNA*, Walken figured as he waited patiently to get the attention of the monstrous fellows hovering outside the Ballroom's doors. He watched them with amusement as he stood there, badge clearly displayed in one hand, waiting for one of them to pretend that they had only just noticed. Every one of them looked like upright bulldogs with a severe myostatin disorder; slabs of lab-cultured muscle had been slid under their skins and stapled onto the original beef. You didn't need steroids when you got in and out of a surgical boutique in a few days. None of that was cheap, of course. They were show ponies as much as they were functional security and demonstrated the amount of money that Stadil was willing to put into his men.

Eventually one of the beef jockeys copped to the show. He stood there for a moment, peering at Walken in his gray suit and long coat, frowning. *They always frown at cops*, Walken thought. *It must make them feel badass*. He was coming over to quiz him - name, purpose, the validity of the badge. Walken was used to this.

He put up a bland mask as the bouncer - whom he had decided to name Beefy - gave him the expected static; it didn't take long for Beefy to tap his neck, have a brief conversation with someone through what must be an implanted microphone and, after informing Walken that Stadil would send for him soon, jerked his head back toward the doors. A cluster of girls in black plastic harnesses were being herded in like giggling cattle. He flashed his best and brightest at the boys by the door before ducking inside.

Entering the Ballroom was like entering a cathedral. Its interior was cavernous, giving credence to its initial existence as a warehouse. It took up the two lower 'steps' of the three-level ziggurat, covered with neon sculptures and holographic panels de-

picting sexual acts of every possible configuration. These images drifted on the walls, as if the place was Angkor Wat and they were apsaras writhing and twisting away in their ecstasy. The black marble floor was dotted with piles of cushions in lieu of tables.

A heady mix of tribal rhythm and sharp electronic fugues pulsed from hidden speakers. It reached in and pulled some of the steel from Walken's spine; even he, with his brain dialed entirely over to police instinct, couldn't entirely deny its relaxing power. The music served as the undercurrent upon which everything floated.

As he crossed the floor he saw a girl laid out among one of the piles of cushions, surrounded by a group of people lounging like lions in the grass. She was stripped to the waist and on her stomach and Walken saw that each of those around her had a needle as long as his forearm. They were sinking the spines into her back, causing her to writhe as if she were in panting agony.

As he drew nearer, however, he could see nerve ports shining like silver lesions on her skin — the needles were probes, stimulating her nervous system directly. What he mistook to be pain was now clearly a far more desirable agony. As he passed he watched as she arched her back with slow deliberation, attempting to impale herself further beneath the lurid smiles of her fellows, opening her mouth in silent supplication to whatever gods of pleasure that rode her like a Voudoun cheval.

Walken looked away. He was suddenly and crushingly aware of similar scenes unfolding around him. A knot of arousal and inexplicable discomfort bound itself in his guts and he found himself focusing hard on the music as he pushed toward the bar that lined the far corner. He let it fill him up, drive his steps, each footfall landing with the thumping of the bass. His head bobbed as he bellied up to the bar and ordered a beer from a smiling, curvy girl who stood behind it.

She wore a tight catsuit of matte red vinyl, unzipped to the top of her navel. The inner halves of her unclothed breasts made impressive cleavage above the dangling charm her zipper served to be. Her hair was like a cockatiel's, dyed bright neon pink and catching the light of all the neon over the bar it shone like a halo. She introduced herself as Bobbi and took the rumpled plastic bills he gave her with a wink. *Twelve dollars for a beer*, Walken thought. *It's a club all right.*

"So you don't look like you're here for any reason I'd expect," she called to him, shouting cheerfully over the noise as she sat his bottle of Tsingtao down in front of him, pulled its cooler tab and popped its lid by hand.

"What gave it away," he deadpanned, taking a deep swig of the beer. He liked her voice. It was light, feminine, yet crackled with energy. She had substance that pushed her away from the background.

Bobbi smiled, exposing rows of small white teeth. "You don't look like you're here to enjoy yourself," she said. She leaned forward on her elbows to further perpetrate her charms on him. "And they're always here to enjoy themselves, one way or another."

A wide bar of white paintstick was drawn across her eyes, catching the light and dampening their intense green which he felt was a shame. "Maybe I get off on looking gloomy."

"That's a whole different scene." It was her turn to shrug. "But that's cool, you know? Everybody got their kick."

A broad hand fell on his shoulder. "Time to go," said Beefy, his voice low and grim in Walken's ear. "Mr. Stadil will see you now."

Chapter 3

The show still lingered in the back of Walken's mind as he followed the bouncer through the door by the bar. He wondered what kind of alchemy had changed her senses to appreciate that pain.

He had always been interested in it, the ability to transmute agony into pleasure — flickers of memory shone in his mind as he passed through the doorway and into the storeroom, himself as a kid in Baltimore, reading Japanese skin mags in the back of an abandoned store. Beautiful girls in webs of knotwork, some with nerve-probes jutting out of plugs in their spines. You could stimulate their pleasure centers directly by just grazing your fingers over the plugs, send them twisting away into orgasm. You could do the same thing without the probes, he knew, but it took practice and an intimacy that didn't really exist these days. Well, not without a lot of recreational drugs.

Not that there was any shortage of *those*.

He'd never done it, but he sure had thought a lot about it. The thought of Bobbi, how she might have looked there on that floor, surfaced briefly in his mind as Beefy conducted him into the elevator. It was a pleasant thought.

They stood in silence, only the electric pine-tree scent of the big man's cologne hanging between them. The climb was soon over, but before the doors could open Beefy had punched the stop with a knuckle on the elevator's stainless steel panel.

He turned to Walken, arms crossed over his breast and gave him a formidable look. "Your gun," he commanded.

"I'm a federal investigator," Walken reminded him with a hint of irritation.

Beefy grunted. "I don't give a damn. You want to see Mr. Stadil, you stow your blaster."

This whole thing was swiftly getting old, but he agreed. 'Extend courtesy', Wolsey had told him. Stadil was a source that the Bureau wanted to cultivate, after all. He didn't want to be the one to fuck it up.

Of course, if Stadil had truly been the one to have arranged for the Dolls to be smuggled over from Wonderland he'd want to see him swing, but it was Wolsey's call and Wolsey always had a plan. No doubt he was simply seeking to determine the measure of guilt; it wasn't the Bureau's job to snag the usual kind of smugglers, after all and some other bureau probably had connections to him anyway. He handed the Nambu over to Beefy; the palm-lock on his weapon beeped, ensuring that Beefy couldn't turn around and tag him with his own gun. He had a backup anyway, a little Matriyu ultralight tucked into a hidden pocket in the crotch of his slacks. "All right," he finally said. "Here it is."

Beefy took the gun without looking at it, tucking it into the waistband of his slacks and punched the stop again. The doors slid open.

Beyond the elevator doors was another large room, though much smaller than the Ballroom floor had been. It was an office, crammed with antiques and vintage paraphernalia; Victorian furniture arrayed upon a prewar Klimt rug, the organic porcelain forms of a Twenties-era Braun tea service, signs from Old Europe, an Autobahn exit marker and a filthy factory placard covered in Cyrillic spray bomb.

The room was framed with enormous video screens which, in lieu of windows, gave an excellent view all around. The Field spread out on one side, the city glowing beyond it and on the other the black expanse of the Sound. The view was so clear that Walken could nearly count the needles on the arcology domes that

floated on the polluted water. The mixture of modern technology and antiques might have been elegant somewhere else, but in Stadil's realm it was an excessive mishmash, lacking theme - almost as if he had no clue why he was collecting in the first place.

"That will be enough, William." A voice, rough and heavily Slavic, came from an open doorway in the far wall. A man followed it as Walken turned in that direction. This, he knew, must be Stadil.

There was such a brutal look to Stadil, tall and broad-chested with blunt lines and heavy features, that he couldn't have mistaken him for anyone else. Yet, as he moved into the office and looked the two of them over, he carried with him an air of incongruous charm. Beefy nodded once and exited the room without a word, leaving the two of them alone.

Stadil smiled, showing a mouthful of broad, perfectly white (and synthetic) teeth and Walken found himself possessed of the distinct sensation of being faced with a cheerful tiger. "You are... Agent Thomas Walken of the Industrial Security Bureau. Yes?"

Walken merely nodded.

"Badge number seven-seven-three-one-two-alpha. You are coming to see about three items that were to be brought here from Great Siam this evening that have been inexplicably tied to me. You think that I have ordered them for a client."

Walken nodded once. Stadil's naming his badge number was a show, something to say 'Ha ha, you fucker, I got you pegged.' He was used to such grandstanding in people like him. "That's the word," he replied.

Stadil's heavy brows lifted just a hint before he nodded. "You are of course coming to see if they are here, yes? I can assure you that they are not. There are--"

Walken wrinkled his nose. "Mister Stadil," he began, forcing his voice into what he felt was a very professional, very patient tone, "Let's be straight with one another, shall we? If you've

enough information to pick my office and designation, sir, you know I'm not coming to search the premises."

The reply seemed to please Stadil; he smiled that tiger's smile again and moved to take a seat behind a heavily scrolled, massive oak altar of a desk that took up much of the back end of the room. "I deal in industrial machinery," he said with a chuckle. "Milling parts, generators, this sort of thing; metal, computers maybe, but not flesh. And I do not handle orders from Great Siam, I think you know."

"Industrial parts," Walken repeated. His hands slid behind his back, slowly but deliberately. He tried not to seem amused.

"Exactly." Stadil leaned back in his padded leather chair and nodded. "And none come from the 'Wonderland.' But... that is not to say that I am not hearing about these... what do you call them?"

"Princess Dolls."

Another smile. "Yes, the 'Princess Dolls'." Stadil leaned back a bit more and produced from a drawer a large remote. He prodded at it a moment and the screens flickered off. "In my business, to satisfy a client order you are sometimes made to search out... alternative means of securing resources."

Walken frowned and nodded. "All right," he said. "And this is where you heard about them?"

Stadil nodded as well. "Exactly. I am hearing from a different source that three of these... Princess Dolls... are coming in on a nonstop flight from Great Siam." Stadil was quiet a moment and his thick fingers spread out fanlike on the desktop, drumming on a laminated blotter that would never see a pen. "I can perhaps find for you the name of who they were meant for. But..."

"It'll cost me." Walken completed his sentence, frowning still. He looked even less amused when Stadil burst into laughter.

"You?" Stadil shook his head, his short hair stalwart against gravity. "No, no, Agent — not you. Your agency, perhaps, but I

would never presume to ask a personal favor. It would not be, as you say, ethical. I will speak to your superior, Mr. Wolsey. Then, if he agrees, I will point you in the direction you need to go."

"All right," Walken ground out. The thought of having to deal with this bastard — at Bureau request no less! — only served to frustrate him. "I'll wait downstairs, shall I?"

"Unnecessary." Stadil reached for the phone. "I will be speaking to him here, if you do not mind. It will not be long."

The bastard enjoyed this far too much. Making him wait, making him sit through that bizarre show and then bringing him up here to dangle information in front of him. The conversation he had with Wolsey was entirely in a language he didn't understand and entirely at Stadil's leisure. Upon closing up his end of the conversation he reached over and slid the phone across his desk.

"Agent Wolsey wishes to speak with you," Stadil nearly purred. The tiger's smile had returned.

"I'm sure." Walken reached for the handset, lifted it to his ear. "I'm here, sir," he said into the receiver.

Wolsey was always fairly acerbic, even on a good day. It recalled the angry police chiefs in old teleprograms, the old stereotype still in operation since the earliest police shows. Talking to him now, however, revealed a patina of calm covering over his superior's usual growl.

"You are to follow Stadil's lead where he points you," said Wolsey, his voice flat as the surface of a cemetery pond. "He's got information on who he believes ordered the Dolls. Go and get them."

Walken didn't really know how to reply. He stared at Stadil for a moment, his face set, countering the man's smile with his own grim expression. Perhaps it was within the purview of the Bureau to maneuver in such a way, but it hadn't happened since Walken had joined up. It for damned sure didn't make him happy.

"Are you sure, sir?" He knew the answer before it had come out of his mouth and he didn't blame Wolsey for barking the affirmative and hanging up. He took a deep breath, smiled a very forced but reasonably civil smile and put the handset back into its socket.

"All right, Mr. Stadil," Walken said, his voice as flat as Wolsey's had been. "What have you heard?"

What Stadil had heard was brief but very interesting. According to the Slav it was a pack of Jopok boys, soldiers of the Korean mob, long since imported from the motherland and generations ingrained. The Koreans had made their way up the West Coast to Seattle from Los Angeles over the past seventy years. After the crews down there had solidified as a part of the city's criminal infrastructure it wasn't long before new gangs broke off on their own, running girls, drugs, protection rackets. Sometimes they even did smuggling work for the Wonderland houses. It wouldn't be the first time he'd had to deal with them.

The Koreans weren't nearly as powerful or wealthy in Seattle as they were further down the coast, and Stadil hadn't heard of any Korean boss that was into kids. Come to that, neither had Walken.

Stadil couldn't say where the Koreans were now, but he did know that a group of them had been tasked with recovery, testing and delivery of product, led by a hacker named Park Jang Woo. A generic enough name, but Walken knew it; Park was a young, up-and-coming data intrusion expert among the local Jopok boys. Hot shit but wasted on gangsters. There was far more money to be made with corporate espionage. Safer money. As Walken stepped out into the cool September evening, he felt the voice in his head whisper that the lead was strong. It made sense.

It wasn't until he'd gotten in the car and driven halfway across the field toward the highway that he reached for the car's panel

and found himself calling Wolsey's number for a call he had apparently missed.

"Where in the hell have you been?" Wolsey's voice was a roar that filled the car's cabin. "I've been calling you for twenty minutes!"

"Talking to Stadil," Walken replied. "I didn't get any call on my head-rig..." He paused to take the little earbud phone out of his pocket; a tiny light glowed serenely blue on its black snail-shell body, indicating full charge and no problems. "...no, it's fine. Maybe he has his office shielded."

Wolsey spat a muttered curse. "Well get your ass back toward Sea-Tac," he rumbled. "There's a hell of a mess building up there."

Walken frowned. Dread pooled cold and heavy in his gut. "The Dolls?"

"Somebody hit the bus on the way back up toward the office." Wolsey's voice was a constant thrum of barely-constrained rage. "Someone hacked the on-board guidance and stopped it in the middle of the Verge."

Ah, shit. "The crew?"

"Buttoned up and unable to override," Wolsey told him. "They were stuck at an intersection when whoever made this happen came and shot the fuck out of 'em."

Walken drew a breath. The dread thickened. "Stadil said there might be a Jopok crew signed on to get the shipment," he said.

"Son of a bitch!" Walken flinched as Wolsey's voice tested the threshold of the car's speakers. "Get the hell down there and find out what's happened. Civil Protection's already on scene with orders to hold until an agent arrives, but you know how those fuckers are. Get down there and sort this out before some corporate asshole screws the whole thing up."

Chapter 4

Walken made for the scene with all best speed, shouldering the car through shoals of traffic. Things thinned out as he reached the Verge and the glittering spires of the city's downtown core gave way to the slow decay of its far less modern outliers.

Seattle now consisted of three divisions: the New City, Old City and the Verge. The New City was the downtown core, corporate-dominated and commercial. The Old City, which served as the area's outermost border, was a dense wilderness of long-abandoned urban ruin. In between them was the Verge which, although largely dominated by the poor and working class, served as a border between the two zones. With economic prosperity on one side and chaos on the other, the people of the Verge were constantly sweating with the weight of their twin burdens. It was no surprise that it was from there where much of the organized crime in the city originated.

The city had very much become a spreading amoeba of neon and consumerism. Consumer society had existed in its super-charged form even in the previous century and graft and civil corruption since the dawn of civilization. It had nearly killed the city once already; by the Thirties the whole state government had gone bankrupt in an explosion of scandal. Forget reform - the Fed rebuilt the whole damned system.

The state and civil governments had been reduced in scope and power; there was a whole new movement at the time, driven by the swollen specter of corporate interest, to reduce states' rights thanks to big-time fuckups like that. It wasn't as if Washington had been the first state to do it. California had nearly taken a nosedive some twenty years before and the Midwest had its whole

agro-economic collapse, but this had been the last straw. Corporations moved in to take care of much of the lower levels of administration in the form of contracted labor and with open corporate interest came prosperity and civil expansion. A great engine of development followed, fueled by investment capital and it took hold of the area around the previous downtown area. In ten years it had created what would soon become the New City.

The New City was everything the Old City was not; new, clean, free of the character of the city it had been spawned to overwrite. It wasn't a haven of creativity and modern Bohemians. It wasn't even about corruption anymore. It was instead being turned into a great corporate camp, glittering and soulless, run more and more by the interests that handled the processes of this new organism they had collectively grown.

He hated it with a passion. Even as he crossed into the immediately tattered confines of the Verge he felt himself relax; the weight of the towers and the empty people that crowded them seemed to slide off his back and every degree by which the New City shrank in the rearview its influence fell away. Even the terrible thing which he sped toward seemed less of a challenge. The Verge was home, after all. He lived here, knew its streets. The police were waiting for him.

But 'police' was an outdated term, gone out of style the same way Miranda rights were no longer sacred. It suggested a form of pure public order, an interest in justice that seemed entirely absent in the city of today. History had seen the country become very top-heavy; the government had retracted itself into the form of an administrative nexus, cutting away many of its civil operations and corporate interests had rushed in to prop the whole mess up.

These days, the jackbooted constabulary of Seattle was a privatized affair referred to as Civil Protection — CivPro — and they

were in many ways no better than some of the iron-handed outfits operating out of the Third World. CivPro officers were gargoyles haunting city corners with armored uniforms and machine pistols, sneering at anyone who didn't look like they had a decent credit rating.

Their lights marked the way, a swollen mass of fluxing red and blue among the empty streets of this forgotten corner of the Verge. The rain had thankfully let up and the cordon of officers ringing the scene stood steaming in transparent plastic slickers. The blue and white of their uniforms was bright under ribbed black ballistic armor. Walken knew the weight of the riot armor himself. He'd been a street cop in Baltimore before he joined Narco, after all, long before he'd come over to work for the Bureau.

Beyond them sat the bus. It looked as if it had been hit by a military gunship. The loaf-shaped ambulance was perforated an obscene number of times with holes as thick as a man's thumb, strewn in the orderly runs of assault rifles. Machine pistols wouldn't have the power or capacity for the strafing done here. The façade of the building it had stopped in front of was like a prehistoric ruin, pocked and shattered with the hollows left by stray rounds. The single streetlight at the corner drowned the ruined vehicle in its harsh sodium glare, as if to proclaim its tragedy.

He got out of the car and made his way past the cordon, his badge parting Seattle's corporate finest like Moses on speed. He scouted for someone in a suit coat. Someone that mattered. It didn't take long to find him; by the ruins of the bus was a knot of heavily-armed officers toting automatics. The suit was there with them.

"Agent Walken, Industrial Security," announced Walken as he closed the distance with the man. He was thin, rather pale, but wore about him an air of arrogance and self-importance that was almost as solid as his charcoal suit. "Good evening."

The pale man looked at him, his eyes working in a slow blink. "Detective Davis," he replied in a thin tenor. "Man in charge. You're late." He seemed almost bored.

Walken did his best to smile. CivPro 'Detectives' were as much corporate reps as they were investigators and Davis seemed more the former than the latter. Giving a shit wasn't in his job description. "Hit traffic on the way over," he said. "Sirens don't go as far as they used to, you know?"

"Traffic's a bitch," said Davis. His bored look turned into a thin smile, malicious around the corners. He thrust his chin toward the perforated ruin. "So I suppose that this your mess, Agent. Federal contraband stolen right off a city street? Medical crew shot up? Even for the Verge, that's classy."

Walken gave him a flat look. "Yeah," he said after a moment. "Just my luck. You got a report for me, Detective?"

"Looks like someone was planning an intercept." Davis shrugged, looking at the watch of heavy lunar silver hanging from his wrist. "Hacked into the autodrive over a secure signal, probably a carrier piggybacked over the standard comms wave — I figure it's up to you to figure out how *that* was done — and sealed the crew in by triggering the bus's onboard quarantine suite. Steered it off the expressway out here and parked it, where they were waiting." He waved at the wreck. "You can see what happened next, I'm sure."

"Yeah." Walken glanced around. "Where's the medical team?"

"On their way." Davis slipped his hands into his pockets with another shrug. "No signs of life in there, Agent. Nary a thump nor a whisper. Whoever did this cut the whole crew."

Walken grimaced. "And the cargo?"

"Pods read open," Davis said. "We haven't looked inside. That's your job, after all."

The sneer in Davis' tone made heat rise up the back of Walken's neck. He nodded, drew his Nambu and proceeded warily toward the ambulance. Better there than here, where he might be tempted to pistol-whip that smarmy fucker.

The ambulance looked even worse as he drew close. The smell of blood filled his nostrils as he surveyed the shredded vehicle. The holes sprayed into its dark blue hull were all above the midline, he noted, about waist level to the crew inside. One of the bus's rear doors hung slightly open. A hint of shattered glass glinted on the deck just beyond. Blood raced in his ears as he stared into the vague sliver of sputtering light beyond and every nerve sang in warning as Walken stepped up on the bumper and nudged the back hatch full open.

The door swung open, revealing the crumpled body of a woman in medical blues. She had gone the same way as her vehicle, shredded through with automatic fire. Her body lay tangled among the cords of a portable defibrillator, wreathed in a pool of darkening blood. The majority of her head had been sprayed across the lower half of the bus and what remained was a shattered piñata of meat and bone.

Walken stared at the dead woman for a long moment, as if searching for her long-fled mortality, before tearing his gaze upward. The isolation pods where the Dolls had been stored lined the right side of the ambulance, two moored in brackets along the floor and one along the top along with a large equipment module. The lower pods were empty.

The upper pod, however, had been drilled through like the bus around it. Walken's blood began to pound loudly his ears as he looked at the clear canopy clouded with the spidery lacework of cracks ringing bullet holes, the white spray of synthetic blood. Beyond the gory veil he could see one of the Dolls — the middle one, he thought, despite her obscured face — and he knew that she

was dead. One hand, drained of color, was pressed against the ruined glass — even with her brain savaged as it was, the animal reflexes had still fired.

When he stepped out and gave the all clear, Davis and his men looked even more bored and disappointed. They had no doubt hoped for something the bomb boys could bill the Fed for. "What's the ETA on that new bus?" Walken called down to them.

"Got about twenty minutes," Davis called back. "Pretty messy in there, huh?"

Walken gave him a dim look. "Yeah," he said, then his words dissolved into muttering as he stepped back inside the bus. "Bastards." Twenty minutes to scan the area before the forensic techs and the coroner arrived. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes to try and clear his mind, to put himself into the necessary state of observation. Seconds ticked by. His eyes adjusted to the darkness.

When he opened them again the entire scene leapt into his mental stage. Holes everywhere, shots from only one direction based on the ragged curls of metal pointing inward from the right. Dead medic on the floor. Blood everywhere, red and white mingling into pink among the diamonds of the decking. It was plain, too, that whoever had hit the bus had some idea of its configuration, the gunfire specific in its application to clear out the crew and leave the pods untouched.

But not entirely, the voice in his head reminded him. He looked again at the Doll's pod. The holes still occasionally dripped half-congealed whiteness. Whoever it was that hit the bus, they didn't seem have all the information. They destroyed part of their intended cargo and from what he could see it was unintentional. It could simply be a very unfortunate coincidence, but he didn't think that he was dealing with professionals here. They were messy. Messy usually meant a trail.

He crouched down by one of the empty pods and examined the lockplate. No obvious sign of mechanical interference, no sign of acid or carbon scoring from a laser cutter. That interested him. He stared at the plate for a long moment, searching for signs of activity — and then he saw a glint of light around the interface port on the side of the lock. New scratches shone around the port, indicating recent use. Someone must have plugged into the lock and hacked it directly.

Walken sat back, frowning. The Koreans. They must have one hell of a systems man, just like Stadil had told him.

"I figure it took them about five minutes to do it." Davis was standing on the street by the open doorway. "Damned fast work, too — we don't take our time with federal requests. They got in here before even the first patrol units arrived."

Walken stood. "Yeah," he murmured to himself, his face grave. Not many people could have slotted in and overridden a lock like that at such a rapid pace — this kid, he really was a hell of a talent. Too bad that he was wasted on his current company and due for prison at least now that he was involved with murder.

He turned to look at the ruined body of the dead medic, staring again. Half her head was missing. Tongue lolled over splintered teeth, partly split by a passing bullet. Terrible. By her ruined head, however, a footprint had been made in the congealing blood. Cross-slashed voids, the soles of men's orbital boots. Expensive and impractical for surface wear. It spoke of someone who had either grown up in space or merely longed for it. He wondered if Park had been raised on one of the colonies in orbit, maybe Treehaus or Ellery-Simms. It was a clever crew, but raw. Good planning and terrible execution. Hitting the bus and killing off the medics probably meant little to them, but they had managed to kill one of their three charges. There was no kind of universe in which they could escape the wrath of their bosses now.

So what then? Would they try and sell the Dolls off and disappear from the city? Or perhaps they'd leave them behind and just take off? The latter seemed doubtful; the money needed to disappear with the thoroughness a botch like this required would demand the kind of cash that the Dolls were worth. In any case, the situation was a bad one. A Romeo, the worst sort of case that an agent of the Bureau found himself having to take. His first.

Walken moved past the pods and the dead woman to check the other two slumped over the dash. Like the other medic, these two had also been shredded with gunfire; the driver's face was a void of bloody hamburger hanging off in strips from ruined bone. The other medic, a tech, was still tethered to the bus's systems by an interface cable leading from the back of his ventilated skull. More blood across the ruined windows.

A Romeo. Walken drew a deep breath and collected himself before he turned to address Davis, who was still lingering at the door. "I'm invoking a Code Romeo," he informed him. "I'll need all the surveillance data you have in this area — patrol cameras, whatever street cameras still function in this area. Drone footage. Whatever. Cook me a relevant précis. Any witnesses in the area?"

A Romeo was an emergency code that was applied to situations where Wonderland tech was missing — or, in this case, absconded with and on the move. Invoking it meant a press blackout and a demand of full cooperation from civil — that was, corporate — employees. It meant that Davis would be looking at a near-endless line of overtime hours for which he as a salaried employee would not be getting paid, something that seemed to dawn on him now as he gave Walken a deep frown. "Not a one," he replied, his own tone very grave. "This part of the Verge went empty after the water grid was shut down. I'll see what I can do about the footage."

He moved to go, but Walken stopped him. "Get the quarantine box out," he instructed Davis, lips pursed.

"Beg pardon?" Davis's expression had already soured in the face of work already requested.

"The quarantine data recorder." Walken jerked a thumb at one of the corners at the end of the bus bracketing the back doors where a small button lens had avoided destruction; federal regulations required that all medical transports be outfitted to record events transpiring inside when quarantine protocols were engaged. "Might get an idea of where they were going." He looked at the empty pods, the third where the doll still lay. He frowned again.

"Most likely shot to hell along with the rest of the thing," Davis said.

"Most likely," Walken agreed, voice stern. "But get the module out and see what you can get, Detective. Or do I have to get one of my own people down here to do it and spare some taxpayers' dollars?"

Davis gave him a black look; detectives were shareholders as much as employees, after all. He ducked out with a curse on his breath, leaving Walken alone with death and punctured steel.

The scene had yielded little more than bodies and paperwork. The shooters had used surplus military ammunition, caseless rounds that fragmented so badly on impact that the forensic team was having difficulty picking anything but splinters out of the bus and the building beyond it. The coroner had come and taken the bodies back under heavy guard to Bureau headquarters, where hopefully a few rounds could be pulled intact.

The Bureau were looking for the serials to trace back to their supplier. Romeos weren't like your standard police action; the Bureau didn't stop until it sought out and collared *everyone* involved, from the thieves to the triggermen to the dealers who pushed

them ammunition. It was a poisoned tree to the roots, now and everyone was due for the choke.

CivPro found where Park's crew had been lurking in the alley opposite the intersection, six sets of feet and a van. Drag marks where they'd had some trouble with the girls. Had there been witnesses the whole thing would have gone much faster, but any squatters or residents that might have been about had long fled with the appearance of armed men and massed firepower. Without them, Walken only had the hope of video evidence and he sat in his car going through Davis's précis waiting on word concerning the quarantine box.

The précis was exactly what Walken had expected — a stream of police harassment and sordid social minutiae. He watched it on fast-forward. Car theft. Fights on the sidewalk. A bodega robbed right in front of an uninterested street cop. People being hassled on the civilized end of the Verge by beat officers, laughing thugs with badges learning well to walk upon the backs of others. Everything in 10x speed.

It was completely useless. Forty minutes ran by as he cycled through the only recording in the area, that of the nose cam of a distant CivPro enforcement drone angling over overgrown ruins of Hilltop Park. Nothing.

Walken heaved a deep sigh and began to rub at his bloodshot eyeballs. Sloppy as they might have been hitting the bus and taking the dolls, Park and his crew were fantastic at the vanishing act.

Presently there was a knock at the window. He looked up; Davis stood outside, draped in a plastic slicker. The rain had started again and he looked like a sort of frowning storm god with his eyes shadowed by its dripping hood.

Walken rolled down the window. "Detective," he said. "What's going on?"

"Got your data." Davis held out a data chip; the thin plastic wafer beaded with drops of rain, the solid-state elements suspended within glittered like nerves. "The box was shot up pretty badly, but we managed to get something. You'll want to see it."

"All right." Walken took the chip, wiped it dry on the lapel of his coat. "Thanks, Detective."

Davis lingered a moment, as if he had something that he wanted to say. Instead he turned away and trudged off toward the scene again where white-suited evidence techs swarmed him.

Walken turned away, rolled up the window and slotted the chip into the car's console. The display flared to life.

He sat in silence as five minutes of fragmented video, pieced together somewhat jaggedly by forensic software, displayed the last minutes of the lives of the medics and the Princess Doll. Duty; the medic in the back, tending to the Dolls in their capsules, drowning panic in routine as the bus drove itself. Horror; the van rocking suddenly as its interior was filled with automatic fire. He watched as the medic shuddered in the spasmodic dance of the gunshot victim, falling against the far wall of the van as she was shredded by fire. He watched as her head burst and splattered against the cool white of the van's plastic liner, jump cuts of her sliding down the wall and then crumpled suddenly on the floor. The driver and the tech were next, furiously trying to find a way to free themselves from the inevitable, only to shudder as if electrocuted as the windshield exploded in front of them and they too were riddled.

Walken watched as their murderers, young men in singlesuits and exotic hairstyles carrying bullpup-style automatic rifles, opened up the back. A thin young man in dull red and wearing heavy black orbital boots winced as he stepped past the dead medic. He froze as he saw the ruptured capsule, streaming white from its new vents. Confusion amongst the killers, silent working of

mouths. Panic in their eyes. Good. Walken smiled despite himself as he watched the boy in red turn, pale-faced, to crouch down and plug his skull into each capsule, managing an expression that was vaguely zen as he brainrode the locks. It did not take long at all for them to open. He stepped out of the bus onto the street and leaned heavily against one open door as his fellows hurried the surviving Dolls outside and into the night. The thin boy stared at the last capsule, silent terror held in his eyes as the recording paused itself at the end of its run.

Walken stared at that image. He took in the face, the crop of black hair shocked with streaks of cyan. The dark eyes wide, unbelieving, empty of understanding. They had no idea about the third Doll, or was it that they did not expect the capsule to be in its upper bracket? Either way the recording did not give him much to go on. What was it that Davis had seen?

He watched it again and then a third time. Only when he played it backwards, bidden by the voice in the back of his head to stare at every frame — as Davis no doubt had done — did he catch it himself. A smile of triumph sprang to his lips.

"Got you, you fuckers," he murmured. He reached to call up the car's phone interface with the burning swell of victory daring the shores of his heart. They were all his.

Thank you for reading.

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