

252 West 41st Street
August 12th, 12:01 AM

He has to be here, Mark whispers to himself, but he knows better. The gunshots must have drawn attention, and it's about time to clear out. With quick moves, he tosses the apartment for info, something - anything - to find his target.

He goes through the kitchen, nothing. The bedroom, nothing but a few used condoms - Mark bags a couple, on the off chance that there's magicks that don't need a police lab to track people by DNA. The living room - less than nothing.

Get going, get going, you're wasting time...

Mark's in the process of going through the sofa cushions with one of his knives when he hears footsteps closing in. With well-practiced silence, he steps behind the corner, waiting for the intruder - and a clean shot.

Good things come to those who wait. The man's African, cradling a beat-up shotgun - with barely a flash, Mark blows out his left knee, forcing the man on the ground with a final bang. Without taking his sights off the prone figure, he walks over, kicks the gun away and aims his USP at the man's head.

"You don't look like Neighbourhood Watch," Mark says. "Now, you get to choose - your friend, or you. You've got five seconds."

The man on the floor writhes around for a second before getting enough control to spit out some words in between crying gasps. "Man, I don't know who fuckin' lives here! I just saw some crazy guy with a gun, and so I went to check it out! I don't want to fuckin' get shot! Jesus Christ, man, my kids are down the hall!"

"Then I suggest you do what a good daddy does and spill everything you know about the guy here, everything, I don't care if you knew him, played poker with him and fucked him, I want details."

"He's just some guy, man. Tall, quiet, creepy-ass guy. My kids stay away from him. Goes out at weird hours."

"When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday. He had a bag with him, I think."

"A bag? What fucking bag? Talk fast, you're bleeding out..."

"Fuck, I don't know, man! A blue Goddamn bag, some kind of cheap gym bag."

Mark makes a face, then reaches into his coat and throws down some bills.

"Medicaid came early this year. Now I hope you guys know how to dial 911."

"Fuck you, you psycho!"

"Oh, one more thing. You shot yourself in the knee. Either that, or somebody else shot you in the knee and the face."

Without further ado, Mark walks out and heads for the back exit. Time to start looking for someone who can trace that DNA...

27th Precinct, NYPD
August 12th, 1:22 AM

Sheppard shoves the suspect formerly known as the Metahuman Killer through the doors. Blood streaming down his broken nose onto the dressing gown they threw on him, he turns to shout at the detective as the rest of the SWAT team walks in behind him. "Justice! I demand justice! I should be out there helping you!"

"Yeah, whatever," Sheppard says. He pushes the bleeding man up to the desk, sending some splatter onto the desk. "Book this dipshit so I can put him in his cage."

The desk sergeant looks horrified at the sight of the suspect, but he's still all business. "Name?" Sheppard pulls the man's wallet out of an evidence bag. "James Kenneth Kirschner, date of birth,

6/15/64. Residence listed as 1249 East 127th. Arrested on suspicion of murder in the first degree." He puts the wallet back in the bag, and uncuffs one arm so he can sign the paper. "Sign it so we can get out of here."

Kirschner gets stupid - he takes the pen, then tries to jab it at Sheppard. Sheppard's been waiting for this, craving this. The pen carves air, while Sheppard's right palm crumples Kirschner's chin. The perp goes down flailing, trying to kick out Sheppard's shins, but he can't hit anything but meat as Sheppard bows down and elbows him in the ribs. Kirschner gasps, Sheppard grabs his wrists and twists, forcing Kirschner to rapidly turn onto his stomach. With Sheppard riding on his back, the handcuffs slip back on easily.

"Go ahead," Sheppard snarls, "try that again."

"Police brutality!" Kirschner cries through gasps of air. "You all saw it!"

"No, try assaulting a police officer." Sheppard bounces Kirschner's head off the desk before pinning it down next to the booking slip. Keeping one arm pinned behind his back, Sheppard unlocks the handcuffs again. "Now, *sign the fucking paper.*"

Kirschner spits bloody saliva onto the slip, giving Sheppard a dirty look. But he signs it.

"Good." Sheppard recuffs Kirschner and hands him to an officer. "I'm going to take a shower."

Boat House, The Ramble, Central Park
August 12th, 6:48 AM

He's fucking with you, Karen thinks as her lonely vigil enters minute 20, no contact, and it's kinda chilly, thanks for asking. She keeps on fiddling with the note that said to meet some mysterious contact at the boat house in Central Park in her pocket. All kinds of thoughts race through her head; fear, anger, the idea of finally getting to meet one of those people who seem determined to keep her from finding out what's really going on. If it's Simmons, she'd be surprised, but at this stage any of her "secret admirers" would do. She's on precognitive high alert, practically living a few seconds ahead of everyone else, but even still, the only thought running through her head is *He's fucking with you, and you're gonna get killed.*

To her surprise, she actually picks up on the man before he shows up. *Was half-expecting some kind of time-travelling ESU team*, she thinks as she steps out of sight and waits for him to walk through the door.

When he does step through the door, there's nothing on him that sets off her "dangerous" flags - no obvious metahuman powers, no guns. He's not big, he's not muscly, he doesn't wear shades or fetishistic amounts of leather. He's just a man, semi-cheap business suit and coat, with a briefcase at his side. Low-rent spook.

He looks around and smiles to the tune of a private joke.

"Hello," he says, as if that was everything Karen wanted to hear.

"Who are you?" she asks, not moving from behind the boat she's using for cover.

"Hannibal McNary, Sanctuary Director of Operations."

"Prove that you're from Sanctuary. After having my apartment blown up a few months ago, I haven't been in a trusting mood."

Hannibal smiles.

"He's good, isn't he? Even when he says that he doesn't want to, even when he believes it himself, he's getting to you. As for my credentials, you'll have to forgive me, but we don't get badges. Would you like to see my secret handshake?"

"I'll pass. What do you want with me?"

"I've read your files on Simmons," he says, wiggling the suitcase. "Very impressive - and all with no official support whatsoever. You understand him in a way few people do. That's a useful skill, in this situation."

"What situation do you have, and why the hell should I help you?"

"Oh, I suppose I should get the trivial out of the way: Mark Simmons is alive."

He drops that bomb like other people pick a flower. Karen pauses for a second, restraining herself from shouting "I *knew* it!"

"We thought we could reform him. What use is a weapon like Simmons if you keep it locked away? He was willing to help us, for a while. But he's getting unstable, and I'm not about to ditch a quarter million bucks in training and support costs with a bullet to the head. In short, we need somebody who can talk to him and get through."

"You're looking at the wrong person for the wrong task. Simmons hates my guts for convicting him, I think the bomb in my apartment proves that. Besides, you don't control Simmons. He's not just a gun you point at someone and pull the trigger on. He's uncontrollable, and a dangerous psychopath. The sooner you figure that out, the better."

McNary nods. He reaches under his coat, but instead of a gun, he draws a cellphone. With a flick of the wrist, he flips the gadget open, then hammers a quick-dial button. He holds the phone up as its tiny speaker blares a dialtone through the boathouse.

"I take it you don't want to talk to him, then?"

Karen walks out from behind the boat and takes the phone. She puts it up to her ear and waits for someone to pick up. There's a click, and then there's the voice.

That voice.

"Hello?" Mark asks.

JS Consulting

August 12th, 6:50 AM

It's cold in here, Jack thinks to himself. He's up again after a rollercoaster ride of brief naps and lying awake all night, and he's tired, but he knows he won't fall asleep again. His eyes remain fixed on Chrome, who's sleeping off the tequila next to him. It's funny, in a way, usually she's the light sleeper and he's out cold. He watches her back, the part where the comforter doesn't reach. Watches her muscles shift ever so slightly with every breath. She breathes in, she breathes out. Peaceful.

That's not going to last. It never does.

He looks at the ceiling. Ultraviolet lamps remind him of the other woman, the one that tore the heads off pumped-up thugs and laughed. The one that makes the girl he loves afraid of herself. The one that he saw last night. He doesn't know why she was drinking so hard, but the idea of Avenger on a bender isn't one Jack likes to think about. He's glad Az was there to calm her down and bring Chrome back. But it shouldn't have been Az that calmed her down. It should have been Jack.

She stirs, and for a second he doesn't take notice of it, just the slight movement of a girl in her sleep, unconsciously fumbling for the blanket or shifting her head to the cool side of the pillow. But then she groans and turns onto her back, and he can see her slowly fade back into consciousness.

"...ow," she mumbles, holding the cool back of her hand against her forehead.

"You had a late night," Jack says. "We found Avenger finishing her fourth bottle of tequila at the Dungeon. Usually she's barely finished with her first one by the time we find her. Remember what set her off?"

"Monica spooked her. You know how she gets when you corner her."

"She tears your throat out and makes craft projects with your blood." The worry on his face ratchets up a few notches. "Is Monica alright?"

"Yes. For some reason, she didn't get angry at Monica. More like...angry at herself. I don't know exactly, I've never seen her like this."

"Hmm. That's pretty weird." He thinks about this for a second, then looks back to Chrome and kisses her. "How are you doing?"

"Me? I do kind of feel like tearing out a few throats...anything to get my head to stop spinning."

Jack laughs. "I'll get Az to make pancakes, that always seems to cheer you up."

"Blueberry pancakes?"

"Just for you. Anything else I can do before I get up?"

Chrome leans over and gives him a long kiss. She wraps her arms around him and looks into his eyes. "Just one more."

"Yes, I'm metahuman," Sharon says. Her voice is firm, her eyes locked straight ahead. "I'm a meta. But that's not all I am. I'm also Detective Hansen, NYPD. I'm a woman. And the badge I carry is not just for show. I spend four days a week doing paperwork. I need a morning coffee or four. And when I clock in, I'm a cop. I serve and protect. That's what this is about, and what it's been about from the start."

The woman in the mirror doesn't look convinced at all. Sharon closes her eyes, tilts her head back, and runs her hands through her hair. Her mouth moves silently as she goes over her little schpiel again. Emphasize this, expand on that, smile here. It's like she's got a show opening on Broadway and her dog ate the script.

"Practice going well?" Az asks as he walks into her room, dressed in his morning uniform of gi pants and muscles.

She mouths through the rest of it, then rolls her eyes behind closed lids and turns to face him.

"You tell me. It's not like there's anything riding on this, at all."

"It falls flat when you start to talk about you being, well, who you are."

"Yeah, well, that's kind of hard to avoid when this bullshit is all about who I am. Or what I am."

He takes a sip of his coffee. "You're going to have to figure out a way to talk about it eventually. No one else can do this one for you."

"So, no pressure. Great."

She paces in front of the mirror and mouths it again.

"This is kind of like sending me to a table setting contest. I can't win, I know I can't win. It's just going to be humiliation city, from beginning to end."

"It doesn't have to be. I've seen you stand on a mountain of wyrms and roar defiance, I've seen you move armies with your words. Don't tell me you can't manage one little speech, Sharon. I know you too well to believe that."

"Damn it, Az. Do you always have to pick me up before they cut me down?"

"It's sort of what I do around here, especially with you, Sharon."

"Reassuring, in a way," she says. "Knowing that you're there."

They both look at each other. Nothing happens.

After a couple of seconds, Az speaks up. "Seen Mark lately?"

"No, but I've heard...things."

Az furrows his brow. "What kind of things?"

"He's been making the rounds on the snitch circuit. A couple of guys say they've seen him skulk around all over town. And a couple of places they say they've seen him...well, you know about all those little weapon caches he has, right? He's gearing up for something."

The furrowing deepens. "That's bad. Jack and I had him looking at the Family Killer, checking out the bottom of the metahuman circles for any clues, but he told us he didn't find anything."

"Probably busy with Sanctuary stuff," she says in a noncommittal tone.

"And he's using his caches...why exactly?"

"...I don't know."

"What if he's gone off the reservation again?"

"You know how he gets when he's mad. He stops giving a damn about noise, he goes through walls and blows things up. Can't be rogue, he's being too careful."

"Maybe he's figured out not to do that. Maybe we won't hear about him until he's killed a bunch of people."

"How about sparing some of your faith for him? You used to be his partner, I'd think you'd at least give him the benefit of the doubt," she says, a weary smile on her lips. "You want to know what he's doing, you find him and ask him."

Holidays Suites
August 12th, 6:52 AM

Mark's sitting in a pay-by-the-hour hotel room when his cell phone rings. He digs it out from the hand-written notes that cover the lower half of the bed and answers it. "Hello?"

"Mark Simmons?"

Mark briefly weighs hanging up right there, but he knows he's fucked up already - better try and find out where the next hit will come from.

"Ayers," he says coolly. "Somebody finally gave you a clue."

"What are you doing, Mark?"

"Adding a few things to my to-do list. Apparently, the first explosion didn't keep."

"You're not helping your cause here, Mark. I'm here with someone from Sanctuary. They want you to come in before you do something you'll regret."

"Yeah, I'm sure they do. They're desperate enough to grab you, so this bluff is busted from the word 'go'. Now, you can of course cheapen yourself further by waving your invisible threat baton over your head, but if experience teaches us anything, it's that it takes a little more than good intentions to stop me from doing anything. So, are we gonna play for keeps or can I expect more of this limp dick act?"

"I'm not going to threaten you, Mark. I just want you to think about what your actions will do to others. Sharon, for example, and Az. And Chrome, and Jack. Think about what will happen to them if you do something big. They'll be looking for a scapegoat, and there will be only one place to lay the blame for this."

"That it? That's the best you've got? You don't even know what I'm doing. What's going to happen to them if I pull it off? Nothing you won't do to them, Karen, so maybe that's not the emotional blackmail grail you're looking for, either. And if they blame Sanctuary? Boo-hoo. Look at me care. I'd be ever so sad. Now, was there anything else before I do...whatever the fuck I want?"

"I'm not talking about what I'd do to them, Mark. I don't think Sanctuary would hesitate for a second to burn them to get to you. I don't care what happens to you, as far as I'm concerned, you should still be in a cage. But I want you to think about what will happen to your friends, to your partners."

"Oh, so you're with me that the biggest danger is Sanctuary choosing the 'Fuck you' nuclear option? Yeah, that would be why I'm not their bestest friend anymore. Maybe you should look into that part. Been nice chatting with you."

click

Karen turns to Hannibal. "That went well." She hands him the cell phone. "Next time, if you want me to reason with a dangerous psychopath, you'd better give me more to work on than 'we don't know what he's doing'. If there is a next time."

"Oh, it was good enough," Hannibal says, checking his watch. "At least we got a trace out of it."

Karen narrows her eyes at him. "You could have done this without making me make myself a target for him."

Hannibal smiles. "Employee motivation is one of my specialties."

"I ought to arrest you right now. I'll be damned if I start working for you."

"But you won't, because then you wouldn't be able to stop him from hurting your friends. We'd have no choice but to reveal to everyone that they were harboring a dangerous fugitive for years."

Karen says nothing, she just seethes at him. She doesn't move to arrest him, though.

"That's what I thought." He hands her the briefcase and cell phone. "I think this should be enough to get you started. You'll find that you've been temporarily reassigned to a federal metahuman task force. I recommend you use the time to look into what's in the briefcase."

"What if I find him and don't play ball with you? What if I just have him arrested?"

"My problems always get fixed...one way or another," Hannibal says. "You wouldn't want to be one of them."

"Right," Karen says.

"I'll be in touch. Good day, Miss Ayers." He walks out the door of the boat house.

Karen waits, and then leaves the boat house and starts walking back to her car.

Well, I was right about one thing. He was fucking with me.
27th Precinct SVU Interrogation
August 12th, 8:19 AM

Kirschner's got clean clothes going for him, but not much else. Didn't wash himself, so there's still dried blood in his hair from one of the many little "encouragement" bumps he took during his arrest. They had to drag him into the room, but he's sleeping face down on the metal table when Detective Chapell walks up to the observation window. Detective Sheppard is already there, staring through the window at him. A monitor buzzes away next to it, showing the camera feed from the room.

"What are you doing?" Chapell asks him.

"Just thinking about what we used to do to people like this," Sheppard says. "Laws are good and all, but I remember the days when we'd beat scum like this to within an inch of their lives, drag them behind a horse for a few hours, and then we'd just start making up new ways to inflict as much pain as we could before they died."

She smiles. "Being an Avatar of Justice just isn't what it used to be, huh?"

"You got that right. You're up, Miss Empathy."

She nods and walks into the interrogation room. Kirschner wakes up at the sound of the metal door slamming shut behind her.

"Hey, who the fuck are you?" he says, in the same tone most people use to order their coffee.

"I'm Detective Chapell, Special Victims Unit."

"Sure is a fancy name for that freakshow of yours."

"No, I'm not a part of Special Crimes. I've been brought in to talk to you, to get your side down before we go to trial."

"Well, I ain't got anything to say, so you're job's done here, missy."

She smiles, and with a small gesture plucks one of the strings in his mind. "You sure about that? Special Crimes isn't very popular 'round here."

Kirschner leans towards Chapell. "Really?"

"Yeah, really," she says, smiling. Played like a fiddle...

"Well, I was just doing what I thought was right, protecting people from those freaks."

"And I gotta say, you did right by me there," she says. She's getting the hang of his mind, and branches out a bit more. "One of those Others, one of those insane killing machines, working for the department? The things it could've done..."

"And God knows what else they working for them! They should all be dealt with before they hurt anyone else!"

Now she really starts playing him. "That's what you were doing in the park, right?"

Kirschner pauses for a second. Chapell can feel his mind try to knot up and pull away, but with the touch of a master musician, she brings him back into harmony. "Yeah, that's what I was doing there. I had my suspicions about that red-haired witch, and look what happened!"

"And on Sixth Ave?"

He doesn't even resist this time. Chapell can hear his mind singing in perfect tune.

"Those two fuckers moved in right down the hall from my mother! We lost my dad to one of those bastards, and now they were coming after mother! I'll be damned if they take her the way they took him, so I bought that gauge and I sat and I waited, waited for the right time. I figured, do it in a crowd, everyone would be too panicked to see me, so I followed them, and then I did it."

"Did what?"

"Killed them. I had a pocket full of shells, just in case, but nah, one shot was plenty for each. Never know if they had some sort of armored hide or shot fire from their eyes or something like that, I mean, that's what I heard they do, right? But those guys, went down real quick, and it felt kinda right, you know? Like there's something about the world, that's just right, like you...you still got the power to change things, right? No matter how high 'n mighty they play it, you give 'em 12 and they fold." Chapell smiles. "That'll be all."

She stands up and walks out of the room. She shakes herself and looks at Sheppard. "Sometimes, I

wish I had it like you do. Just touching that guy's mind gives me the creeps."

Sheppard just nods.

Sanctuary Ops
August 12th, 8:45 AM

It's the thirty-fourth minute since Director McNary gave the order to trace and bag Mark Simmons. Not that anyone's counting, because this should be easy, right? Roger DiAngelo thinks so, or at least he did when he took over seven minutes ago, but the less than impressive results so far are working hard to dampen his enthusiasm.

"Come on, guys," Operator DiAngelo snarks into his headset as he watches colored blips moving on a map of New York City. "You're right on top of the asshole, why can't you find him?" "How about you go try this?" comes Legion's discord of voices, replicated to the best of the equipment's abilities. "It's a street market, we're watching about 300 people here. Ping the tracker again."

DiAngelo hammers a button on his keyboard. The satellite picture is static, last flyover from three hours ago, with major roads and other important info superimposed. "Surveillance drones three minutes out", one readout says. "Priority 3" says another. DiAngelo has never seen it go beyond that. Presumably, you get to retask a spy plane or something when you hit 1.

"Nope, still there. Keep looking."
"Request permission for overt," Legion's reply comes, the various voices that comprise it slowly drifting further apart. They're losing their focus.
"Uh, that's a, that's a negative, Legion. No priority upgrades for you."
"Then call the boss and get us one, this is going nowhere."

Something's going somewhere: one of the dots on DiAngelo's screen starts moving.

"Come out, come out," he gracefully adlibs as he watches the movement. "Legion, tracker's bound east, check for traffic."
"How fast?" comes the chorus's next question.
"Like...pretty quick. Jogging, running, Nordic Walking, whatever."
"No joy, Ops, lots of people mingling but nobody legging it East."
"Where is that motherfucker?"
"Like we said, get us a priority..."
"And like I said, you're not getting it, that's the gospel from the super. Keep your eyes open."
"Does he want Simmons found or not?"
"Look, I'm not making that call, right? Get it done."
"Still moving?"
"Hang on, let me..." DiAngelo begins.

Then the dot disappears.

"Fuck me," he whispers. "Legion, we've got a skipper, I repeat, Simmons skipped."
"Ain't that the best thing we heard all day. Can we get some priority now?"
"Just hold for a second..." DiAngelo quips, already hammering a new command onto his board.
"Dispatch 14 to Sensei, Dispatch 14 to Sensei."
"Sensei here," comes the old man's voice.
"No visual on Simmons, and we lost his signal. Legion requests priority."
"I'll see what I can do. Keep trying."
"Yes, Sir."

More keytaps.

"Dispatch 14 to Legion, your priority is cooking as we speak."
"About damn time."

A beep, a flash.

"Lady and gentlemen, we have priority," DiAngelo says. "Drone thermals coming online..."

"Screw the thermals," Legion counters, "Triangulate the bastard."

"Sweeping now..."

"Oh, yeah, that's real subtle, three black wedges hanging in the air."

"That's what priority means, Legion," DiAngelo counters. "You want overt, you get overt." He takes a deep breath. "No one will notice, they'll think it's some fucking birds if they look up at all. Anything yet?"

"They don't look like they're finding anything, you got them on bloodhound?"

"Bloodhound positive, they should be tracking."

"Doesn't look like it. What's the readout?"

Tap tap tap.

"A big pile of cosmic background radiation. Nice."

"Maybe they need to get closer."

"They're as close as they need to be," DiAngelo counters. "I know the birds, alright? They sniff trackers through fifteen feet of rebarred concrete. No, that signal's dead at the source."

"...ain't that a bitch," Legion replies.

"You know what that means, back to the hotel, toss the room."

"We'll bring some EOD suits. Legion out."

JS Consulting
August 12th, 8:51 AM

Karen sits in the parking lot behind the JS Consulting building, going over the items McNary had given her. The cell phone was completely empty except for contact numbers for Mark and McNary, and the briefcase, aside from what was stolen from her floor safe in her burglarized apartment, had a few Sanctuary files from four years ago or so, dated immediately around the events that lead to the destruction of Love Towers.

They seem to concern the creation and makeup of a Sanctuary black ops team lead by Reaper, who is quite clearly Mark, Wraith, aka Sharon, and two other people she doesn't recognize, codenamed Dingbat and Deadeye. A few pages later, it indicates the addition of two more individuals to the group, Ghost, who Karen recognizes as Azuriel, even without the eye-cancer shirt, and the somewhat-unfortunately codenamed Utu, with a photo of Jack looking completely out of place in the unit's shiny-black tactical getup and masks stapled to the file. Their actions up to that point were primarily what the file calls "controlling rogue elements through necessary use of force" and Karen recognizes as "assassinations", but after Jack and Az join up, things seem to go downhill rapidly for the team. They're dispatched to confront an team-up between a mutant ninja and an "unknown metahuman entity" at Love Towers. Once there, however, Mark, Sharon, Az and Jack turn on the other two, helping another group of interlopers not only take down the targets, but Dingbat, Deadeye, and Love Towers. Assorted photos and screen captures from surveillance cameras show some of the other players in the event, Karen recognizes Dante, but the rest of the assembled group are unknowns to her.

Armed with this new knowledge, she climbs out of the car and walks into the JS Consulting offices. Inside, Az and Sharon are in their respective offices. Karen walks over by their doors and knocks on the wall, a serious look on her face. "Can I see you two in the conference room?" They both look at her for a second, then get up and follow her into the conference room. Karen sits down at the table and clears a space in all the stacked papers.

"So, what's up?" Az asks.

Karen holds up Az and Sharon's Sanctuary dossier images. "I need you two to tell me everything you know about Sanctuary."

"Look, I was totally drunk," Az begins, but Sharon shushes him.

"The only guys who could get you those photos would be Sanctuary," Sharon says. "So I'm gonna go

ahead and assume you already know that they're out there and what they're doing."

She pulls up a chair and sits down.

"You remember the day when Simmons went totally ballistic downtown, right? They called in SWAT, the car chase, then shootout, everything. You might also remember that he had a helper in his escape attempt, though they tried Simmons alone."

"We could never find who it was, Mark never rolled on him." Karen pauses in thought for a second, then smiles. "It was you, wasn't it?"

"It's funny how everybody assumed it must've been a guy. I guess you couldn't really tell, what with the body armor and the balaclava. Anyway, what Mark didn't know was that a couple of guys - Sanctuary - were very interested in getting this metahuman thing to work for them. Superpowered death squads, basically, all sponsored by Uncle Sam through the backdoor. They grabbed me, I said no, and they...insisted. It's not every day that somebody manages to get past my pain threshold, but those fuckers just didn't care. They wanted soldiers and they wanted them now, they didn't care where we came from. That's why Simmons went for the death penalty, it was their way of smuggling him out. They had the access to the Vault to pull it off. So they got us two into the outfit."

"And what about you, Az?"

"Simmons grabbed me off the street, basically," Az says. "Me and Jack. Didn't last very long, because as it turns out, he's got a plan. There was this other guy there...Deadshot or whatever, and he was a precog. Like, really focused. He could see everything coming, and pick out what he wanted to happen. Sanctuary probably figured that he'd be able to take down Simmons if he tried anything. Well, we were headed straight for Love Towers...and you saw on TV how that worked out. Simmons creamed Deadshot, we slipped away in the confusion, went back for Sanctuary and torched the place while everybody else was busy. That's the last I heard of them for a long time..."

Karen stares at the table for a second, tapping her fingers. She then looks up and levels both of them with a steely gaze. "And what about Mark? Where did he wind up after all of this?"

Az shrugs.

Karen stands up. "Don't give me that bullshit," she snarls. "I know he's still alive, I just talked to him on the fucking phone. So you two had better start telling me the fucking truth, or I'm going to just let Sanctuary kill him like they so obviously want to."

Az opens his mouth in attempted protest when Sharon begins to speak softly. "All of this was his idea, you know," she half-says, half-whispers. "The crime-fighting thing, it was supposed to be a cover while we laid low after Love Towers. For a while there, it looked like he really wanted to change. He bankrolled this, he kept us together, he made sure we had the sources and the gear to do the job. You ever wanted to know how the NYPD can afford us? It's because we didn't need the money. But," she says, "it didn't last. He flaked out. He became angry again, he started losing control...we had to talk him down a few times, but he didn't get better. We...I...I didn't know what to do. He flipped, I called Sanctuary...and they took him in. I felt like shit, but at least the problem was solved, right? I mean, they knew what had happened the first time, they wouldn't be stupid enough to try that again, right?"

She looks Karen in the eyes.

"But they don't work that way. They think in terms of assets. And Simmons...Mark. Mark was a big fuckin' asset. Point him in the right direction and he'll cut down anything you might care to throw at him. That's what he exists for. But when he has a lot of spare time and things don't go the way he likes, that's when he starts thinking. And then he does his thing, come hell or high water. You want to hear my opinion? As Mark's...friend, I can tell you that he's not a monster. But as a professional...we can't leave anything to chance this time. We have to stop him."

Karen sits back down. "Well, all I know so far is that Sanctuary has lost control of him. They told me that they want me to bring him in alive, but the feeling that I'm getting from them is that they'd much rather have me find him so they can kill him. My contact at Sanctuary is some guy named Hannibal McNary. They've gotten me moved off of case duty onto some made-up federal task force, so I can work on this full-time." Her demeanor softens a little. "Thank you for the honesty, but you have to know that I'm not here to help you help him get away again. If we find him, he's going to go to prison for the rest of his life, and that's the end of it. But the last thing I want to see is Mark getting killed. He may be out of control, but that's no excuse to have him assassinated. Agreed?"

Sharon just nods. There's a weird spark in Az's eye, as if he was weighing the consequences of getting involved, but finally he nods, too.

"Good. Now, do either of you two know what he was doing before he disappeared?"

"He was tracking a murder suspect," Az says. "The Family Killer. The last I heard from him, he was stuck, but I think he was lying and has a lead we don't know about. If we want to find him, we need to retrace his steps - and that means we do the big snitch route."

"Great, tell me where to start," Karen says.

"Yeah, that's gonna be a problem for you," Az says. "You don't know these guys, but they know you and they don't like you very much. No one's going to talk to you."

"Well, what about you two? They'll give you the time of day, at least. Can you work in the field for me on this one?"

Az hesitates for a second. "Well..."

"We'll do it," Sharon says.

"That's perfect," Karen says. "Keep me informed, I have to go to the courthouse and prep whoever caught the Metahuman Killer case."

New York County Superior Court
August 12th, 9:12 AM

Karen speed-walks down the large marble hallway to the arraignment courtroom. Looking ahead, she sees Andrew Siegel. He's only worked minor felonies before this case, seeing him here shows just how badly her sudden and probably unexplained transfer has caught the DA's office off guard.

"Hey, Andy," she says, and waves him over.

Siegel jogs over to her. "What the hell, Karen? This federal thing you sprung on us has completely screwed things up back at the office. How long did you know about this before you let the feds drop it on us?"

"I found out the same time as you guys did," Karen says. "Some fed big-wig arranged a meet with me this morning, and I was told that I was...needed on a sensitive case. Not really allowed to talk about it. What do you have so far?"

Siegel hands Karen a file and she immediately starts leafing through it as he talks. "Name's James Kenneth Kirschner, lives in some dump up in Harlem. Police are serving search warrants on his apartment as we speak, I spoke to them a few minutes ago, they're finding all sorts of anti-metahuman literature and weapons. Looks like your garden variety lone gunman."

"I heard you got a confession out of him?"

"Yeah, Detectives Sheppard and Chapell got him to spill about everything. Apparently, the first two victims moved in next door to his mother and that's what set him off."

"I've heard those two names before..." she says, and it takes a second before it connects. *I hope Sheppard didn't somehow trick another suspect...* "Oh. Who did the interrogation?"

"Detective Chapell."

"Well, you should be fine, then. Ask for remand, we need to get this monster off the streets. I'll be in the gallery."

Siegel rolls his eyes. "Gee, thanks Karen, any more pressure for me?"

She smiles. "No, that's about it. I'll see you inside."

"Docket number 32512, People versus James Kenneth Kirschner, three charges of murder in the first degree," the bailiff says, and hands the judge the case file. Siegel is standing behind the podium and Kirschner and his lawyer, Nina Millen, are seated behind the table.

Judge Kirkman looks down at the file. "Three counts," he says, a slightly humorous tone in his voice, "someone's been ba - this is the Sixth Avenue gunman?" He looks at Kirschner. "How do you plead?" he asks, the humor gone from his voice.

"Not guilty," Kirschner replies.

"The people on bail?"

"The people seek remand, your honor. The defendant has confessed to three murders and is a continuing threat to the metahuman community."

"We are contesting the confession, your honor," Millen says. "Detectives Sheppard and Chapell have been involved in coercing a confession before, and my client claims that he did not willingly confess,

that Detective Chapell made him talk through some form of metahuman ability."

Kirkman cocks an eyebrow. "Do you have proof of this?"

"Not yet, your honor."

"Well, then I'd ask defense council to keep their wild speculation against two decorated NYPD detectives to themselves until they have evidence. Defendant is remanded pending trial."

As soon as Kirkman strikes his gavel, Siegel turns and walks towards Karen, anger in his eyes. "Why didn't you tell me that Sheppard and Chapell coerced a confession?"

"Because they didn't. She's still bitter she got beat on a motion hearing six months ago, and now she's beating on the same drum. I'll talk to Sheppard and Chapell and sort this out. You just worry about this case, we need to win this one"

"If you can keep any more bad surprises away, then we'll talk about guarantees," Siegel says.

252 West 41st Street

August 12th, 10:34 AM

Azuriel's fingers softly glide over the carpet while his eyelids flutter. His ears peak up; he's listening. Not to the half dozen cops, not to the CSI team, not to Sharon on the phone.

To everything.

"Somebody called 911," Sharon speaks into her cellphone. "Shots fired...a few hours ago. Big white male with an assault rifle. That's all they saw...that's why we're here. He had a hunch."

"Don't call it a hunch," Az says, still scanning the ground. "There's something here."

Sharon rolls her eyes. "Yeah, a whole lot of GSR and blood. No calling card as to who did it, though."

Az's hand stops. Nothing he can tell the cops, but Sharon's been with him long enough to recognize it - familiarity. That was him.

"Wait a second...we need to talk, Jack," she says. "In person."

27th Precinct, Special Victims Unit Squadroom

August 12th, 10:37 AM

Karen walks into the squadroom. Amid the usual buzz of activity, Detectives Chapell and Sheppard are eating a late breakfast after an all-night stakeout. She walks up to their back-to-back desks. "Can I have a moment of your time, detectives?"

"Yes, of course," Chapell says.

"Sure thing," Sheppard concurs. "What brings you to SVU?"

"Just following up on your interrogation of Kirschner. Is there somewhere more private we can talk?" Sheppard and Chapell share a look. "Sure...follow me," Chapell says.

They lead her into an empty interrogation room, checking to make sure the surveillance system is turned off. Chapell and Sheppard lean against the wall, with Sheppard crossing his arms. "Well?"

"There's been some questions about your interrogation of Kirschner. He says you coerced him into confessing, Detective Chapell."

"I don't know what he's talking about," Chapell says. She looks a little hurt at the accusation. "I'm not in the business of twisting arms."

"No, that's what your partner is for."

"Oh, so we're down to insults now?" Sheppard asks, half-mockingly.

"I remember what happened on the Holston case," Karen says. "You got that confession awfully quickly, Detective Sheppard. And now the same thing happens in this case?"

"Maybe we're just good at our jobs," Chapell cuts in. "And Kirschner is not exactly what I would call an impartial observer. Of course he's going to say we coerced him, he and every other criminal who ever signed a confession and thinks a mistrial will save him."

"Or maybe you two have some kind of hidden ace up your sleeve that you're not telling people about. The NYPD has pretty strict rules on concealing metahuman abilities, you know. I'm going to take a look at your past arrests. What do you think I'll find?"

"Metahuman is such an ugly word," Chapell says. With her smile, she reaches out, sorting through Karen's mind. "Wouldn't it be better if we were all just...people? Without all the prejudice, without having to constantly prove that you're as good, that you're better than the rest? That must be tiring for you, Ms. Ayers."

Karen feels weaker all of a sudden, and braces herself on the table. "What...what are you doing?"

"I'm doing nothing," Chapell says, tugging on a few strings. "It's all you. All those ugly rumors are tearing this place apart. Tearing you apart. Maybe you should start trusting people again." Her smile is gone now, replaced by a grim look of determination.

"Chapell, I don't..." Sheppard begins, but she cuts him off with a flick of her hand while she digs deeper into Karen's mind.

"Only a little adjustment," Chapell says. "We have to protect what we've been sent here to do."

Karen manages to make it into a chair before she becomes too weak to support her own body.

"Stop...I'm trying to help you..."

"That's funny," Chapell says, "so am I."

And that's when she goes deep. Karen almost faints from the shock, trapped inside her skull while everything inside...everything she is...floats around her, so many little fragments, and someone else inside, looking for the right piece of the puzzle...

Azuriel.

With a flash, Chapell is out of Karen's head, sinking back into a chair herself. Karen suddenly sits straight up, gasping for air. Sheppard rushes to her side, helping to steady her.

"Lord, Chapell, what did you do to her?"

"Can't..." Chapell gasps. "She knows..."

"Knows what?"

"Azuriel."

The silence in the room isn't just thick enough to cut. It's thick enough to pour a foundation with.

Karen manages to regain her breath. "And Sharon. And Chrome." She takes a few more gasps of air.

"And Mark."

"We can't stay here," Sheppard says. "Chapell, come on. We have to leave."

"We can't leave this place," Chapell responds. She looks at Karen. "And we can't answer your questions. You already know too much."

Karen looks at Chapell, still breathing heavily. "There's a lot of trouble coming soon. Mark's in trouble, and I'm trying to save him before Sanctuary kills him."

Sheppard scoffs. "That joke..."

"Look, you don't know what you're talking about..."

Karen pulls up her right sleeve, showing a thin but ragged scar on her arm. "I got that from one of Sharon's wings when she threw me across a room. I saw Az unveil his wings and proceed to knock her out to stop her from doing much worse." She rolls her sleeve back down, completely back to her normal self. "I've already gotten the 'birds and the bees' talk, so don't tell me what I do and do not know."

"In that case," Sheppard says, "you also know that you can't threaten us with anything. How about you crawl back to that second-rate celestial and get him to tell you a few more stories?"

Karen nods. "I'm not here to come down on you, I just knew that there was something going on with you two and I'm not the only one who's beginning to notice. Also, I know you two are more in tune with the..."

"Symphony," Chapell says coldly. "Azuriel's explanation wasn't very thorough, it seems."

"It's been a while since Sharon's heard it," Karen says. "It was a sore subject. Anyway, you two know more about what the general atmosphere is like than anyone else. I just want you two to keep your ears open and listening for anything big coming. I have a bad feeling about this whole Sanctuary thing, and I could use all the help I can get. Alright?"

Chapell and Sheppard share a glance.

"We'll be in touch," Sheppard says.

Karen nods, and pulls herself to her feet. "Just keep a lower profile from now on. I'll be waiting for

your call." She walks out of the room, leaving the two celestials behind.

"You shouldn't have tried that," Sheppard says.

"Would you prefer I just let her blow our cover?" Chapell asks. There's a pause. "What are we going to do now?"

"Our jobs," Sheppard shoots back.

Twilight Zone
August 12th, 10:52 AM

Jack and Chrome are already in a booth at the back of the bar section when Az and Sharon walk in. Jack has his arm around Chrome's shoulder as they both watch Dante, who's busy doing his little "change the longdrink's color" spiel with a couple of Swedish tourists at the bar.

Sharon sits down next to them. "So, aside from parlor tricks, what are you doing here, Dante?" He shrugs. "Synchronicity is a cruel mistress. I was merely out for my morning walk, and I came across the two lovebirds here, who told me that something's going on with Mark and that I'd better come with them."

He finishes his little act as the Tequila Sunrise in his hand slowly fades into blue and green. The Swedish girls applaud and chatter amongst themselves; Dante throws in a few words in smooth Italian. Sharon's not sure whether the girls understand him, but it doesn't seem to matter.

"What's next?" Sharon asks, "rabbit in a top hat?"

"Oh, you do hurt me," Dante says, then hands the Sunrise off to the girls with a quick '*Prego*'. "Now, what matter afflicts our twin-fisted friend?"

"He's in big trouble," Az says.

Dante shrugs. "He's been in big trouble before. Why circle the wagons?"

"Because we can't reach him, Sanctuary thinks he's gone rogue, and they've brought in Karen to deal with the whole mess," Sharon says.

"Miss Ayers? They must be hard up," Dante says. "Still, nothing that Mark can't handle."

"We think that they're going to try to kill him if they find him, and we think that they can actually do it."

"I can see how that would trouble you," Dante says, his irreverent nature slipping slightly. "So you want to find him first and keep him under the radar until this blows over?"

There's a pause as Az and Sharon look at each other. "Not this time," Sharon says.

Dante raises an eyebrow. "What is the plan, then?"

Sharon sighs. "If we can, we'll bring him in for arrest."

"And if you can't?"

Sharon just looks at Dante. The mage's smile is under full assault until it finally slips.

"This is insane," Dante says. "I'm not saying he's got any right to run around killing people, but..."

"He's a bad guy," Chrome suddenly says. "And he's not our bad guy anymore."

Jack nods. "I like the guy as much as the rest of you, but he's over his head this time. And it's time we did the right thing."

"Well, pardon me," Dante says, getting up from the bar. "But I'm not that desperate. We've all done things we're not proud of, and anything Sanctuary tells us is doubly suspect. You haven't even spoken to him, have you?"

"Karen has," Az says.

Dante just gives him a glare.

"I've heard enough," he says, and walks out.

Christian's Charms
August 12th, 10:53 AM

Christian's in the process of organizing and tagging the latest shipment of knockoff cursed arrowheads when he hears the front-door bell ring.

"We open in ten minutes, come back then!" he shouts at the door.

"If you're not open," Mark says from behind him, "you should keep that door locked."

Christian spins around so fast on the chair that he almost knocks it over. "Jesus, Mark. One of these days you should actually try calling before you break into my shop. What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Opening a door is breaking and entering now? No wonder the prisons are flooded." Mark walks into the shop proper, a small grin on his face. "Seeing as we're both here, I thought I could get some help, just a little something for the road. Minor divination and I'm out of your hair in three minutes."

"Oh, no no no," Christian says as he follows Mark into the shop. "Word's come down from on high that you are persona non grata for the time being. Just talking to you could get my licences yanked."

"Half the stuff in here is contraband, Christian, and the other half is fake."

"All the more reason for me not to deal with you right now."

"Nice to know that you're consistent, at least. Wouldn't want you to get in hot water with...who is it this time? Gestapo, KGB, the Salvation Army?"

"You know damn well who it is, Mark. Fucking Sanctuary sent some big lumps of muscle in cheap suits down here this morning, they shoved their way through the door and let it be known that I am not to help, aid, or assist one Mark Aaron Simmons. And judging by the auras and the pistols they were packing, they mean it, so you need to leave before someone sees you in here."

Christian tries to shove Mark out of the shop. That works out about as well as you'd expect.

"You don't want to help me, fine. Have a nice day, Christian."

"Nobody's gonna help you, Mark."

"We'll see about that."

With no warning, Mark slams his elbow into a display case, breaking the glass with the armor pad in his sleeve. Sifting through the glass, he picks up a small piece of dark metal from the case.

"Whoa, whoa, what are you doing with that? Those things are bad news, man."

"I'm just going to borrow this for a while. Hey, if this doesn't work out, you can always ask your Sanctuary friends to pull it from their evidence locker."

Christian considers protesting, but stops. "Whatever, just get the fuck out of my shop."

"Already gone. Always a pleasure, my friend," Mark says as he walks out the front door.

Twilight Zone

August 12th, 10:55 AM

After Dante storms out, the others finish their drinks and walk back outside. "Well, that was a bust," Jack says.

"Big surprise," Sharon says. "So, what's the plan?"

"Jack and I have to meet with that new ADA, Siegel I think, and prep for the Kirschner trial," Chrome says. "so we're stuck there for the rest of the day."

Jack looks at his watch. "Actually, we need to be there in five minutes, so we should leave before we're later than we already will be," he says, and with a wave, the two of them run off to the Chevelle.

"Looks like it's just you and me then," Az says. "What's the plan?"

"Well, the apartment was rented by a Victor Smith. I checked the social he gave the landlord, he's had a bad history. Mom killed abusive dad in his sleep, she's upstate in Bedford Hills, so that's our first stop."

Az cocks an eyebrow. "You're getting pretty good at this cop stuff. You know, for a demon." He flashes her a goofy smile.

She returns the look. "Helps when you pay attention."

Constantine's Rare Books

August 12th, 11:16 AM

"Anybody here?" Mark asks as he looks around the storefront. It gives him a few seconds to just take a breath and feign interest in the books on display. Hmm, another fake Necromonicon?

"I'm here," Richard Constantine - aka Gamariel - replies, an inscrutable smile on his lips.

"Dante around?" Mark asks.

"He's out on his morning walk. Can I help you?"

"Well, I was gonna ask him to ask you to help me, so, yeah..."

"...cut out the middleman..."

"...and get straight to it," Mark says, then opens his coat and grabs some plastic baggies from an interior pocket. "There's some...material in those, I'd like to ask if you can track that."

"And what would you do with that piece of information, Mark? Perhaps kill that young man?"

"..."

"I'm an angel, Mark," Gamariel says matter-of-factly. "I heard you a minute before you decided to come here, I knew who you were looking for before you stepped through the door, and I knew you want to kill him before you opened your mouth. Do you honestly think I'm going to help you with that?"

"I wouldn't ask you, Rich, but my options are...limited...at the time."

"It figures when you're on the run from Sanctuary."

"The Symphony told you that?"

"No, I've got a little FM radio in my bedroom. Little help from the Loas, it picks up encrypted mil-channel transmissions just fine."

"Then I guess you also know where he is."

"I always knew," Gamariel says. "Nobody with a name hides in my city."

"So, seeing how you've done the work...tell me."

"No."

"What do you want, old man?" Mark snarls. "Money, artifacts, a favor for a favor?"

"I want you to rethink your course. I'm all in favor of justice, Mark, just not this way."

With a snap, the front door slams closed, locking itself. Mark glances at the barred exit, then back at the rogue angel.

"Oh, but throwing me to the wolves is cool? I see how your justice works."

"Dammit, Mark, I can't just let you walk out there and kill people because you don't like them."

"I have my reasons."

"You always do, and they're never good enough."

"You're trying my patience," Mark spits, fondling the cross on the chain around his neck. "You know your little parlor tricks can't touch me."

"Listen to yourself, Mark," Gamariel says, a little glow to his eyes. "You come into my house, demanding that I help you kill someone, and then you threaten me?"

"This could've been easy," Mark says with a resigned expression. "But you had to play the big man. I think you need to be taken down a peg, Rich. Better for everyone if I do it."

"Your powers don't work on me, either," Gamariel replies.

"You're right about that," Mark says.

Mark reaches back under his coat. When he withdraws his hand, he's holding a piece of twisted metal in the rough shape of a knuckleduster, the same one he took from Christian's. As he slips it over his fingers, it seems to awaken, biting into his flesh and bonding to his fist. Gamariel instinctively shrinks back, the dischord in the Symphony too powerful.

"But I came prepared," Mark says coolly.

Gamariel doesn't waste any more time on words - with a mere gesture, he calls his sword into his hands and lunges for Mark. The Paladin parries with his own blade, losing ground against the angry attack but deflecting the angel's strikes. The dischord grows stronger and fury clouds Gamariel's thoughts as he swings his sword upwards to wind up a killing blow - but Mark dodges to the side and slams the piece of metal into Gamariel's side. The angel recoils, stunned; Mark grabs his sword arm, then hits him again, twice, three times before the angel just crumbles to the ground, dropping his sword. In a flash, Mark has him on his belly, twisting his arm behind his back. He lowers himself onto Gamariel's back, bringing the knuckleduster close to his face. The angel recoils his head, as if in pain.

"This is why people listen to me, Rich," Mark growls. "Nobody does the first time, nobody wants to be reasonable...but I don't have time to convince you, so we're doing this the messy way. Where is he?" "I won't..." Gamariel says, spattering blood from his broken nose onto Mark's coat. **"Where is he?"**

Richard Constantine tells.

Dante walks up to the front of the bookshop and bounces off the door, almost falling on his ass. With an annoyed grunt, he flicks his right hand through three quick poses, disabling the spell that holds the entrance closed.

"Richard?"

The angel isn't in the front. Bloodstains are.

"Richard? You in here?"

"In the back," Gamariel says. Dante walks into the storeroom and finds the angel attempting to wipe blood out of his shirt.

"Jesus. What happened to you?"

"Simmons happened." He gives up on the blood and moves on to attempting to bandage his face.

"Does the name Victor Smith mean anything to you?"

"Can't say it does," Dante replies, helping Gamariel with his wounds. "Why can't you just handwave this away?"

"Well, it meant a lot to Simmons. Enough that he brought a Stygian for if I didn't feel like answering his questions. Should've seen that coming...thought the bass was just him being pissed off. Guess I'm getting rusty."

Dante finishes bandaging Gamariel's nose. "I'll be right back, I have to make a phone call." He walks back to the store counter and picks up the phone. It rings without him dialing a number, and the line picks up instantly.

"Well?" Sharon asks.

He hesitates. For a second, it feels wrong, then he says it anyway.

"I'm in."

Bedford Hills Correctional Facility

August 12th, 2:30 PM

"Right this way, detective," the guard says, and walks Az towards the visitation room while Sharon stays behind to go over the visitor's log.

"Does Ms. Smith get many visitors?" Az asks.

"The occasional guy with flowers, she's on one of those online dating websites, and a few people looking to get rich publishing her story, and a few Women's Studies majors. Aside from that, no one." Az chuckles. "Dates?"

"You'd think that people'd be wary dating someone who slit her last husband's throat from ear to ear, but, you know. Some guys..."

Az shakes his head. "I'll never get used to the things that people do."

"Me neither," the guard says, and opens the door to the visitation area. "Knock when you're done."

Sharon's fingers hover over the pages of the visitor's log, searching for Ms. Smith's visitors. There's quite a few, even in the last few days. Three are women's names, so at least those are out, but the remaining four look like guys. Aaron Fulcrum...hm, Mark always did have a predilection for using his middle name, Sharon reflects, but the Fulcrum part throws her off. Besides, she knows the name from the morning papers - this guy's legit. Steve Jablonski? Yeah, right. Michael Jiminez. Hmm, father's name and biblical...but he wouldn't pass for hispanic.

That leaves the second Aaron. Aaron Taylor. The name brings back the steaming jungles of South America, trying to pass themselves off as travelling mercenaries...demon eyes between the leaves and just his breath in her ears as the jungle went quiet around them. Just before things got - loud.

Jackpot.

The room is empty except for the woman sitting on a molded concrete bench in front of a metal table bolted to the floor. Her hair is twisted into a bun, but the orange jumpsuit doesn't help her looks. She looks like she can smell the badge on him.

"Ms. Smith, I'm Detective Marcos, Special Crimes Unit. I'm here to ask you a few questions about a visitor you might have recently had."

She's obviously in no mood to talk to the police. "What visitor?"

Az sits down across from her, and pulls a picture of Mark out of his shirt pocket. "This man." He slides it across the table to her. "We have reason to believe that he's looking for your son."

"Might've been. Hard to tell, with all the hair and that."

"Maybe if you look at it again..."

"Why should I help you, Detective?" she asks, her face growing hard. "I've been in this shithole for five years now. I know how this place works. Favor for favor. And if this man...had been here, he wouldn't have stuck his badge into the air and expected me to provide him with everything he needed, for free. He would've helped me." Her eyes burn holes in the wall behind Az. "Do you know what a good attorney costs? A lot, I can tell you that."

Az leans forward, his face sliding from "professional" to "ominous". "Ms. Smith, this man is very dangerous. Whatever he told you he was, he was lying."

"Got a call from my attorney yesterday," she says. "He's working for me again. Seems I paid him a lot of money, enough for him to finish my appeal. Now how do you think that happened?"

"This man," Az says, tapping on the photo, "is a professional killer. He is looking for your son in order to murder him, Ms. Smith."

She laughs bitterly. "Yeah, right. Why would he pay my lawyer if he was just looking to kill Vic?"

Az pulls a file out of his shirt. He opens it up and slides it to her, it's full of photos and case reports on dozens of homicides. The name on the file is redacted, but everything else is plain to see. "Because this is what he does, Ms. Smith. Whatever it takes to find his target. And if he hadn't paid your lawyer, you might have suspected him and warned your son." He points out the photos as he calls out names. "Fernando Bou, shot just before we could arrest him. He was begging us to help him when a sniper rifle blew his brains out. Nikolai Danko, a bullet in each elbow and both knees. He drowned in a sewage tank, and your benefactor watched."

She looks at the photos, horror seeping into her expression. "No matter what he said to you," Az continues, "no matter what he did for you, you have to believe me that he is going to murder your son if he finds him. Your only hope of saving him is to tell me everything you know so we can get to Vic before he does."

She just sits there. "I...I..." she stammers.

Az takes one of her hands. "It's okay, Ms. Smith, you couldn't have known. Now, did you tell him where your son is?"

She tears her hand loose and covers her mouth as she takes a deep breath. After a few seconds, she speaks again. "...not all of it," she says. "I didn't trust him. I thought I shouldn't tell him everything, see him pay up. Maybe sell him the rest."

"Well?"

"We used to take him to Roosevelt Island, back before they turned it into condos. He loved going there, loved taking the tram. All the times that he ran away, that's where we found him."

Az smiles. "Thank you, Ms. Smith," He collects the file and pictures carefully, then stands up and turns to leave. Smith takes a second to collect her thoughts, then raises her voice again.

"Detective?"

He turns back to face her. She looks at him, her eyes slowly misting up. "You'll save him, right? Vic...he's all I have left."

Az doesn't know what to say for a second. He can't bring himself to crush her by saying that for all he knows, Mark's already put a bullet through his head, that things don't always work out. But in the tangle of emotions in his soul, he clings to the most familiar one - hope. And he sees that Sabrina

Smith could use a good dose of it, too.

"We will save him," he says, and means it.

JC Consulting
August 12th, 2:41 PM

The office is relatively quiet for the first time in a while. Jack and Chrome are at the DA's office, and with Az and Sharon upstate, there's not much activity in this usually busy space. This silence isn't helped by the stony glares that Dante has been giving Karen every so often ever since he walked in the front door. Karen's tried to engage him in some slight conversation, but it never went anywhere and she's resigned herself to sorting through paperwork and doing more research while Dante broods in her general direction.

Dante's cell phone rings. He pulls it out, sees "Az" on the display, and he walks into another room to take the call. "What did you find out upstate?" Dante asks as soon as he slides the phone open. "Smith has a thing about Roosevelt Island," Az says, "something about his mom taking him there when he was a kid on the tram." "Roosevelt Island, got it. So he's probably on it somewhere." "That's what we're thinking." "Any more details?" "Sorry, that's it." "Okay. I'll check it out. See you later."

Karen steps into the doorway. "I'm coming with you," she says. "What for?" Dante asks as he closes the phone. "Somebody needs to hold down the fort here." "You're going to go door to door in every single cheap apartment building on Roosevelt Island? That'll take you what, a year or so?" "Then I suppose we two can do it in six months." Karen ignores the snide remark. "What exactly did they learn?" "Nothing you didn't hear already, that's the problem." Dante sighs. "Two sets of eyes are better, even if we have to search the whole island." "Let's get going, then."

It's Manhattan on a weekday. Yeah, there's traffic.

As they drive up the FDR, Karen breaks the long silence. "So...how have things been?" Dante scoffs and keeps looking out the window. "Come on, we're stuck in this traffic jam, the least you could do is engage in small talk." "No, the least I can do is not speak ill of you, Ms. Ayers." "You're not still pissed about what happened in June, are you?" "Well, an apology would have been nice." "Fair enough. I'm sorry I threatened to have you arrested. Next time, try not conspiring to hide one of the most wanted men in the nation." She's silent as she moves forwards another ten feet. "What on Earth made you so loyal to him, anyway? He's a stone-cold killer, and from what I've been hearing, he's been out of control for a while now." Dante contemplates just blowing her off for a second, then decides to go the other way. "I'm sure you're tired of the 'You wouldn't understand' answer by now, so let me see if I can break it down. Mark wasn't the best of us, sure. I'm not saying that the things that happened to him excuse what he did. But he tried to go straight, the only way he thought he could. I don't know about you, Ms. Ayers, but in my eyes that afforded him a measure of respect." "And now?" Karen asks. "It's...hard. Not to think of him that way anymore." "Even after he executed that Bou at the warehouse and blew up my apartment? That wasn't a red flag to you?" Dante shakes his head. "We killed people. I'm not proud of it, but it seemed...it just seemed like the lesser evil at the time. You don't worry about that when you think the world's coming to an end. And

when it was over, I thought we would all go back to our lives, but Mark went in for the whole justice thing and kept fighting. I believed he was just dedicated. You don't want to think that your friend has gone too far. It just looked like...like he wanted to help and was catching all this heat for it. There was always a reason, a rationale. You can justify a lot, if you look at it from the right angle."

Karen nods, and falls silent. The traffic around them starts moving, crawls forward for a minute, then stops. "I don't want him dead, Dante."

"He's got death penalty to his name," Dante says coolly. "And I don't want to know what Sanctuary's going to do to him. So what do you think will happen?"

"He was already executed. It's on the books. I know one of the best defense attorneys in the city, and he lives for constitutional violations, which punishing the same man twice for the same crime could fall under. At the very least, this can get knocked down to life in prison. It's no guarantee, but it's better than what he's going to get from Sanctuary, at least."

"Do you think that Mark would go for that?" He pauses for a second to refocus his thoughts. "He's not big on surrendering."

"He's not stupid. Given the choice between being killed by Sanctuary and this, do you really think he'll choose Sanctuary?"

"No," Dante says. "He'll choose the 'Fuck you all' option."

He coughs a bit as Karen pulls onto the 59th St. bridge.

"Pardon my French," he says.

Dante steps out of her car first, and starts rummaging around in his coat.

"Where do you want to start? Lowest address first?" Karen asks.

"You might want to look away, Ms. Ayers," Dante replies. When Karen emphatically does not, he sighs and produces a small plastic evidence bag. "A sample of Mr. Smith's...genetic material."

"Where did you get that?"

"Guild secret." Karen looks incredulous, but Dante just shrugs.

He bows down and puts the bag on the ground, then steps back and beckons for Karen to do likewise. As they clear the vicinity, he reaches into a different pocket and produces a small vial. After shaking it vigorously, he kisses it three times, then undoes the small stopper and starts dripping it in a circle around the bag. As he uses the last of the liquid, he turns to Karen.

"You might want to cover your eyes for a bit. For safety, not modesty."

Karen rolls her eyes, then turns around. Dante does something behind her back, whispering a few syllables that sound like gibberish to her. Then there's a small whine, like a distant car screaming past them, and she sees a flash of light behind her stretch her shadow to hundreds of meters for the blink of an eye.

"There," Dante says, sounding slightly groggy. When she turns around, she sees the circle of droplets glowing. Small rays of light converge at about four feet above the ground, and a glowing arrow shaped with light hovers above their meeting point, indicating a rough North-East direction, but nothing specific.

Karen doesn't look impressed. "That it?"

"Give me a second," Dante says. One more grab beneath his coat produces a small city map of New York City. He grabs the evidence bag from the ground, doing nothing to disturb the lights, then spreads the map onto the ground within the circle. With another kiss to his right hand, he grabs the hovering arrow from midair and pushes it down to just above ground level.

"Do you have a pen, Ms. Ayers?"

Karen pulls a pen out of her purse. "Am I getting this back?"

Dante smiles, producing a compass from his coat. How many pockets does that thing have, anyway?

"In a second." He orients the map according to the compass, presses the arrow further down, then lays the straight edge of the compass's housing along the arrow and uses the pen to draw a line on the map. He repeats the process on the other side of the arrow. He returns the pen to Karen, then picks up the map. With a wave of his hand, the light construct disappears into thin air.

"Divination is not my specialty," he says, "but this should narrow it down a bit."

Karen takes the map. "You've narrowed it down to...five buildings."
"Down from a whole island. Not so bad, I think."
She looks closer at the map, then turns and points to five twenty-story apartment blocks. "Those five buildings."
"Magic's good for a lot of things. Others, not so much," Dante says. "Now, what about that second pair of eyes? We're burning daylight."
Karen closes her eyes and folds her hands over her mouth, and thinks. "Are you sure Az and Sharon didn't get anything else out of the mother? What exactly did she say, and I mean word for word."
"Victor Smith has a thing for this island," Dante recalls. "His mother used to take him here, by tram."
He thinks for another second. "When Victor was a kid. That's all."
Karen looks back at the map. "These buildings are on the same side of the island as the tram." She searches on the map for the dotted line that represents the tram cables, and smiles. "But only one of these buildings is facing the tram cables." She points it out to Dante on the map. "That's the one. We'll start there."
Dante looks just a little impressed. "A good idea. Lead the way."

Dante and Karen walk into the lobby of the building. It's no 5th Avenue palace, but it's clean and all the lights are working, with the furniture leftover from when the building opened in the 1980's. They head down the staircase into the basement, and she pushes open the door marked "Maintenance Office". Dante hangs back, his instincts making him watch the way outside.

Inside, a portly man in his 40's has his feet up on a stack of milk crates, watching TV. He looks over at Karen and Dante with a surprised look on his face. "Hey, you're not supposed to be down here."
Karen pulls her DA's Office badge out and flashes it at the man. "District Attorney's office, we're investigating a string of identity thefts. The criminals involved use rented apartments as cover for their illegal activities. Has anyone moved into this building in the last few days?"
"Yeah, Mr. Smith. Don't remember his first name, though."
Karen shows him a picture of Victor Smith. "Was this the man?"
"Yeah. Turned his utilities on last week. He some sort of bad guy?"
"No, we're just following up some information from one of our witnesses, he hasn't done anything wrong. Have you seen him today?"
"He was leaving as I came in today. Haven't seen him back yet. Anything else I need to worry about?"
Karen smiles. "No, he hasn't done anything wrong, we're just following a statement from a witness. Have a good day, sir."

Karen walks back out; Dante falls in behind her. They head up the steps and walk back to her car.
"What now?" Dante asks. "We came all this way and then we don't even break into his place?"
"I try to draw the line at felony burglary," Karen says, unlocking her car with a deft touch on the remote. The two of them get in and settle in for a long wait. "Besides, we need him to find Mark. We want him, we have to wait for him to show up here."
"I was expecting this to take a lot longer," Dante says, "so we find ourselves with some time to pass."
"What, no confidence in my investigative abilities?" Karen asks with a sideways glance.
"I have every confidence in your abilities, Ms. Ayers." He reaches under his coat and produces a thermos. "Would you care for some coffee?"
Karen smiles. "Always."
29 Main Street, Roosevelt Island
August 13th, 1:44 AM

It's been half a day's worth of stakeout, and the results aren't encouraging. Sharon's shift started 3 hours ago and she's already seeing shapes in the dark, just itching for something to walk into the light and end this gig. After a few hours of alternating small talk with half-hour silences, she and Karen have officially run out of nothing to talk about.

After the thousandth time that Sharon's snapped up the binoculars to get a look at someone leaving the apartments only to put them back down just as quickly, Karen speaks up again. "So..."
"So...what? You can only start so many conversations that way," Sharon replies.
"I've been wondering-"
Sharon rolls her eyes. "Oh, here we go. Should've listened to Dante."

"About what?"

"I want the truth, I want to understand why...is this how you crack your cases? You just 'have to know'?"

Karen smiles. "It helps. So, you're a demon."

"Says so on my driver's license."

"So, why all this? Why follow the rules? Hell, why work for the good guys at all?"

"Short answer is Mark. We already covered basic cosmology, angels, demons, heaven and hell, all that jazz. So, the first thing you have to understand, it was my job to stop Mark from...doing his job. Could've tried to take him in a fight, but I thought I'd mess with him a little bit, the whole confusion and seduction thing that earns you your leather wings. But..."

Karen cocks an eyebrow. "You fell for him? It couldn't have been his charming demeanor."

"Travelled a good bit with him, you know, to keep an eye on him and do the standard sabotage thing. He was different then, more idealistic, more focused. And hell, after a while of trying to save the world, you like working with people who aren't scheming to torture you if you slip up. People who care about you. And then you start wondering why you're trying to kill this guy. I guess I just got swept up in his little crusade."

"And you two lovers went around the world, killing bad people as you went. I read this part in the Sanctuary file. But why this, why work for the NYPD right after busting Sanctuary? I mean, this wasn't exactly your style. What happened?"

"We just wanted to keep doing what we were doing, save the world...and this gig sounded like we could lay low for a bit, let the big heat die down and do some good in the mean time." Sharon shifts in the seat a little. "We used to just roll into town, kill the bad guys, save the day, and then move on. Wandering heroes don't have to look back, you stick in one place too long, you might catch the consequences of what you're doing. But with the NYPD, with Jack and this consulting thing, my world got more complicated than just shooting bad guys. I can see the relief and the closure I give to people when I close a case and started paying more attention to the little things instead of just the big picture, and I tell you, it got to me after a while. I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't hung out with Mark in the first place, got sold on the whole 'doing good' thing, but thanks to him, I started to like helping people. And I started to see the reasons why you people have laws and all this rigmarole that seemed so pointless before."

"The great seducer...seduced. First hell, then Mark, then the NYPD."

"Well, that's a strength, isn't it? If it's wrong and you find out, you need to change."

There's another pause, then she looks over at Karen. "What are you going to do with Mark when we catch him?"

"Put him away, get him to help us take down Sanctuary. It doesn't seem like they've changed any, and he has to know something that we can use to get at them."

"...take down Sanctuary?" Sharon sighs and shakes her head. "Do something good with your life, help us take down those bastards...what do you think Sanctuary told him when he joined them? What do you think Az told him when he was recruited into the war?" She looks at Karen, not in anger, but still with conviction in her eyes. "All his life, he's just been used, and now you want to do the same thing with him, and I'm tired of it. I won't let it happen again."

Karen's taken aback for a moment, as having a demon glower at you tends to do. "I'm here to keep Mark alive, Sharon. Not just throw him headlong into another battle. The first chance I get to get him put someplace safe and where he can't hurt anyone else, I'll take it, and if it comes down to saving Mark or getting Sanctuary, I'll just have to find some other way to do it. I may want him locked up, but I don't want him dead. Agreed?"

Sharon smiles wistfully. "A safe place? Where do you think that is?"

"That's why I need him to help me get Sanctuary, so we can know that he doesn't have a bullseye on his back once he's put away. I know he'll probably tell me to go fuck myself when we find him, but maybe he'll come around." Karen looks back at Sharon. "You do want him put away, right Sharon? He still needs to answer for what he's done."

"Arresting him's the right thing to do," Sharon agrees. "But I don't know if he'll ever cooperate, and what are you going to do about it? He'll still be in deep shit, and then what?"

"If we find him before they do, we can catch and try to turn the people they send to kill him. I doubt Sanctuary has a lot of tolerance for failure, especially if you get captured."

"Do you have any idea who they'll send to kill Mark? For all I know they'll just level the building he's in and call it a day. It's Sanctuary, Karen. They can do it and they know it."

"It's not a good plan, but unless you have a better idea, it's all I've got at the moment." Karen bumps Sharon. "You've got a guy coming out." Sharon grabs the binoculars and they both fall silent again.

New York County Supreme Court
August 13th, 9:07 AM

ADA Siegel stomps into Judge Stanhouser's office, piece of paper clenched in hand. "What the hell is this, Nina?"

Miss Meyers and Kirshner are already seated at the judge's desk. "Just what it looks like, Andy. Notice to change our plea to not guilty on the grounds of mental disease or defect. The death of my client's mother caused a psychotic break."

"Judge, you honestly can't be buying this. He went through extensive efforts to disguise his identity and hide his associations with the murders, which is pretty much the opposite of the definition of insanity."

"It was all a part of his delusions of vigilantism, Judge. He's been put on anti-psychotics and his violent delusions have subsided."

"Oh please, this is the biggest load of cra-"

Stanhouser looks over his glasses at Siegel. "Contain yourself, Mr. Siegel." He turns to Kirshner. "Do you remember why you killed those people, Mr. Kirshner?"

"No, I..." Kirshner begins, seeming genuinely lost. "I'm sorry, your honor, I don't. I got those pills yesterday and I'm just, I'm just a little slow today."

"Or he's been surrounded by crazy people and decided that joining their ranks is a quick way out of a murder conviction," Siegel says. "There's no way that this meets the basic requirements for an insanity plea, your honor. This is a blatant move to play to the predispositions of the jury."

"Just because it makes your job harder doesn't mean it's not a legitimate plea, Mr. Siegel," Stanhouser says. "As for the plea of not guilty by mental disease or defect, I'll leave it up to the jury to decide."

The defendant is to submit to psychological examination by a court appointed psychiatrist. Now I have to be in court in five minutes, so..."

"Thank you, your honor," Meyers says, and the both of them leave.

Siegel corners Meyers in the elevator. "You know this plea is crap."

"His mother was killed by a metahuman thug," Meyers says. "She spent two weeks in agony as he watched her die from the inside out because she wouldn't give up her purse. I'd say that could cause a psychotic break."

Siegel rolls his eyes. "He's faking so he can spend a few months in Bellevue and be back out on the streets popping metahumans, and you know it. You really want to let that animal back out on the street?"

The elevator dings and the doors slide open. "Better than the animals that put him in here in the first place," Meyers says. "The SCU is out of control, and when I bring Ayers' little friends on the stand, I'll prove it. First though, I'm getting the bail reduced and getting him out of Riker's Island." She walks out the door, leaving Siegel behind, wondering what to do next.

29 Main Street, Roosevelt Island

August 13th, 10:15 AM

Dante Vecchi slinks up to Sharon's car, carrying a small messenger bag over his shoulder. He contemplates knocking on the glass briefly, then decides that he'd rather look dignified and wait for a second to be noticed. After a beat, the driver's side door opens and Dante climbs in.

"Good morning," he says; Sharon nods without looking at him. "Did you get any sleep?"

"Don't need sleep," she says. "Sleep is nice, but it's a luxury. Can't be too much longer until we have something, anyway."

"I brought coffee, though."

"Well, that's fucking fantastic, Dante."

"...you might want to reconsider that sleep thing. Your attitude needs rest."

Sharon tears herself away from the binoculars and turns to face Dante. Her eyes are closed from the effort to summon basic social niceties.

"I'm sorry," she spits out. "But I don't think caffeine will help."

"The caffeine, probably not. The subtle vanilla flavor, on the other hand..."

"You're just going to keep distracting me, aren't you?"
"One cup, coming right up."

Dante unscrews the cap on his thermos, then pours some fresh coffee into Sharon's mug. He has to resist the urge to take it to the nearest sink and give it a good scrubbing, but the thought that he won't have to drink out of it does ease his mind considerably.

"Got him," Sharon whispers, a smile forming on her lips. "We fucking got him," she says with more emphasis.
"Mark?"
"No, Smith."

The last couple of days haven't been very kind to Victor Smith.

The glint of power has long since faded from his eyes. The shadows around him are the subject of constant scrutiny, and ever since Mother called on the number she wasn't supposed to call, **ever**, Victor's mind has been racing. Why would she call? He left her alone with Daddy back at the house, back when he was strong enough to save her. Now, she's following him, needing him to save her again, but he's not strong enough. He needs to get away, and he needs to do it fast.

One last stop at his apartment got him the stash from behind the bathroom tiles; not a lot of money, and not a very fancy gun, but it's enough to keep him alive until he can rebuild his strength and face Daddy again. Until then, he has to be like he was when he was young, when he could hide under the bed and in the closet. Be small, stay on the move, sooner or later he'll stop chasing you.

As he steps outside the apartment building, he sees something normal. An empty car. Except when he came in, there was this woman sitting inside it. She has to be somewhere watching him, waiting for Daddy, like all the other women, but Victor needs the cash. It was a chance he had to take. Now she's not in her car anymore. She's waiting for him. Somewhere he can't see.

Victor steps back into the building and heads for the first floor.

Dante's waiting at the back door of the apartment building, Beretta 9000 still in his coat pocket, when he hears a muffled sound from close by. Drawing his gun, he quickly decides to abandon his position in favor of investigating.

He rounds the corner and sees Smith legging it, already halfway across the parking lot. A brief glance upwards and Dante knows how he got past him and Sharon.

"He's here!" Dante shouts, then sprints after Smith. Not a chance in hell to hit the guy with a pistol at this range.

Dante sees Smith get into his Cadillac Eldorado and start the engine; by the time he has his gun in a shooting stance, the car is already headed straight for Mr. Vecci. Dante has just enough time to think how he knows a disturbing amount of people who could've made the shot right there, but he's not one of those guys. Instead, he dives to the side, narrowly escaping a career change into hood ornament.

However, his stunt does give Sharon enough time to get between Smith's car and the lot's exit.

Sharon could make that shot, Dante thinks, but she doesn't even have her gun out; instead, the illusion of her having a human jaw shatters as her face splits at the seams, emitting a defiant roar. In the blink of an eye, Sharon's twice as big and has her wings spread out. Her shoes, Dante notes with faint detachment, are ruined beyond salvage. Mostly because the claws on her feet are quite busy digging into the asphalt.

The transformation has almost the desired effect on Smith, who doesn't even consider going through her; instead, he yanks the steering wheel to the side hard enough to lose control of his car. The flaw in Sharon's plan quickly becomes apparent as she's sideswiped by the rear of a skidding Eldorado, briefly knocking the wind out of her. Smith is in complete panic mode at this stage; he floors the accelerator as her hand digs into the car's trunk. With a horrible sound, the Eldorado tears loose, though the trunk lid stays with her. Smith drives off, losing his side mirrors and the rest of the factory finish as he pinballs between parked cars, finally skipping over the curb **twice** and onto the road.

"Sharon? You okay?" Dante shouts.

His question is answered when the angry demon drops the car part and dashes upward, gaining air with rapid flaps of her wings. That part is at least of tangential interest for Dante, because he's never actually seen that happen before, but his second thought - right after that - is that this is not a good thing to do in broad daylight.

"Sharon, I think that maybe this isn't a good thing for you to do right now!" Dante shouts.

"He's getting away, Dante! If we lose him now, we'll probably never find him again!" Sharon bellows as she gains further altitude, slowly rising above the lot.

"Your police board review! What do you think they'll say when they find out about a demon-like creature that looks a lot like you chasing a car through Queens?"

She immediately stops rising and pauses in midair. For a brief second, she considers chasing him down anyway, but then she stops flapping her wings and falls back to the ground. "Goddamnit," she shouts.

"Son of a *bitch*!" She emphasizes that last point by burying her fist into the asphalt.

"...you okay?" Dante asks, rushing over to meet her.

"Fuck," she growls, folding her wings again. Within seconds, she's back to normal size as the human skin stretched over the body aligns itself back into a normal-looking configuration. The boots are still toast, though. "We almost had the bastard, Dante. Now what?"

"Now, we get you out of here," he says, taking off his coat and draping it over her now mostly naked form. "You're lucky there's nothing here but apartments, I think everyone's at work."

Sharon nods. "That was kinda stupid, huh?"

"Yeah, a little. You sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine," Sharon says, adjusting the coat. "Get me back to the office, I need some new clothes and we need to find this guy before Mark does. It's not like there's too many Cadillac Eldorados missing a trunk lid and both rear-view mirrors, right?"

Dante nods. "Indeed. Also, might I mention that you could still really use a cup of my wonderful vanilla roast?"

Sharon rolls her eyes and climbs into her car.

"Damn," Mark mutters to himself, putting down the monocular. "And people say **I** should be more subtle."

He's not actually on the parking lot, as that would have been too much of an exposure risk. But sitting in a half-abandoned apartment building for a few hours has its perks, too. Mostly a nice view of the whole scenario.

First things first, though; Mark walks out of the building and towards his car. Fun trivia: it hasn't been his car for very long. It's kind of interesting what kind of deals you can get on used cars when you travel a bit into Jersey and pay cash.

With his right hand turning the key in the ignition, his left hand switches the small receiver in his pocket on; he grabs it and puts it on the passenger seat as he pulls out of the parking space half a mile away from the action. Good call on putting the tracker in the front of the car, Mark thinks, though he's somewhat annoyed at himself - what if that stunt had jostled the gadget loose? He's still taking too many chances on this.

Beneath a blanket on the back seat, there's a Remington 870 shotgun. Mark doesn't intend to take any more chances.

Monica Pizzorno's Office
August 13th, 11:10 AM

Sharon quickly strides into Monica's office. "Sorry about being late, I was working on something and totally forgot about the appointment."

"Must have been something really important," Monica says with a raised eyebrow, "considering that this is your fitness evaluation for return to duty."

"Those papers aren't going to push themselves," Sharon says. "So, how is this going to go down?"

"Well, I'm going to start by asking how you've been doing. How have you been doing?"

Sharon smiles. "Cute. No, I mean, about...what I am. You know the score, you've seen what's really going on. You know that will never fly in a real report."

"No, but I think the differences between being a demon and being a dangerous metahuman are all semantics. What they want to know is if you're a danger to the population at large, I don't think knowing if you're an unfortunate fluke of genetics and magic or an ancient being of celestial nature matters."

Sharon feels her muscles relax a little and flashes a grin. "Not quite so ancient, I know some angels who have a few millennia on me."

Monica laughs. "I'm sure. Well, let's try starting again. How do you feel?"

"Am I angry about being outed? Sure. I'm more pissed off about being put on leave, though."

"Feel like you're missing out on the action?"

"No, more like I'm missing out on what I'm supposed to be doing. I talked about this with Karen yesterday. I wouldn't have thought about it before, back when Mark and I were running all over the world, taking out dictators and despots, but I get more satisfaction out of telling a scared woman that her abusive ex won't ever bother her again than I did out of a hundred assassinations. Something about this job makes me feel like I'm actually doing something, instead of just exchanging one evil bastard for another."

"That's a remarkably altruistic perspective for a demon," Monica says.

"Well, I've changed a lot in the last year. We all have, Az, Chrome, Jack..."

"And Mark?"

Sharon frowns. "No. It doesn't seem like he's changed much at all," she says tersely.

Monica doesn't know if demons can communicate telepathically, but Sharon's body language says "change the subject" loud and clear. "How about the rest of the police? What was their reaction to the news?"

"Pretty good, surprisingly. The SCU guys were pretty spooked at first, but they've been calling and letting me know that they support me and can't wait for me to be cleared for duty again. Some of the people in the department clear out of the room when I walk in, but most of them have said that when they look at me, red skin, spike and wings don't matter, the only color they see is blue," Sharon says, smiling at the thought.

"Is that helping, knowing that the people you work with accept you for you?"

"Yeah, it's definitely something new. I'm used to having to be secret about what I am, people find out and no matter what I've done, they just see a demon, and then I find myself at the business end of an angry mob, so I stayed with Mark, Az, Chrome and whoever else he was running with, away from the rest of humanity. This time though, they found out and still welcomed me. It's....nice, being accepted for who I am, instead of hated for it."

"Sounds like you really like working for the police, Sharon."

"Yeah, I do. I'm beginning to think that this is what I'm supposed to be doing. You know, in the grand scheme of things. I love working for the NYPD and with the SCU, and I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't do it anymore." She starts to tear up a little at that last part. "Shit, look at this. I can't believe this, me crying over a damn job."

"Well, it sounds like it's a bit more than that to you." Monica says, and hands Sharon a tissue. "Is that why you and Mark grew apart? He couldn't see how you felt about the NYPD, or didn't care?"

Sharon's features freeze up again. "Yes, I guess so."

"Sharon, is there something going on with Mark? You're awfully defensive about him today."

"Nothing you need to worry about," Sharon says.

"That's fine," Monica says, and hands her another tissue. Sharon doesn't notice that Monica's taken her gloves off until it's too late, and Monica touches her arm.

- electrodes under her skin, crude but the pain is intense -
- a kiss from the liar -
- the blood of a thousand dead on her face -
- the night sky, the stars calling to her -
- on the parking lot -

Monica wakes up, mind heavy with worry about her police hearing. After a quick shower, she stands in front of her mirror and practices her speech. "Yes, I'm a metahuman. I'm a meta. I'm also Detective Hanson, NYPD..." She continues, and then Azuriel walks in. They talk for a bit, and then he leaves. She wishes he'd stay.

Monica looks down at the table. "All of this was his idea, you know," she half-says, half-whispers. "The crime-fighting thing, it was supposed to be a cover while we laid low after Love Towers." She feels horrible, about lying to Karen, about what might happen now that she knows, and most of all about what she's saying about Mark.

Monica looks across the table at Dante. "Because we can't reach him, Sanctuary thinks he's gone rogue, and they've brought in Karen to deal with the whole mess." She can't believe what she's doing, but Mark's finally gone off the deep end, and as much as it hurts her, she has to stop him before he hurts anyone else, no matter what happens.

Monica looks through the binoculars, tired after spending all night sitting in her car, waiting for the serial killer they know Mark is hunting to show up so they can catch him and, hopefully, catch Mark. Dante's screwing around with his damn coffee again, when she sees him. "Got him," she whispers, a smile forming on her lips. "We fucking got him."

Monica runs out into the middle of the road, her pistol aimed at Victor Smith in the oncoming car. The calm boils away as false flesh tears and true flesh emerges. Bound so long, the claws itch in her hands, demanding their freedom. Her wings begin to spread, and she feels herself expand and grow to her true form. The car swerves and slides out of control, the collision knocking the wind out of her. She manages to dig a clawed hand into the car and her talons rip into the asphalt, attempting to hold the car in place, but the trunk tears off, leaving her empty handed. Just as she spreads her wings to give chase, she hears Dante shout at her, "Monica! Monica! Snap out of it!"

Monica comes to on the floor, Sharon kneeling next to her, a worried look on her face. "Oh, God," she says, "my head is killing me." Her eyes are burning, she's got a splitting headache and her whole body feels swollen and painful. She reaches up to rub her temples, and feels two bumps under the skin.

"What the hell happened to me?"

"What happens when you try to read the mind of a demon," Sharon says, and shows Monica herself in the mirror from her desk. Her pupils and iris have turned bright red, horns are beginning to poke through her forehead, and there's a sensation crawling over her back that she'd rather not know what it is. Her face looks like it's beginning to split at the seams.

"What the fuck is happening to me, Sharon?" she shouts, her voice growing deeper and somehow beginning to reverberate.

"You're shifting. Close your eyes, you don't want to see this."

Monica's fingers feel like somebody's pumping them up with burning fat. She can almost smell her skin burning as it splits apart on hundreds of seams across her body. She can't stop watching, either out of the pain it takes to even move her eyelids or morbid curiosity. "You know," she chokes out, "you know what you have to do with Mark."

"Shouldn't you be more worried about what's happening to you at the moment?" Sharon asks.

Monica's hair is, quite literally, on fire. Molten plastic from her clothes sticks to her tenderized flesh. Claws, talons and spikes erupt from her skin.

"Will I die?" Monica asks. She feels her body expanding, growing, becoming stronger. As her wings and tail begin to unfold, they flip her over onto her side.

"No, but--"

"Then it doesn't matter," Monica says through clenched teeth. "Talk to me about Mark, it's not like we've got anything else to do." The pain finally fades as Monica reaches for something to hold on to. With cautious moves, she scrambles back to her feet, but the additional weight doesn't make it any

easier to keep her balance. She stretches her arms out to her full ten foot reach, wings expanding out and talons tearing holes in her carpet.

"We've got to get you to Constantine, he can help you," Sharon says, and takes a blanket off of the couch and puts it over her shoulders, but the two points of Monica's new wings still show through.

"Umm, you've got to fold those down. It's kinda like crossing your arms, but in your back."

It takes a bit, but Monica figures it out. Now that the pain has subsided, the feelings of strength and raw power come through. "I can see why you like this so much. You never answered my question, Sharon."

"Yes, I know," Sharon says, and stops for a second. "I'll call ahead, you go down to my car. Try to tuck the tail up, it's a dead giveaway."

"Right," Monica says, and tries to work on that as Sharon runs down to her car.

3rd and East 47th Street
August 13th, 11:17 AM

Jack and Chrome step out of the Interceptor, then hurriedly cross the road. Az and Dante wait on the back seats. The BOLO on Smith's car - conveniently enough, Sharon got his plate - has led them here, and after a brief glance at the row of parked cars, the one missing most of its trunk sticks out like a sore thumb. Someone - Victor Smith, probably, but hard to see from behind - is still at the wheel, waiting for reasons of his own.

"Let's keep walking," Chrome says. "Maybe we can close in like that."

"Okay," Jack replies.

It's a good plan. They manage to close to about fifty yards before a sidelong glance by Chrome puts her eyes on a small roadside diner. Or, more precisely, on Mark walking out of said diner.

In another world, sticking to the silent approach might have netted them both. In this one, it doesn't take more than a second before Mark spots Chrome back. He starts running, and Chrome darts after him. Just as Jack realizes what's happening, Smith's car starts and peels out of its spot, its driver spooked by the unfolding action.

As Mark sprints, he sees the car swerve past him; he considers stopping and shooting for a second, but he can't slow down with his friends right behind him. *God damn it all to hell, why now? Why did they have to show up now?*

"Mark!" Chrome manages to shout as she runs after him, Jack in hot pursuit. The roar of the Interceptor's engine is unmistakeable. He doesn't listen.

Inside the Interceptor, the situation isn't much better. After scrambling for the front seats, Dante's at the wheel and Az is frantically loading beanbags into his shotgun.

"We have to cut him off!" Az shouts, racking the pump on a full magazine and chambering a less-lethal round; Dante's past talking, he just has the hammer down and speeds past the foot chase, sliding the Interceptor around the next corner to the shrieking protest of its parking brakes.

Mark's eyes dart from one part of the street to the next as he pushes through the crowd as quickly as possible. He's lucky insofar as that Az is not on foot and that pushing through people neutralizes the speed advantage his friends have, but this isn't going to last forever. He sees the Interceptor slide to a stop at the next corner - no side alleys to duck into, and if he closes further they'll get a free shot at him. In the blink of an eye, his gaze finds a check cashing place a few meters in front of him. He doesn't have to think about this too hard: Friday means people on their lunch break cashing paychecks, bulletproof glass if he's lucky. He slams his weight against the door and ducks in.

Chrome and Jack are maybe five seconds behind him, now with their guns drawn; the Interceptor peels off again to the tune of Az shouting, trying to find a side alley and cut off Mark's escape route.

Inside the shop, Mark doesn't waste time being nice. Displays, people, anything he can get his hands he throws behind him. With a flash, his sword springs into his hand; two quick slashes compromise the door to the employee section and he rushes through, giving the manager an elbow to the face

before he can pull his weapon. Chrome rushes into the shop to see Mark kick in an "Employees Only" door in the back, but she doesn't have anything approaching a clear shot.

More employees in his way. Mark runs through the back of the shop, past the break room and the money safe, and finally arrives at the back door. Another swift kick opens that; he steps out, closes the door and almost runs, then thinks better of it. Chrome rushes into the hallway just to see Mark standing outside; she raises her gun and Mark slams the door shut, then jams his sword into the handle mechanism. He has a moment to observe that the door would be much more secure if it was installed the other way around (i.e. properly), but after a moment to catch his breath, he powers on. Behind him, he can hear Chrome cursing and firing her gun to shoot out the lock.

By the time she's got the lock almost open, Jack has had the time to flash his badge to the horrified workers at the store. They settle down just a bit, but the manager threatens to call the cops.

"You do that," Jack says between heavy breaths. Then Chrome kicks the door open and the chase is back on.

The alley behind the shop is well-lit and reasonably clean. No obvious hiding places, so Chrome and Jack power forward. By now, Mark has twenty seconds on them, if not more. At the street before them, they briefly split, rushing in opposite directions, but except for the regular crowd freezing as they see the two scan the street with guns in hand, there's nothing. Mark's gone.

It is then that the Interceptor rounds a far corner, driving back to Chrome's position. Jack comes jogging over to join them as Az leans out of the corner.

"Almost had him," Az says, pointing to another alley across the street. "He went that way, we drove to cut him off but he didn't come out on the other side."

"This sucks," Chrome says, her breathing almost normal again. "Where the hell did he go?"

As if on cue, her cell phone goes off. She doesn't recognize the number, but she recognizes the voice.

"That was fun," Mark says, faint engine noises in the background. "You wanna schedule another workout for Monday?"

"This isn't fucking funny!" Chrome barks. "Tell me where you are and stand down before somebody gets hurt."

"That's the point, people have been hurt and Victor Smith needs to be stopped. I know where he is hiding, I'm heading there now."

"Don't do this, Mark."

"Do what? Help you? Fine. Grab a pen and write this down, I've got your perp on a silver platter for you. Just promise me he'll get what's coming to him."

Chrome can't properly articulate just how angry she is; the best she can do is put down the phone for a second and shout at Dante to give her a pen and a notebook. Dante, ever the gentleman, obliges her with a quick reach beneath his coat.

"I'm listening," Chrome says, doing her best to keep her voice steady.

"416 3rd Street, between 7th and 8th Avenue in Queens. And Chrome?"

"Yes? What is it?"

"Put one between the bastard's eyes for me."

Click.

Constantine's Rare Books

August 13th, 11:30 AM

Sharon walks through the door, Monica's hooded form in tow. Gamariel looks up from his reading, and rises up, wincing at the remnant of pain in his side.

"Oh dear," he says. "That looks interesting, to say the least. What have you brought me this time?"

Monica shakes the blanket off herself, revealing her demonoid form. "She tried to use her little mind reading trick on me, and learned a lot more about me than she was looking for," Sharon says.

"I can see that. Any reason in particular, Miss Pizzorno?"

"I'm dedicated to my job," she growls.

"Your dedication is noble, indeed, but perhaps you should avoid touching celestials without consent in the future. I suppose you are looking to reverse the experience, are you not?"

Monica nods.

"The good news, then," Gamariel says, walking over to one of his bookshelves with a slight limp. "The universe has a way of correcting itself and you still read as human in my eyes. Sooner or later, it should begin reversing itself."

"Usually, that phrase is followed by 'and the bad news'," Monica says, awkwardly moving through the cramped space of the bookshop, wings, tail and shoulders bumping into shelves.

"Your knowledge of dramatic tropes is commendable, too. Yes, there is bad news. Namely, the specifics of your particular case elude my memory. To speak plainly, I have never had an empath absorb demonic essence, so I have no yardstick to measure the length of your predicament with. Hours, days, weeks, the field is wide open."

Insofar as it is possible for Monica to slump in the confined space, she does. "I might be stuck like this for weeks?" A guttural growl escapes her lips, which could be a sigh.

"Look on the bright side, Ms. Pizzorno," Gamariel says with a light smile. "I'm sure a dedicated professional like you has saved up an uncomfortable amount of vacation days. I would advise that you perceive your transformation as an opportunity to cash in on them. Besides, what better way to understand your patient than by becoming like her for a while? Come, let me show you to my back room, where you can stay as long as you need to. I'm sure I can make the appropriate arrangements for your absence."

"Relax, Monica, there's worse places to be laid up than here," Sharon says. Her cell phone rings, and Chrome is on the other end of the line. "Thanks," she mouths to Gamariel, then takes the call.

"We had Mark, but we lost him."

"Great, any good news, or do you want to rain on my parade, too?"

"He told us where Smith is hiding, we're headed there now. 416 3rd Street in Queens."

"Alright, I'll meet you there," Sharon says, and hangs up.

Gamariel walks out of the back. "Thanks again for taking care of her," Sharon says. "If there's anything you need..."

"I have enough favors that I don't need another," he says. "Simply the opportunity to observe such a rare occurrence is payment enough. Go, find your killer." He pauses for a second. "Sharon? Be careful. Mark's a dangerous man, and I don't know if he can be trusted."

"How do you-"

"Please, my dear. How long have you known me?"

"Right," she says. "Thanks for the tip." Sharon runs out the door and into her car. "Just once, I'd like something to go right today..."

416 3rd Street, Queens

August 13th, 12:03 PM

The team pulls up at the address Mark gave them. It's another one of those apartment buildings that seemed like a good idea in the 60s and subsequently proved themselves to be quite the opposite.

Sharon's already there, making arrangements with a patrol cop to lock down the area and give them some peace & quiet for the raid. Sharon nods to Az as he gets out of the car; they walk to the rear of the Interceptor and retrieve their gear. Sharon chooses a G36 - one that Mark lobbied for, she reflects bitterly. Az throws on a Dyneema vest and grabs his SPAS-12 shotgun, then slips a few baton rounds into the magazine. Just as they're about to leave, Chrome grabs another vest from the back and puts it on.

"You sure about that?" Sharon asks, genuine concern in her voice. "This could get messy."

"We need to get him," Chrome replies. "The sooner we have Smith in custody, the sooner this crap stops and the sooner we can get Mark to come in."

"Look, I'm the last one to pull the lecture about getting too involved," Sharon says, "but you're still wired from chasing him. If we want to do this right, I need you with a clear head and not an itchy trigger finger, got that?"

"Got it," Chrome says, pulls out her Beretta and cocks the hammer.

The front door opens easily; Az takes point, Sharon follows, with Chrome covering the rear. Most of the doors inside are boarded up; it takes them until the third floor to find one that can be opened. Bonus points: it's clean and in very good repair. Somebody must have been here recently.

Az slips a doorbuster shell into his shotgun and chambers it cautiously. With nods from Sharon and Chrome, he shoulders the gun, takes aim at the lock and pulls the trigger.

BANG!

The door doesn't quite open, but surrenders to another kick; the team still has the initiative, so they press into the main hallway of the apartment. The inside looks noticeably more worn than the door; security was more important than appearances. In the darkness and the rush, Az notices a tripwire only when it's too late to stop his move; he barely gets to shout "Trap!" and throw himself to the ground when the door slams closed behind them and a deafening boom goes off above them.

Jack's securing the building's front when he hears the explosion; he looks up to see windows in the third floor shatter from the shockwave, raining glass onto the street. Shouting and cussing, he draws his gun and hurries inside, waving at Dante to stay outside and make sure no one comes out. The small, rational part inside him that screams for him to stay with the car to intercept Smith, to call Bomb Squad and other reinforcements, hell, to do anything but rush into an obvious trap - he blocks it out.

The door still stands in his way, locked again. A frustrated kick isn't enough to open it, and the lock visible from the outside is already shot out. It takes Jack a second to concentrate, but then he focuses the totality of his psychokinetic powers and pushes forward as hard as he can. The door groans and buckles roughly in the middle, secured on both sides but apparently not reinforced enough.

Az is just about able to get back on his feet when Jack bursts in, gun drawn.

"What the fuck!?" he shouts. Chrome and Sharon are likewise picking themselves off the ground, but are much slower to recover. Chrome in particular seems to have gotten the worst of the blast and is too unsteady to even consider standing up.

"Flashbangs," Az offers, still catching his breath. He points to a cluster of now-spent canisters hanging from the ceiling, right above the door. "The neighbourhood can't possibly be this bad."

"Smith's not into this Home Alone shit," Sharon says.

"So..." Jack says, then cuts off. The implications are all too clear. "Let's toss it anyway, might give us a clue." He helps Chrome to her feet. She wraps her arms around him and hangs there for a minute, still stunned from the blast. "Are you okay?" Jack asks, holding her tightly.

"Yeah, I'm," Chrome stammers, "I just need a moment." She cracks a smile. "Those things really knock you on your butt."

"Don't worry," Jack says, "they were just flashbangs, he could have used C4. Shows he still cares about saving lives, right?"

"If he did," Chrome says, "he wouldn't have lied to me." Her smile's gone as quickly as it appeared.

The apartment search doesn't yield much. Oh, there's guns, ammo, cash, spare clothes and food, fake ID, tossable cell phones...the usual safe house stuff. Jack's mind is still swimming from the level of paranoia it takes to set one of these up, keep them in stock and then just casually toss it all away for a diversion, and says so.

"How paranoid do you have to be to do this kind of thing?" Jack asks.

"We're talking about Mark here," Sharon says. "It wasn't too long ago that we had Heaven, Hell, and at least three national intelligence agencies hunting our asses down. You don't get through that

without a talent for preparation."

Az cuts open another cushion from the sofa. A few bundled rolls of hundred dollar bills fall out. "Lots of stuff, no useful forensics. For a guy who's known for showing off, he's really good at cleaning up a room."

"Tell that to our kitchen," Sharon says, trying to lighten the mood. It gets a slight chuckle from Az, but not much else.

Jack climbs on a chair to check on top of the bookcases when he sees light glint off of something in the corner. "What's this?" he asks, and pulls back the drywall with a prybar. Plastered into the wall is a webcam. Pulling away more drywall reveals a link to a ancient laptop with an antenna. "Guess we know how he was keeping an eye on the place. Chrome, think you could take a look at this?"

She moves a chair over to the hole in the wall and opens up the laptop. It's password-protected, but Chrome gets through that in two tries. "That's what you get for using the same passwords for everything," she says. "Okay, it looks like he has the camera rigged to send an email if it detects motion." A few more clicks brings up the email client. "Hm...it looks like all the messages are sent to something at a clearriver.us address."

"Do you know that?" Jack asks.

"No," Chrome admits, "but we can search for where that domain is registered. They should have a name - and an address - on file."

"What if that's another diversion?" Sharon asks.

"I doubt it," Chrome says, tapping away at the keyboard. "Mark never was that good with computers. It took me three tries to walk him through setting up his email at the office, I doubt he knows about whois lookups. He probably paid someone to set this up, too, someone who used the real address of his main safehouse." She finishes her search and manages to weakly grin. "There, got it. It's on Staten Island."

"Let's go, then," Jack says, and both he and Az head out the door immediately.

Chrome and Sharon hang back for a second. Chrome looks down at the keyboard for a second.

"Sharon, are we gonna bring Mark back?"

"We're gonna try," she says.

"We have to," Chrome says. "He saved you, he saved me. We have to save him."

The words hang in the air for a moment, then Sharon helps Chrome to her feet. "Come on, we've got to go." They walk out of the safehouse together.

Riker's Island

August 13th, 12:30 PM

Kirschner is lead into the interview room in chains and sat down at the table across from a tall older man with horn-rimmed glasses and a light blue shirt.

"Where's lady I talked to before?" he asks, seeming somewhat asleep in his seat.

"Miss Pizzorno is currently attending to a family emergency," the man says. "I'm Dr. Lazlo, and I'll be conducting your psychological evaluation. So, how are you today?"

"Dull," Kirschner says. "I think it's those pills, they take all the color and the sound and they make me not me."

"Do you think you need the medication? How do you think you would behave without the medication?"

"I..." Kirschner begins, then loses his train of thought. "I dunno. They say I'm not nice when I don't take pills."

"Do you remember anything from the past few weeks? Victims of a psychotic break often experience amnesia."

"I, like, I woke up in a cell. Oh, I had breakfast before. Cap'n Crunch. It was all very soggy, I put too much milk in it."

"Do you remember attacking that metahuman couple in Times Square?"

"I was there," Kirschner says, "I was there, man!" He looks at Dr. Lazlo with a driven gaze. "It was horrible."

"How about shooting at Detective Hanson in Central Park?"

"The devil walked among the blades of grass. The Lord cut him down."

"Was Detective Hanson that devil? What do you think of her as a metahuman?"

"Metahuman?" Kirschner asks, skeptical. "Devil's the devil, man."
"Do you think Detective Hanson is the devil?"
"No, man!" Kirschner insists. "You don't get it! The devil walked and the Lord cut him down."
"Are you the Lord, is that someone else, or are you talking about some other kind of being?"

Kirschner just stares ahead blankly. If he understands, he doesn't answer.

"Okay, moving on. What do you think about metahumans, what's your opinion on them?"
"I don't know. They look grey."
"Grey?"
"Like, no color, but everything has to have a color, so they look grey." His voice dims into a whisper.
"But, they are. not. grey."
"What are they really, then?"
"I told you, you can't see. Are you listening to me? Because we keep going round in circles and I tell you everything and you still ask me about the color of things that don't have colors..."
"Do you feel any animosity or aggression towards metahumans, like Detectives Hanson or Schaefer?"
"No!" Kirschner shouts. "No! We mustn't touch them! We can't! We must lose our colors!"
"What do you mean by that?"
"Shed colors, bleed colors, look grey without being grey..."
"Why?"
"...become meta," Kirschner says. "Take their place."
"You want to become a metahuman?"
"Grey is a bad color to be," Kirschner concludes, "but it's a good color to pretend to be."
"So you want to pretend to be a metahuman. Why? To get revenge for what happened to your mother?"

Kirschner looks like he's going to lunge across the table any second. Then he does.

He doesn't get very far, what with the cuffs and chains that restrain his limbs, but it's enough to make Dr. Lazlo flinch backward. When Kirschner's intent doesn't take him to the shrink's neck, he calms down as quickly as he got furious.

"My mother," Kirschner says, his breathing heavy, "was very grey."
"I see," Lazlo says, adjusting his glasses. "And what are you?"
"...I was the devil."
"Well then." Lazlo stands up. "I think it's time for a break. I'll be back soon, alright?"
"I want apples. Thirteen apples. No cores!"
"Alright, I'll see what I can do." He walks out the door, pulls out his cell phone and dials his office.
"Yeah, Erin? Cancel the rest of my appointments for today. I'll be here for a while. Yeah, he's fuckin' nuts. I smell a book deal out of this one. Thanks." He hangs up and heads off to the vending machines.
5 Beverly Road, Long Island
August 13th, 1:43 PM

Mark pulls up in front of what he finally knows for sure to be where Victor Smith is hiding out, waiting and preparing for his next attack. He rechecks his weapon, the "acquired" Remington 870 shotgun, and opens the door of the car and walks towards the front door of the Family Killer. Mark's footsteps are as soft as he can manage, a necessary adjustment when you move in for the kill. He's traveling light, no heavy coat, no body armor, just gloves on his hands and the shotgun with a full saddle of spare shells.

The door ahead is unassuming, not the kind of door you'd expect at the end of a frustratingly long pursuit, but it's there, faux wood and all. Mark steadies his breath and brings the shotgun up to his shoulder. With a final sigh, he takes aim.

BLAM!

The door splinters around the lock as the shell impacts just half a second before Mark's body does, slamming the door open. With the totality of his attention focussed on his quarry, Mark rushes inside the room, sweeping his field of vision in search of his prey.

Too bad Victor knew he was coming half a minute ago. You can't sneak with a car.

From his hiding place in a corner of the room, Victor answers the violent entry with a shot from a .45. It slams into Mark's left arm, tearing tendons and chipping bone, but it doesn't stop the Paladin. He lets his right leg drop out, diving to the side just as Victor's second shot goes wild. With a furious effort, Mark manages to rack the pump on his shotgun and acquire his target; Victor's third shot rings only slightly less true than Mark's second. Just five seconds into the fight, both combatants are on the floor with sucking chest wounds, but Victor's still at a disadvantage - he isn't half as psychotic as the Paladin, who's almost beyond caring about the pain from gunshots at this stage. Before Victor can process the thought that Mark isn't out of the fight, his right hand - gun included - disappears into a cloud of meat chunks. The shock is almost enough to let Victor pass out, but he can't quite get there.

Mark rights himself, a groaning killing machine scrambling back onto his feet. In desperation, Victor raises his left hand and taps into his metahuman potential. Mark's exposed wound pushes itself past reasonable as the blood in it begins to burn through flesh, etching deep wounds into Mark's already mangled left arm. The pain is enough to make him drop the shotgun, but Mark retains enough command of his body to jump forward, landing on top of Victor. It breaks the murderer's concentration enough to stop him from immolating Mark with his own blood, but that isn't Victor's only trick. With a roar, he flips Mark off him and turns the tables, pinning the Paladin to the ground and pounding his face in with his good arm. Mark feels the first strike snap his jaw in half down the middle, the second shatter one half of his face and eye socket, and after that, the pain starts to blur as his brain begins to realize what is going on.

"Can't beat me!" Victor half-laughs, half-screams. "You can't beat me anymore!"

Somewhere deep inside Mark's fleeting consciousness - and it is fleeting, as things have gone really wrong, really fast -, old instincts are all that remain functional. He summons enough power to punch Victor in the gut. There's a brief lull in the fight as Victor's head snaps back; Mark closes his eyes and desperately grabs for something he knows is there on the ground. His talent for finding weapons serves him well once more; he grabs the bloodied .45 from the ground and shoves its muzzle against Victor's belly.

He shoots Victor.

The sound that follows is not so much a groan as it is a whimper, the sound of meat being forced out of the way. Mark lets go, feels Victor's weight shift to the side and tumble off him, and finally there's silence. Through his broken jaw, Mark draws ragged breaths, still fighting to stay awake; he maneuvers his right hand onto his face, then channels his power. It is difficult, even painful, to heal this much damage, but with intense effort, Mark manages. He can feel the teeth realign themselves in his gums. A crack in his skull - God knows how Mark can feel it, but it's knitting itself back together. The bloody veil before his eyes fades slowly.

After half a minute of this, Mark is conscious enough to assess his situation. His left arm is a mess, but it's not bleeding much, so the gut shot gets the next dose of healing. Within a minute, the two combatants have painted the room in blood. Victor lies beside him, fading in and out of conscience. Mark's right hand still clutches the .45, now bloodied and with the faintest wisp of smoke curling from its muzzle.

Mark rises to his feet, slowly. As he reverses the damage to his arm, he takes careful, measured steps towards his quarry. For a beat, Mark just watches, assesses the damage he's done to this man, but it doesn't last. With a final sneer forming on his lips, he raises his boot and stomps down on Victor's skull. If that were enough to kill the beast, the fight wouldn't have lasted even this long, but Mark's a persistent kind of guy. The stomp was really more of an experiment; Mark drops the .45 and grabs his discarded shotgun.

Victor's fading fast; with his last bit of power, he wills Mark's blood to burn again, but the Paladin's wounds are sealed. Smoke rises from the walls and the floor where Mark shed his blood, and that's all there is to it.

"Do me a favor," Mark slurs, bringing up the shotgun and racking the slide again, "and just die

already."

BLAM!

A spray of buckshot shreds what remains of the organs in Victor's torso; his heart stops beating, and the last twitches of his limbs die down.

Mark takes a deep breath and lumbers out the way he came in. Another monster taken down.

5 Beverly Road, Long Island
August 13th, 3:32 PM

"Just stay at the office until we're sure this is Mark, alright?" Jack says into his cell phone as Az as he pulls up outside the suburban one-story ranch house in Long Island. He mentally flicks the phone shut and turns to Az. "What do you think the odds are that this isn't Mark?" he asks.

"There's always the chance that someone else was gunning for Smith," Az says. "But he'd have to beat Mark to it. That's...not very likely."

"Right," Jack says. "Well, let's get inside and see if we can find something."

The crime scene isn't exactly swarming with cops - two cars, with CSI yet to show up. It's secure, but there hasn't been much time to pick over it. Jack and Az climb out of the car and are met by two Long Island detectives. "You guys the NYPD SCU detectives? Detective McClellan," he says, motioning towards himself, "and Detective Harris, thanks for the quick assist. We don't see too many metahuman cases out here in Long Island, but we're pretty sure this is right up your alley." "Marcos," Az says, "And this is Detective Schaefer. Let's get inside and see what's going on."

The crime scene is an unholy mess. Thickening blood from Victor Smith's broken corpse is mingled with dark brown stains all over the place. Jack steps carefully, looking around for more details. A handful of shotgun cases litter the ground; the corresponding handgun cases take a bit more searching, even after Az spots the .45 next to Smith's body.

"So, what's the story?" Az asks, almost touching the gun with his latex gloves. "Any witnesses?" "Middle of the day, DT," Harris says. "Nobody's home. We only got called in when a passing car saw the freaking hole in the door."

"Any thoughts?" McClellan asks.

"The way I see it," Az begins, "the perp came in through the front door, blew out the lock. Probably used the shotgun those shells are from to open the door. It's a bit big to hide in here, but he might've tossed it nearby. There's a short gunfight - Smith and the perp both got injured, there's too much blood for just one guy. Then the powers get brought out."

"You see this blood?" Jack says. "It's cooked, but there's no other indicators of fire anywhere."

"Powers?" Harris asks. He looks to Az, who has his eyes closed and his fingers trembling as he directs an invisible orchestra. The detective is just about to speak up when Az opens his eyes again.

"One of those guys could make blood boil," Az says. "My money's on Smith, fits the other crime scenes."

Harris looks at the body, then at Az and scratches his temples.

"Geesh. Makes me a little less sad that he's a goner. Wouldn't want that kinda talent walking my streets," Harris says. "So, the other guy. Who are we looking for?"

"Don't know," Az lies. "We'll send some more guys from our department over to assist, we've got another appointment. You guys look like you've got things well in hand, there's nothing overtly weird here. Just write it up like it's any other homicide."

Az and Jack leave the house behind. They've been after Victor Smith for days now...and all it adds up to is a bare house in suburbia with bloodsplattered wallpaper.

"It's got the aggression," Jack says as they get back into the car. "But it's too even. Mark wouldn't give him a fair fight."

"It was Mark," Az says. "He just wasn't prepared for Smith to fight back."
"Okay." Jack thinks for a moment. "But he's done now, right? His target is dead, he's probably hurt...he'll have to come in now."
"You're banking on Mark making the smart choice?" Az says with a weak smile.

WNYX Action News
August 13th, 4:00 PM

This is a Action News breaking news alert. Has the Metahuman Killer struck again? Sources within the Nassau County police indicate that a murder committed there earlier today matches the MO of the so-called Metahuman Killer. The NYPD officially denies this, saying that the man they have in custody awaiting trial, James Kirshner, is responsible for the two murders earlier in the week and the attack on NYPD detective and recently outed Others metahuman Irene Hansen. However, Mr. Kirshner's defense attorney has reportedly filed to have him released on bail, pending a hearing later on today. We will keep on this story as it develops, until then, this is Bill McNeal for WNYX Action News.

New York County Supreme Court
August 13th, 4:15 PM

Judge Stanhouser walks through the door from his chambers to the courtroom, and the first thing he hears is ADA Siegel and Meyers shouting at each other over the merits of her motion.

"This is possibly the most specious motion filing I've ever seen. You're basing all of this on a dead guy in a crime scene in Long Island who might have been killed in a similar MO to Kirshner's victims?" Siegel says.

"Might be similar?" Meyers shoots back. "It's practically signed by the real killer. This 'victim', Victor Smith, used powers almost identical to the signature of the Family Killer, which makes him right up the real killer's alley."

Stanhouser sits behind the bench. "Care to save it for the hearing proper?" he says. "Miss Meyers, if you would, please?"

"Your honor, recent events have brought to light a certain degree of reasonable doubt," Miss Meyers says. "A recent murder in Long Island shares the same MO as the crimes that my client is alleged to have committed. The weapon used was similar, and the victim, one Victor Smith, shares abilities with the so-called Family Killer serial murderer. If DNA testing confirms that Smith actually was the Family Killer, that further fits the MO of the Metahuman Killer. Plus, the recent findings of the court-appointed psychologist that my client is mentally unstable cast further doubt on his ability to have committed these crimes. I move for a dismissal of all charges and the immediate release of my client."

Siegel stands up. "Your honor, her claims are nothing more than wild speculation and supposition. First the confession was coerced, then he's mentally unstable, and now she's latched onto some home invasion robbery gone bad in Long Island to try to get her client out. The Metahuman Killer's MO includes ambushing the targets in open spaces, not invading their homes, he's never attacked an actually dangerous metahuman before--"

"Dangerous?" Meyers interrupts. "What do you call that beast of a meta that the police keep on retainer? Hanson is twice as dangerous as anything else out there."

He shoots Meyers a look. "As I was saying, he's never attacked a dangerous metahuman before, and we don't know if Victor Smith even is a metahuman or not. The damage could have been caused by the attacker, for all we know. She's reaching, your honor, there's absolutely nothing to her claims."

"You both make good points," Stanhouser says, leaning back in his chair. "I see no reason to grant your motion, Miss Meyers."

"In that case, your honor, I move for the reduction of bail from remand so my client can at least get out of Riker's Island. He has already been targeted for attacks by metahuman inmates, and any further time in there is an unreasonable risk," Meyers says, and hands the judge and Siegel copies of

the motion.

"How desperately do you want a dangerous psychopath out on the street, Nina?" Siegel says. "If you can't get the charges dropped, just get him out on bail, huh?"

"Threats have been made against his life. Maybe the DA's office just wants him to die in jail awaiting trial, but I prefer to have my client live to face a jury of his peers."

The judge reads the motion over, closes it and thinks for a moment. "I see nothing wrong with this motion. Bail is set at \$250,000."

"Excellent," Meyers says. "The bail money will be at the clerk's office within the hour, I'll pay for it myself if I have to."

"**What?**" Siegel explodes. "Your honor, if you let this man out, he will go straight back to what he was doing, and that's killing innocent people."

"Now listen to me, Mr. Siegel. Mr. Kirshner is merely accused of a crime, not convicted. The events that have happened since the beginning of proceedings provide a clear case of reasonable doubt, something that you will find hard-pressed to get past a jury. I could have dismissed the charges, but instead I gave you a chance to strengthen your case. Now, both of you, get out of my courtroom before you give me another migraine."

As Siegel walks out of the courtroom, he opens his cell phone and dials SCU. "Helsing, Siegel. Yeah, Meyers just got Kirshner out on bail."

"**What?**" Helsing shouts.

"My reaction exactly," Siegel says. "Whatever Jack and his friends are doing right now, tell them they're off of it. Kirshner knows who they are, and they'll probably be his first targets."

"I'll get them in right now. Goddamnit, let's hope they're the only ones he goes after."

"Agreed. Keep me posted." Siegel hangs up and dials his office. "Kirshner's out. We need to find something, anything to get him back in there. Warm up the coffee maker, we're there until we get something."

JS Consulting

August 13th, 5:20 PM

"Alright, here's the score," Sharon says. "Az says that Mark's blood was all over that Long Island crime scene, so he's probably out of commission for at least 12 hours while he regenerates half his blood volume. We don't have to worry about him for now, which is good, because we have bigger problems. How many of you have been stalked by a crazed gunman before?"

Sharon, Az and Chrome all raise their hands.

"Why am I not surprised," Jack adds, deadpan as ever.

"Okay, rule number 1, everyone stands at least five feet away from Jack at all times," Sharon jokes.

"Anyway, as long as he's out there, he has the initiative. Any time we go out, we're in danger.

Normally, I'd recommend that we stick to crowds, but Kirshner's crazy and I don't think he cares about collateral damage. I think the best we can do is to travel by car as much as possible, stick together and don't go anywhere alone. We need to reduce his opportunities, and maybe making sure that he goes down if he tries to shoot us will dissuade him." Sharon thinks for a second, then adds a second "Maybe."

"And hey, if he takes a shot at me or Az, we'd be back in action fast, and Sharon's bulletproof. Sorry, Jack," Chrome says with a smile, elbowing Jack.

"Yeah, yeah, you all keep laughing, I'll be adding more Kevlar accessories to my wardrobe," Jack says.

"Let's get going," Az says. "Our dangerous psychopath isn't going to watch himself, you know."

300 Block, West 84th Street

August 13th, 8:51 PM

Az walks back to the borrowed squad car with two bodega coffees in hand. He gives one to Sharon and climbs back into the passenger seat. They both resume staring at the bar in the middle of the block. "How are things down at the other end?" Az asks.

"Neighborhood kids need to learn to respect other people's property," Jack grumbles.

"Why, they steal anything?"

"They were using the Chevelle's car door as third base," Chrome says. "Aside from that, nothing."
"He takes the bus from Riker's straight to the nearest OTB office, wastes an hour there, and now he's spent the last few hours at this dive bar. Anyone get the feeling that we're not following a criminal mastermind?" Jack says.

"Historically speaking, assassins aren't very smart," Sharon says. "You get a guy who's not too bright and can shoot straight, and you point him the rough direction. Kirschner's the right kinda soul for that. In the end, the IQ of the guy who pulls the trigger on you doesn't matter, does it?"

"I'll say," Chrome says. "Hasan-i Sabbah may have known how to pick a stronghold, but he hired some real idiots." She squints and points down the block. "Someone's coming out, I can't quite tell who it is," she says into the radio.

Everyone snaps up a pair of binoculars. "It's Kirschner," Az says. "He's walking away from the bar."
"Alright, everyone get ready to move," Jack says. "Chrome, get ready to call in a GPS code if he gets in a cab."

Instead, something unexpected happened. The door doesn't open so much as give way to a crowd of people in various states of merry agitation. Kirschner might be in the middle of it, but then again, he might not.

"Goddamnit, I lost him," Az says.

"I still got him," Chrome says. "He's in the middle, they're pushing him around."

"What's the plan if this goes bad?" Sharon asks.

"Az, Chrome and I roll up and arrest him, you stay in the car," Jack says.

"It's heading that way fast," Chrome says. "It looks like it's getting out of hand." She sees one of them cold-cock Kirschner. "And now we have a fight."

The crowd quickly turns into a brawl. "Alright, roll in, we pick him up and put him on ice for 48 hours while Siegel gets a chance to stick him back in Riker's," Jack says.

The two cars start up and roar down the block, lights and sirens blaring. The fighters in front of the bar don't even notice, even when Az, Jack and Chrome climb out of their cars, badges on lapels and guns drawn.

"Detective Schaefer, NYPD! Please cease and decist all illegal activities!" he shouts. "Hey, assholes, stop fighting!" He reaches in to grab one of them, and the guy reels around and socks Jack in the face. He's about to take another swing when Jack grabs his arm, pulls him in the direction of the punch and takes him to the ground, then flex-cuffs him.

"Alright, that's enough," Chrome says, and grabs the closest guy, flipping him around and slamming him to the ground. She cuffs him too.

"You're all under arrest," Az says. "Especially James Kirschner, wherever you are in there," he says, pulling more people out of the brawl.

The fight winds down a little bit, and aside from some shoving, the bruised group of men turns to look at the three of them, Az standing in front of them, Jack and Chrome on their knees, cuffing their assailants. "On who's authority?" one of them asks. "Detectives Marcos, Schaefer and Raecher, SCU," Az says.

"The freak cops?"

"Yeah, what of it?" Jack says.

Then something completely unexpected happens; all of the men bolt in different directions.

Jack, at least, has the least strenuous part in what follows; he stays with the subdued perps, but uses his power to trip up two of the fleeing men right away. Az is right behind a group of five, while Chrome has the unenviable job of going after Kirschner. Sharon climbs into the Interceptor's front seat and starts the car, hoping to help Chrome cut off Kirschner.

Jack runs over to the two prostrate men, hoping to cuff them before before they get up, but one of them greets Jack with a boot to the chest, knocking him to the ground.

On the surface of it, Az's job wouldn't be all that hard, either, as he has the speed advantage and quickly closes the small head start the quintet produced, but it quickly goes out of control when they realize that they're five people who don't all have to run in the same direction. The group splinters again, and Az has to make a judgment call on who to follow. With no method to it, he just sticks with

the two guys who still run in the same direction.

Kirschner's fast in the way disregarding your personal safety can make you. Traffic, obstacles, whatever it is, he either ignores it or plows right through it. Chrome sees a few more of the scattered bar patrons running parallel to him, having rounded the bar, but there's nothing she can do about that now but keep her badge visible and occasionally shout at Kirschner to stop.

This is starting to feel like deja vu all over again.

Az finally catches up to the two runners he was trailing and tackles them from behind, taking both to the ground with him. They roll and tumble over the sidewalk, a vicious little melee he easily stays on top of. It takes scant seconds to redirect their unfocused struggling into a matching pair of zipcuffs, plus number three to fix them both to the post of a street lamp.

"NYPD," Az says as he flashes them his badge. "Feel free to start talking."

Jack's in trouble, kind of. On a team of close-combat monsters of various flavors, he's just a regular guy who's taking on two very aggravated drunks, albeit a regular guy with extensive hand-to-hand combat training from two beings with more than a few thousand years of experience between them. Still, two-on-one is never a good situation to be in, especially when you're wrestling on the ground. Jack knows the drill - knees and elbows to the fleshy parts of his opponents, but he can't quite make his attacks hit as the two assailants dogpile him, limiting his options. However, one of them makes the mistake of getting face to face with Jack; he headbutts the drunk's nose, and the thug rolls off him, clutching his bleeding face in pain. That leaves the other guy, who's currently grappling with Jack's legs; it doesn't take a lot of effort for Jack to free his left leg and deliver a vicious stomp to the thug's shoulder. He doesn't let loose, but he's rattled, and Jack's in the perfect position to keep kicking him until he does let go.

The first thug's arm comes smashing down blindly in the direction of Jack's face, as if to repay injury in kind, but Jack gets his left arm up in time to block. He kicks Thug Nr. 2 without aiming, scoring a glancing hit, then rolls to the side. Thug 2 has no choice but to let go; Jack stops on his side, then pivots on his hip just as Thug Nr. 1 tries to get on his feet - he gets Jack's heel against the side of his knee, dropping him to the ground for good with a loud crack. Thug Nr. 2 realizes that this is as good a time as any to stand up and run away; Jack gets up two seconds after him, but he's too winded to chase the guy. With a sweeping motion of his arm, he telekinetically sweeps the thug off his feet and throws him against a nearby brick wall. He hits, bounces off and rolls across the sidewalk, down and out.

Jack breaks out the zipcuffs. "Not too shabby for a mortal, if I do say so myself," he says to no one as he starts securing his attackers.

Chrome chases Kirschner into a small side alley - a dead end, too. Her imminent triumph is spoiled when a first floor window shatters and a helping hand reaches down to Kirschner; within seconds, he's pulled up and into the building. Chrome's set on following him, though, so she puts together her best memories of Az and scrambles up the wall, trying to reach the window frame. Her hands find purchase on the brick ledge outside the window; she's about to reach up and pull herself in when she sees the ragged edges of shattered plate glass in the frame. She drops back down to the ground, and looks at the wall opposite the window. *This is gonna suck*, she thinks, and after mentally picturing what she's about to do, she runs full speed at the wall. When she reaches it, she vaults up, scrambles a good five feet straight up, and then pushes off and twists, flying headfirst through the air and right through the window, clearing the five foot alley. She tucks and rolls, momentum carrying her right up to her feet again. She momentarily pumps her elbow in celebration, then keeps on going after Kirschner.

Az flips open his phone and is about to call for a squad car to pick up his two prisoners when he's clocked from behind by something that feels large, hard and wooden. He hits the ground and rolls onto his back, seeing the three other fighters that ran away standing over him holding big scraps of wood. "You better start running," one of them says, spitting in Az's face. "This isn't your city anymore."

"Let's gut the fucker," another one says. He pulls out a knife, but that's as far as he gets before he disappears from sight with a grunt and a thud. A few quick wet smacks later, Sharon stands up, wearing a spare trenchcoat and ski mask from the back of the Interceptor. "You're gonna have to get through me first," she says, purposefully dropping her voice to disguise it. The reaction she gets isn't entirely expected, though. She was expecting to give them pause, maybe intimidate them a bit, but the Louisville Slugger drops his weapon as he backpedals slowly, almost paralyzed with fear.

"What's the fucking problem?" the other thug shouts, now suddenly alone and outgunned. "Back me up!"

"It's the Reaper, that's fucking him...the guy at Love Towers..." Slugger manages to spit out before he goes down, tackled into submission by Az. The last thug whirls around to face the new threat, but before he can even process what's happening, Sharon has twisted the weapon from his hand and hip-tossed him onto the ground. Az zip-ties the Slugger to the lamppost, then moves on to the last thug.

"Thanks," he says to Sharon. She just nods and runs off, back to the car. She has to find Chrome and help her.

Chrome runs up the stairs in what she thinks is a multi-story apartment building, senses keyed all the way up, following the wet, musty smell of Kirschner's panic up the steps. The staircase is full of his presence, a burning path upward, his shoeprints all over the dust on the floor. If Chrome were to stop hunting him, she would realize how close she is to losing control.

He isn't in the building, and she knows it. The trail leads right to the rooftop. At least he's smart enough to have tried blocking the access door behind him, but Chrome's not looking to push it open; she's still running, with all her momentum behind it, and just smashes her shoulder against it, flinging the door wide open. She can smell Kirschner before she sees him; he's a few feet from the edge of the roof, trying to work up the courage to jump to the next building. Seeing Chrome smack the door aside like cardboard provides all the motivation he needs. Within a few steps, he works up as much speed as he can manage, then jumps the gap. Chrome follows, of course, with a longer running start.

Kirschner does reach the next roof. It's just that he slams chest-first against the edge. With the strength of panic behind him, he manages to stop slipping off just shy of falling, his hands clawing to the margin of the roofing. Chrome has the opposite problem: her jump takes her too far onto the roof; she has to slide to bleed off momentum, then spring up and dive forward to catch Kirschner before he falls.

She almost makes it.

A brief moment of terror passes with the sound of breaking glass; Chrome realizes that Kirschner just swung against and through a window below. Cursing and cussing, she picks herself off the roof and visually sweeps her surroundings for an easier route, but there's none to be found. Only one way down; now extra careful, she lays down again, crawls to the edge and climbs down slowly, several seconds of nothing beneath her feet until she finds purchase on the window Kirschner used. Unsure of how to proceed, she takes one hand off the ledge and reaches down to grab the top of the windowframe - no glass there, thank God. She lowers herself until she can see where she's going, then carefully climbs through the window.

That took way too long, and Chrome's painfully aware of it; his scent is fading fast, but still there. She starts running again, down a staircase not unlike the one she just ascended. Down at ground level, she can see her quarry, way ahead of her; she'll have to make it up on the open street. As she takes another set of stairs down, she hears the sound of squealing tires outside and slides to a stop in front

of a street-facing window; a car outside has come to a stop and opened the passenger side door - he's running for it. Chrome draws her gun and takes a few steps back from the window.

"And this is really gonna suck," she says to herself, then fires three rounds through the window, turning it into a rain of glass shards. She runs and dives through the window, adding a few more slashes to clothes and skin. The ground ahead is closing in steadily, and she barely rolls in time to slam into the softtop of a convertible parked below. She can see her target looking back at her before he gets in, fear in his eyes; as she climbs off the wreck, he slams the door closed and the car tries to speed off.

Chrome runs after him. For a few paces, it honestly looks like she could catch up - and if raw desire counted for more than physics, she would - because the car has to swerve through oncoming traffic and isn't driven by a professional driver on a closed course. She has to catch him, but she can't catch up. She has to slow him down, even the playing field again, so she snaps up her gun and fires a few more shots on the run, drilling a neat hole into the car's rear window and bursting a tire; but that's all she can do before she realizes that she's shooting with no regard for where her bullets might go and checks her fire. The car skids onto a major road - this time the right side of it, too - and limps away.

The anger and focus fade as Kirschner slips through her fingers. There's a snarl on her face that she's only feeling now, frustration and energy with nowhere else to go unloading into heavy breaths. Chrome slowly lowers her gun and looks around at the chaos. Several of the cars that swerved to avoid the wheelman and her have crashed into parked vehicles, some people are running around in what can best be described as high-functioning panic, and her nice clothes are utterly trashed. She's dirty, she's tired, and she doesn't have a clue where exactly on the chase she lost her shield. She can still smell Kirschner on the air, and a good chunk of her wants to keep on chasing him down. The police sirens in the distance and the smoking gun in her hand speak another, more persuasive language.

"Fuck," she says. She whips her jacket open, then pushes her weapon back into the holster and takes a deep breath. This is gonna be a long night, and after failing to get Kirschner, she's in no mood for it.
3 Romer Road, Staten Island
August 14th, 6:43 AM

It's a quiet morning on the island as Mark pulls up to the garage door of a non-descript one-family house: the American Dream (as ratified by the Neighbourhood Association) in a pale beige color, two floors and a nice lawn. He retrieves a remote from his coat, then opens the garage door with it and drives the car inside. As the door swings down behind him, he turns off the ignition and climbs out of the car.

He doesn't look very good. His shirt, his hair, his hands are caked with blood, some of it his own. Blacking out in a car park isn't the same as sleep, but at least he's feeling a little bit less like hell now. He dumps his coat and his shirt into a nearby waste bag, then fetches a new t-shirt from a shelf. The car's hot, so he'll have to get rid of it with all other evidence of his little hunt later. For now, he has to get some sleep. As he walks towards the door leading to the living room, he pauses. There's sounds inside, someone's there. Mark swallows the curses; no time to complain that this day isn't going his way. Instead, he sidesteps to the toolbox and opens the code-locked compartment on the right. There's a small cache of weapons inside, and Mark grabs a suppressed .45 1911 Colt.

I really need to start stashing vests.

His entry was obvious; all he can bank on is that his opponent might think himself unnoticed. Well, Mark's not about to make the same mistake twice. He whistles a cheery tune and audibly unlocks the door, playing the witless part, but he has his weapon up and ready to fire as he walks through the living room and heads for the kitchen.

"Please don't shoot me," Dante calls, just as Mark is halfway through the living room and past the couch. Mark rolls his eyes and stuffs the Colt into a loop on his belt - a primitive holster, sure, but it'll do. He walks into the kitchen to find Dante leaning against the counter, arms crossed in front of his chest. The coffee maker is on.

"Your milk is spoiled," Dante says, the slight smile on his face never faltering. "We should go shopping later, you're way understocked."

"Dante," Mark begins, scratching his head, "what are you doing here?"

"Chrome found the address of this thing in the safe house you sent her to. I took the liberty of searching your computer here and forwarding your list of hideouts to her. She wanted to be here - they all did - but right now they're dealing with the fallout of your decisions." With a weary look, he adds "As usual."

"And so they sent you here to make me coffee?"

"You had to go to ground somewhere and you're running out of places to hide. And I'm making coffee because I can't go out there and indulge my crypto-archeological leanings while you're running around killing people."

Mark rolls his eyes. "Guess it was just a matter of time until they guilt you into this. But you'll be pleased to know that it's over. Smith's dead, I got him before he could strike again. The whole deal went down clean, nothing to tie me or any of you guys to it."

"Well, see," Dante says, his voice gaining an edge, "there's a problem with that. You did it like Kirschner."

"So? He's in custody."

"Not anymore. He played the crazy card and the same MO used while he was incarcerated raised enough questions that he got out on bail, which was of course gigantic but quickly posted by a whole lot of people who don't like metahumans, a grassroot hate campaign if you will. And then he bailed and we have no idea where he is."

"Oh," Mark says, processing that information. "Then I've got some preparing to do."

"Mark," Dante starts, then thinks better of it. "Your friends are hunting you, not to mention Sanctuary. You almost killed Gamariel. What the hell kind of damage are you going to do hunting Kirschner?"

"Whatever I have to," Mark says. "Oh, I know that look. Are we about to have the 'killing people is bad' lecture again? Because I'm getting tired-"

"Kindly shut up, Mark," Dante says, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Fine, you want a good reason? I don't care all that much about the law, either, but what I do care about are my friends, and what you're doing is going to ruin them. Chrome's coming out of her shell. Sharon's doing a job she actually likes; she's freaking happy, Mark. And you're about to blow all of that to pieces again. You want to go off and kill the scum of the Earth, fine. Just know that you're hurting my friends and your family."

Mark pauses for a second. "Not my problem," he says quietly.

"What? What did you just say?"

"I said it's not my problem. This is what I was put here to do, Dante, and if they don't want to play along anymore, fine, they don't have to. I'm done with the lectures. I'm done with everything I do being picked over and criticized. And I'm done being stabbed in the back by my 'family'. They're so worried about the rules, but this city needs results. I'm cleaning up after their messes. It's Kirschner today, Sanctuary tomorrow, and after that I'll just have to see about the next threat while you guys sit around and have a good sulk. What I do will save lives and protect the innocent, not let evil men go free to kill again. Now, if that's all, get the fuck out of my house."

Dante stands up and finishes his coffee. "I'll give you a few hours before I call Jack and tell him you were here. After that, you're on your own. You want to stay out of trouble, you never cross my path again. Goodbye, Mark."

Mark taps the Colt stuffed into his belt.

"Start walkin'," Mark says.

57 East 21st, Brooklyn
August 14th, 11:34 AM

The dim lightbulb flickers on, casting shadows throughout the basement. Macintyre leads the way, with Kirschner right behind him, stretching his neck.

"Nice," Kirschner says, "you got a bed down here?"

"Over here," Macintyre replies, pulling some canvas off an old single King-size. "Damn sight better than my couch, I can tell you that."

"Yeah, that's great," Kirschner replies. "No offense, but that couch..."

"Yeah," Macintyre chuckles, "I got to learn that when the Missus didn't like me some nights. That's

why I bought the damn bed. 'course, then she's gotta go and leave me..." Kirschner shoots him a sympathetic look, then looks around more. The bed, a few shelves, a small TV and a space heater. As basements go, he's seen worse. "Ain't much," Macintyre says, his hand sweeping the place, "but it's safe. Just, you know, a place to stay."

"It isn't safe," Kirschner replies, suddenly fired up. "You saw that beast woman chasing me? I'm not safe from that, nobody is."

"Well, shit yeah, but she's got a badge...that's trouble."

"That badge won't mean a thing when we show everyone who they are - monsters," Kirschner says forcefully. "You saw the way she chased me? She thinks I'm her prey, and there's nobody who can stand up to those freaks and shut them down."

"Just let me make some calls," Macintyre says with a smile, "you got more fans than you think, James."

Kirschner nods. "That's great, but what we need is an army."

Macintyre laughs. "Now that's the easy part. What we need is a plan."

"Oh, I got some thoughts," Kirschner says as his eyes lock upon break-action double-barrelled shotgun sitting on a cupboard. "Does that thing work?"

"Sure. Chinese stuff, I bought a couple for dirt cheap at a gun show way out of town, I had a hell of a time getting 'em all in my trunk. I mean, one of those freaks gets into your place, you give 'em both barrels, and if that don't work you're screwed anyway, so why break the bank?"

"Good thinking," Kirschner says. "But it's not very mobile that way."

"You got an idea, don't you."

"In my experience-" Macintyre smiles at Kirschner's casual description - "it doesn't matter if you give 'em two short or two long barrels. All that metal up front just makes it long and heavy. Shotguns are like that woman. Better with the top twelve inches cut off." He smiles.

Kirschner flips over a milk crate and takes a seat, shotgun and hacksaw in hand. "Beast woman. She's outside. She's there. Can't run away no more..." he mutters to himself. With the shotgun clamped between his legs, he starts to cut his way through the steel barrels. "Gotta stop her before she kills someone else, only a matter of time, she's gotta feed eventually..." The front part of the shotgun falls off, hitting the ground with a loud ring. "And nothing stops a beast like two shells of double-aught buckshot." He holds up the shotgun, looking at it and then Macintyre. "Time for me to go hunting."

"You don't fuck around, James, I like that, but let me get the guys on this," Macintyre says. "We've been itching for some action, and after seeing what that beast bitch can do? You'd better not go alone, brother."

"Nah, you guys stay here. If I don't make it, you just get ready, alright?"

Macintyre nods. "You watch yourself out there, James. We've got your back."

JS Consulting
August 14th, 7:03 PM

It hasn't been a good day at the team's HQ. The secured building isn't helping much with overcoming siege mentality, and the armored construction feels more cramped than ever. Jack, Chrome and Karen step out of the garage door and start walking down the block.

"I don't know how comfortable I am going out for dinner with Kirschner still out there," Chrome says. "It's just down the street," Jack says. "We'll only be out for a second." He wraps his arm around her waist as they walk. "Besides, don't you want out of Sharon's lockdown drill?"

Chrome smiles. "It is a nice change of pace from watching Sharon pace around Karen's apartment with a sniper rifle."

"You're telling me," Karen says as she wraps her coat tighter, her face marked by the absence of makeup and rest. "I can't take a step without bumping into ammo cases, or optics, or whatever the hell is in those big black cases; actually, I don't want to know that, not that I have much sleep to lose..."

"Find anything at the Staten Island house when you searched it?" Jack says.

"Five hours of combing that place top to bottom, and I've got enough evidence to write a biography on Simmons, but nothing about what he's doing next. Hopefully Sanctuary isn't doing much better, I haven't gotten a call from McNary since this whole thing started."

Chrome shivers. "Those bastards again. Never should've called them in."

"Why?" Karen asks.

"I was -" Chrome looks at Jack for a second - "they captured me when they brought Mark in for the first time. Collateral. 'Motivation'. They forced him to watch -"

They stop in front of the neighborhood deli. "God," Karen says, shaken. "Chrome, I'm sorry," she half-whispers.

Chrome waves her hand. "It was a while ago. Don't worry about it, you didn't know." After an awkward pause, she continues with a smile. "Anyway, that's enough about the problems with Mark and Sanctuary, I'm in the mood for a meatball sub and better discussion topics." The three of them look inside the deli, which is packed full of patrons waiting their turn. "Great, I knew we should have snuck out the escape tunnel. We lost a half-hour trying to convince Sharon to unbolt the garage door."

"I'll put our orders in, you two wait out here, alright?" Karen says.

"You shouldn't be alone," Chrome protests. Seeing Jack's face, she adds, "I mean, that was one of the rules, right?"

"I'll be fine," Karen says. "You're outside. You're, like...overwatch."

"We have to get Sharon out of your place," Jack says with a smile. "Before you know, you'll spend your nights field-stripping assault rifles and reassembling them instead of reading legal journals and doing case prep."

"It'd be a lateral move," Karen says. "Prosciutto and a meatball sub, right?"

Jack nods. "We'll be outside."

Karen heads inside to join the teeming hordes waiting to place their orders. Jack stands behind Chrome, arms around her. "You can't keep lying to her."

"Sure I can," Chrome says. "I've gotten more control over Avenger, I can even go into the server room without needing to bring that stupid UV flashlight."

"What was last night, then?"

"Last night was...fun," Chrome says. "I mean, it's a little freaky, when you think about it, the whole 'vampire hunting' thing is something that I've been afraid of for a while, but this felt different. I wasn't thinking about feeding off him, just catching him. It was like I was using that half of me, instead of Avenger just taking over."

"Hey, that's great!" Jack says. "I see your sessions with Monica are paying off."

Chrome turns around in Jack's arms and faces him. "It's not just Monica. She keeps on talking about how important a support structure is, and, well, Mark's not exactly the supporting type, and Sharon and Az are busy trying to keep each other together and not thinking about how badly they want to be together." Jack smiles at that. "And you, Jack? You're supportive, you're positive, you're just...there for me. I don't think I'd be nearly as in control as I am right now without you. You're...exactly what I need, Jack."

Jack rolls his eyes. "I'm just in love with you Chrome, let's save putting me on a pedestal for later."

"Yeah, well, how about this, right now?" she says.

The two of them kiss, each closing their eyes to focus on this perfect moment in time.

BLAM!

Jack's frozen in shock as he watches Chrome slide down to the ground, her eyes closed but her hands still clutching for something to hold on to. Just a few steps behind her, Kirschner stands with an intense look in his eyes. The sawed-off shotgun in his hands is still belching up smoke.

Karen runs out of the deli at the same time Kirschner fires, too late to stop him but already headed to attack him. He swings the shotgun around to aim at her, but there's nothing he can do with that before he catches a straight punch to the chin from her. He falls, but scrambles away, back onto his feet and dashes for it. Karen's instinct isn't to catch him - she turns around and hurries over to where Chrome is lying on the sidewalk, with Jack kneeling over her. She's ashen and her eyes are closed.

"I tried to warn you, Jack, but I couldn't get through the crowd in time. Jesus, Jack, she looks -" Karen says.

"Stay with her," Jack says. He stands up and starts to run. "Call for a bus. I'm going after Kirschner!"

Kirschner has a head start of ten seconds, and he's got an exit strategy - a car with a running engine, parked rather precariously. It's a good thought, but it's also bleedin' obvious; just as Kirschner gets near, the door slams closed and the car rocks. Kirschner doesn't have to think twice to know that Jack's after him, so he starts running across the street. One car shoots past him, another one comes to a stop a little too late and slams into him at low speed, but Kirschner keeps going, limping a few steps before the pain fades.

Jack reaches Kirschner's escape vehicle and jumps up onto the car's hood, giving himself some much-needed height for a clearer picture. Kirschner's across the intersection by now; Jack's pistol tracks him for half a second before Jack jumps onto the street and starts running again. Kirschner's head swims with the thought that he has to gain height and take it to the rooftops again, but there's no residential building that fits the bill near enough; with an annoyed grunt, he skips into a multi-level parking structure. He runs past the entrance, across the bottom floor and up the ramp to the next level. Jack stops at the entrance, then holsters his gun and starts to climb up the small gate structure at the exit. He can reach the first floor from there...

Kirschner's all-out run takes him to the first floor, but as he rounds the corner, a car comes down the ramp from the second and squeals to a stop in front of him; almost breathless, he bangs his hands against the hood and heads across the structure again, this time for the pedestrian staircase. He's got half the distance covered when Jack swings up over the edge. Kirschner redoubles his efforts - he can get to the staircase before Jack, yes, just has to go a little -

Jack throws up his arm, and Kirschner's flung against the wall like a scarecrow in a hurricane. The impact sends him sprawling onto the ground; with footsteps approaching, he knows he's done for, unless -

Kirschner pushes himself up, flips around and snaps his shotgun up to aim at Jack. Before he can even try to pull the trigger, he's got two 9mm rounds shredding his center of mass. He slumps down the wall a bit, but he's still strong enough to try to aim at Jack again. Jack slows his run to a quick walk, both hands on his gun; he fires again, and this time Kirschner just folds over and falls, facedown onto the asphalt as the shotgun clicks and tumbles across the ground. Jack closes the distance to his unmoving target and kicks the shotgun away from Kirschner.

That wasn't necessary. Kirschner's dead.

Karen is kneeling over Chrome. There's a pulse, that's good. But Chrome is neither conscious nor breathing, that's bad. Karen grabs Chrome's jaw and forces her mouth open, tilts her head back, pinches her nose and starts rescue breathing. Three attempts seem like five minutes of terror, but then she feels Chrome breathing against her face. Karen retreats just as Chrome starts coughing and opens her eyes again.

"Shit!" is all that Chrome manages to blurt out; Karen's holding back tears of relief as she hovers over her friend.

"Don't," she begins, "don't you ever do that again."

"Get shot in the back?" Chrome coughs. "Don't plan on it."

"You just stay there. We'll get you to a hospital, you get better, alright?" Karen says. She takes Chrome's hand and they sit there for a second, listening to sirens approaching in the distance. "And first thing after that, heh, you're going to the hair salon."

"What?" Chrome says. "Why?"

"You never told me you have black hair," Karen says, smiling. "Your roots are showing. Gotta take better care of that."

Chrome laughs nervously, then winces at the pain. "Yeah, I guess I do. Damn..."

"What is it?"

"Next psycho stalker," Chrome says, "I'm ordering Chinese."

Sacred Heart Hospital

August 14th, 8:05 PM

After a brief ambulance ride, Chrome, Jack and Karen are in the emergency room, with Chrome

face-down on a hospital bed. Her back is covered with several large wound dressings, and an IV drip with painkillers is connected to her right arm. Doctor Erin Knight, an old friend of Jack's, is attending to Chrome while Jack sits next to her, holding her hand. The quiet is disturbed by a ringing phone; Karen takes the call in a corner of the curtain surrounding Chrome's bed.

"Well, Erin? How bad was the damage?" Jack asks.

"The vest stopped most of the pellets," Erin says. "Those that got through must not have hit any major blood vessels. Can't say I've ever seen less damage done by a shotgun." She turns to address Chrome. "Tore up your ink something fierce, though. And no, you're not getting that replaced any time soon. My biggest worry right now is getting your wounds infected, so I'm afraid you'll be staying here for a while."

"I'll worry about that later, doc," Chrome says. "I'll be out of your hair sooner than you think."

"I'm sure, I've heard about the kind of company our wayward ME keeps these days," Erin says.

"Dating blond, tough women with guns and intricate tattoos on their backs."

"You never wanted to go to the range," Jack says with a slight smile. Erin's pager goes off. "Thanks for the favor, Erin. Call me and we'll have lunch together, catch up, alright?"

"Sure thing, see you later." She hustles out of the room as Lt. Helsing walks in. His eyes are bloodshot and he's walking like he knows his cellphone will have twenty missed calls by the time he checks it. He's carrying a bouquet of dahlias in his left hand. Chrome turns her head to greet him and smiles.

"Hello, Lieutenant."

"I knew you wanted me to take a break from work, but getting shot is just overkill," Helsing says. He looks around for a nurse to bring him a vase, then realizes that should probably wait until Chrome has a room. "How are you, Cassandra?"

"Oh, you know, work load's been pretty heavy these last few days, juggling a few big cases, and I got shot in the back by a crazy guy with a shotgun, but aside from that, pretty boring," Chrome says, keeping that smile. "Thanks for the flowers, Lieutenant. I should be back to work by this time next week."

"Yeah, about that," Helsing says, then sighs softly. "I bring flowers and...well, news. Can't tell if it's bad yet."

"What is it?" Jack asks.

"The SCU's gearing up for another press conference, you know, spin control, the usual political bullshit before cellphone videos on YouTube deliver the headlines. I'm gonna need duty weapons from both of you, IAD wants them for the shooting board review. It sounds like they're gonna rule them as good shoots, but you'll be on desk duty for the time being."

"Gives me time to let my new holes heal up," Chrome says, never dropping the cheery tone. "Review board's later on this week, right?"

Helsing nods. "Yeah, that's what I've heard. Just be careful with this one, the Kirschner and Smith cases have everyone a bit rattled, so just nod your heads and get through this one as quick as you can. The last thing this city needs is to have you guys put through the wringer right now." The buzzing in his coat pocket grows insistent enough to be obvious, and he ducks back out.

Karen hangs up her cell phone. "Just got off the phone with Siegel, it seems the DA's office is officially outraged at the tragic turn of events in the Kirschner trial."

"And unofficially?" Jack asks.

"They're just glad it's over, and to let you know that they're behind both of you one-hundred percent on this one, Jack." Sharon and Az walk in, concern on their faces and with Sharon bearing a large paper bag. "Hey, Sharon. They want me to say that they're pulling for you too."

"Who?" Sharon asks.

"My office. The executive ADA went over some of your trial transcripts, and he says that from that and what he's seen of you in court, you're just as upstanding as any cop he's ever met."

"Great, see if you can get him to say that for the hearing," Sharon says, and hands Chrome the paper bag. "I brought you a present."

Chrome already knows what it is. She tears open the bag and shovels a big handful of popcorn into her mouth. "I could smell it down the hall," she says in between kernels. "They don't make anything this good in a hospital cafeteria. Thanks, Sharon." She looks up at Az. "Did you bring me anything?"

"Only the pleasant comfort of my company," Az says with a grin. Chrome pretends to pout before resuming stuffing her face. "Right," he says, "let's get this over with."

He steps up to Chrome's bed. "Close the curtains," he says to Jack. "Okay, Chrome, you take a deep breath. I have to take the dressing off and that won't be pretty."

Karen edges closer. "This, I have to see."

Az nods, then places his fingernails under the medical tape holding the dressing on and begins to peel it back slowly. After a few seconds of this, Chrome pipes up.

"Just get it over with, please," she says.

Az nods, then strips the rest of the tape in one rip. Chrome winces, but Az peels the dressing off. The skin below is discolored in a psychedelic spectrum - green, blue, yellow and black accents all intermingle, along with the disrupted traces of Chrome's tattoos. The wounds are clearly visible, with heavy stitches holding them together.

"Jack, I need some scissors, or a scalpel."

"Coming right up," Jack says, rummaging through the drawers of a nearby cart.

"You're going to open her wounds?" Karen says.

"I need to remove all foreign materials," Az responds. "You don't want sutures fused into your skin, believe me."

"They looked like really cool piercings though, until they started to fall apart," Chrome says.

"I could have lived without knowing that," Karen says.

"Warned you," Az says. Jack hands him a pair of scissors, and the angel starts the process of removing the stitches. Chrome winces with every pair he pulls out, but even while he opens up the wounds, there's no new bleeding. "And now, our main event."

His right hand hovers over her wounds. There's a faint glow all the way up his arm, and his eyes shimmer with a golden hue, focussed on infinity. As Karen watches, Chrome's wounds seem to reverse themselves, pulling together and closing until the skin is unbroken, with faint discolored scars where the pellets hit.

"Have to leave those," Az says. "Too much mojo scares the straights. I'll fix you up the rest of the way once you get out of here, put that pretty tattoo of yours back together. Jack?"

"What are you doing?" Karen asks.

"Need to redo the sutures," Jack replies, threading a suture needle. "Wounds heal naturally. Stitches don't pull themselves out. This part, you might want to look away." He stabs the needle in and out through Chrome's back. She winces. "Sorry, baby."

"Okay, I think I've proven whatever I wanted to prove," Karen says, looking a bit queasy. "See you outside."

After Jack finishes the fake stitches on Chrome's back and Karen can safely return to the room without worrying about being ill, the five of them are drawn into an inpromptu strategy discussion by a stray remark from Az. It starts out perfectly harmless...

"At least you're easier to heal than Mark," he says.

Okay, maybe not perfectly harmless. He looks around at the faces in the room and scratches his wrist.

"And that brings us to the topic at hand. What do we do about Mark?"

"No more siege," Chrome says. "We can go out and check the other safe houses. He's gotta be hiding out in one of those."

Az nods. "That's all well and good, but I was thinking more...long term than that. What do we do with him once we find him?"

"We bring him in and convince him to help us take down Sanctuary before they kill him," Karen says.

"That's shockingly practical of you," Sharon says with a humorless smirk. "Pay evil unto evil?"

"It's either that or he dies, Sharon," Karen says. "That's pretty much the opposite outcome we're hoping for here, right?"

There's a noticeable silence from Az and Sharon. "Look," Az says, "I've seen this movie, **and** the uninspired cash-in sequel. You try to use Mark, it backfires. You should have seen the damage he did to Sanctuary the first time around. I'm not worried he can't take them down, I'm worried about who's going to stop him after that. Because he'll climb out of that trainwreck stronger and smarter and crazier, he always does."

"First, I'm not going to be 'using' Mark for anything. We're doing this to save his ass and do some good at the same time. Secondly, as soon as he tells us what we need to know, he's going to prison, and that's it. There's no way he's staying out long enough to get into any more trouble."

"And you think he'll go along with that?" Sharon asks. "Mark's too defiant, too obstinant to do anything that doesn't get him what he wants."

"Well, what's your plan, then?" Karen asks.

Sharon and Az fall silent again.

"No," Chrome says. "No way. Not after all he's done for us."

"Dante made it pretty clear what he wants to do when he called us from Constantine's," Az says.

"Well he's not here, is he?" Chrome says angrily. "He's saved our lives dozens of times. Sharon, you wouldn't be here, working with the NYPD and the rest of us without him, and I know I'd either still be stuck in that horrible basement or..." she catches herself for a moment, "...some other bad situation without him. He's saved us. We owe it to Mark to try to save him. We're not just gonna let him die."

"Look," Sharon says, "I get that we're all torn up about it. But this is starting to feel like a four-hour edition of Old Yeller to me. I'm committed to seeing this through, and the longer we delay, the more we waffle and try to avoid it, the more painful it will be."

"Whoa," Jack says. "Not to mention the illegality of all of this," nodding to Karen, "but Chrome has a point. I haven't known him as long as you guys have, but he deserves that one last chance. If he tells us to fuck off, fine, it's his decision. But we should at least give him that option, right Karen?"

She nods. "I've got the least history with him out of any of you, and I still think he deserves at least that."

Sharon shrugs. "Offer it, if you want to. I don't think he'll do it. And when that final 'Fuck you' comes - well, we can't let him run around. You should be prepared for that result."

"Fine," Chrome says. "Now we just need to find him." She sits up in the bed and grabs the plastic bag full of her clothes. "Let me get changed and we'll head out."

Karen's pocket starts ringing in an unfamiliar ringtone. She fishes the device making the noise out of her pocket: it's the Sanctuary phone McNary gave her, and it has Mark's name on the caller ID.

"Speak of the devil," Az says. "Put it on speaker."

Karen accepts the call and hits the speakerphone button. "Yes, Mark?"

"I heard the news," he says, not sounding quite as self-confident as he did the last time he talked to Karen. "Is Chrome okay?"

"Yeah, no thanks to you," Sharon says. "Next time you decide to murder someone, try to do it so the fallout doesn't include your friends getting shot in the back."

"It was a shotgun, Sharon," Mark says, anger bleeding into his tone. "A fucking shotgun. That was the flimsiest fucking link possible, and for your edification, Dante already gave me shit about it, so I'm not in the mood for this, got that?" He takes a deep breath. "Chrome, you there?"

"Yeah, Mark?" she says.

"I'm sorry," he says softly. "I didn't mean for you to get hurt. I just...wanted to keep you out of my way. Sharon, I didn't want you to have me in your sights again. Jack, I didn't want to pawn off Kirschner's fate on you. The whole thing...it didn't go as I thought it would."

"Listen to Karen, Mark, she wants to help you," Chrome says.

"Mark, we both know that Sanctuary wants you dead," Karen says. "That would be very bad for all of us, and it seems to me that they're far more dangerous than you are right now. I want to meet to discuss a deal with you to take down Sanctuary."

"A deal?" Mark says. "Would that deal include the words 'state's evidence'?"

"Not officially," Karen says. "We just need to know where to look and what to raid when it all goes down, there's plenty of ways that we can legitimately come across that info once we get it from you."

"We can talk about it," Mark says. Az raises an eyebrow, but doesn't speak up. "There's a brownstone in East Village, West 15th, Number 22. Can you remember that?"

"Yeah, I'll head over there now," Karen says.

"15. 22. Remember the place, I'll be there in an hour. And come alone," Mark says. "No offense, guys, but Sanctuary's after me and I can protect one better than five." Sharon rolls her eyes.

"Deal. I'll see you there," Karen says. Mark hangs up, she grabs the phone and starts to head out.

"You're not seriously going to go alone, are you?" Az asks.

"Not unless any of you have a better idea," Karen says.

"We'll stay a block away or so, just in case," Jack says.

"Good idea. Be ready for anything."

"Including Sanctuary?" Chrome asks.

"Especially that," Sharon says.

22 West 15th Street
August 14th, 9:00 PM

Karen's waiting on the sidewalk as her watch ticks down the minutes until the scheduled meet. The rowhouse towers above her, sparsely illuminated by the street lamps. This isn't a very good place to spend an hour, even knowing that she's got the team on call if anything goes wrong. Actually, they're even closer than she knows - she walks past Az, who has adopted one of Mark's favorite tricks by disguising himself as a homeless drunk. Az reflects that it's a good trick, if you have the patience to pull it off without giving yourself away. The ability to selectively intoxicate yourself doesn't hurt either.

A beat-up compact pulls up next to Karen with Mark at the wheel. He opens the passenger door.

"Get in," he says, and throws the car into reverse. He stops next to Az and rolls down the passenger side window. "Seriously?" is all he needs to say, then he shifts back into gear and pulls out, driving down the street and going North at the next intersection.

"Told you to come alone," Mark says.

"I thought I did."

"I know, you didn't look at him, Jack or Chrome the whole time. You're good, but you're not that good, Karen."

"Seems that way," she says.

"Anyway, you and me. What's on the table?"

Karen looks at Mark. He doesn't look all that much like his file photos anymore, with deep lines on his face and a different haircut. There's a brief moment of doubt as Karen ponders whether she would have recognized him walking down the street.

"I'm sorry, do you need a second?" Mark says.

"I have a few questions, first."

"Figured. Get on with it, would you?"

"Why do all this? Why bomb my apartment, kill all those people, work with Sanctuary again, why?"

"Awfully philosophical. Fortunately, the answer's simple. There's bad people, and a limited selection of good guys who can fight them. Since nobody else seems to want the job, I'm the guy. You were a threat to me, and by extension my friends - hell, I don't know if you ever stopped being one. I didn't mean to blow up your apartment, just scare you a bit, but the guy I hired to do it was a little...over-zealous. As for Sanctuary, I was Shanghai'd both times, thought the basic idea was tolerable, found out they're actually not people you want to be aligned with, made my exit." He pauses for a moment.

"And that about covers it, I think. Now, can we keep the inevitable moralizing down to a minute or less? I don't really care at this point."

"Nope, no lecture. You're a killer. You kill people. They happen to be bad people, but you're still just a killer. Lecturing you about the morality seems pointless."

"Astute as ever. And no guilt trips, I like that."

"I lived and breathed you for years, Mark. I know what you are."

"Fair enough. That it?"

"Yep. Here's the deal. You cooperate with me, give me all the info I need to roll up Sanctuary for good, from the top on down. You then turn yourself into the police, and go to prison for the rest of your life."

"That's not really a deal," Mark says.

"It's either that, or Sanctuary kills you," Karen replies.

"Eh," Mark says. "Better men have tried and failed. I'm a survivor kind of a guy."

"Yes, but I doubt that they've all tried at once. Sanctuary has enough resources, they can just throw everything they have at you at once, and I don't care how good you are, you won't make it."

"Probably," Mark concedes. "I'd take a hell of a lot of them with me, though. And I'm not convinced you can stop them, even with everything I know."

"If you stop screwing around in New York and go deep underground, you should be safe long enough for me to take them down. People want a big metahuman bust right now, and a shadowy government conspiracy would suit them just fine." Karen stops for a second. "Mark, I know you still care about your friends, and now that we're past the tough-guy act, just consider doing this for them. You want to do good in this world? Help me take down Sanctuary, stop all their corruption and killing. That's better than a hundred Victor Smiths."

Mark's silent for a second.

"I wouldn't have called you if I wasn't already halfway there," he says, his voice trembling. "I'll help you."

Karen pauses again. "Not to be ungrateful for your help, but you are planning on following through with that second part, right? Dante, and I think Az and Sharon are somewhat...emphatic about you being somewhere that you can't kill anyone."

"Then let me be honest in kind," Mark says. "In my experience, genies don't stay bottled up very long."

Karen's reply is cut off as Mark hits the brakes hard, sliding the car to a stop.

"What was that for?" she asks.

"Did you bring the cell phone?"

"Yes," Karen says. "Oh, dammit!" She quickly tosses it out the window. "They tracked us, didn't they? Dammit, I'm so stupid." She immediately shifts her perception ahead in time, looking out for any kind of attack.

Mark puts the car in reverse, looking around for a different escape route from the intersection.

"...or they listened in when I told you where to meet. Never mind that, we're both stupid. Out of the car."

"We should..."

"Out of the car!" Mark insists, opening her door and shoving Karen outside. He follows, vaults the hood and drags her with him as he runs for cover.

"Yeah, but we should - *get down!*" she screams, throwing her weight against Mark. He slips and tumbles while a bullet darts overhead at Mach 4, taking out the air where Mark's head was supposed to be. The muffled gunshot echoes just as Mark drags himself to his feet again. The two of them start to run for cover, heading for a factory building up ahead. Karen steals a glance at Mark and sees twin pistols slide out of his coat sleeves. They almost make it to the front door of the loading dock before another shot rings out, this one close but not a hit, either. Mark just opens up on the door ahead with both guns blazing, blowing the lock to smithereens. As they press inside, Mark slams the door closed behind them, then tips a file cabinet against it.

"As I was trying to say, we should call Jack for backup," she says, and tries dialing him on her regular cell phone. No signal. "Dammit, they must be jamming cell phones."

"We need to get out of here and find a landline," Mark says. He looks at Karen. "You carrying?"

"What do you think?" she replies sarcastically.

"Never too late to start," he says. He flips the safety of the USP in his left hand on, pauses for a second, then holds it out for Karen to take. "You'll need this."

She takes it, flips the safety back off, checks the mag and then the chamber. "Thanks."

"...don't scratch it," he says, and they hurry into the factory proper.

The sound of choppers overhead grows louder. "Welcome to my life!" Mark shouts.

"Squad One is following them now!" Sensei shouts into his headset. Even with the noise-cancelling, sitting in the open cabin of a combat insertion helicopter is loud, loud, loud. "We've got him pinned down, blueprints show no sewer or subway access."

"Who's he with?" McNary asks on the other end.

"A woman, probably Ayers unless they pulled a switcheroo."

"Doesn't matter," McNary replies. "I want them both dead. Try to limit the collateral damage, but if you need to blow it up..."

Sensei's eyes shoot to the missile pods mounted on the chopper's stub wings.

"Understood, Sir."

He flips the NVG's on his helmet mount down and switches them on. The factory looks even more like a rusted mousetrap with a green tint.

"Sensei to all squads, we're going in!"

Mark and Karen rush into the factory's loading dock, past pallets of shrink-wrapped car magazines. The sound of an approaching chopper has turned into the whine of a hovering one, and Mark knows they don't have much time before they're getting hit.

"Stay away from the doors and windows!" he shouts to Karen as he moves half-crouched from pallet to pallet, trying to get to the other side of the dock - a small office, hopefully with a telephone. A large bay door groans and starts rising; Mark fires a few bullets at it, hoping to make the attackers think twice about their choice of entry point. "The office! Call for backup, I'll cover you!"

"Got it!" Karen responds. She hurries toward the office, doing her best to keep the gun up and stabilized with both arms, while Mark ducks behind a pallet and takes aim at open bay. A large shell comes sailing through, bounces along the ground and starts spewing a greyish miasma of smoke. Mark gets his left hand on the gun to keep it under control, then braces his arms on top of the pallet and just lets loose, pulling the trigger as quickly as he can.

Karen reaches the office, but the door is locked. Karen takes a step back, aims the gun at the door lock and squints. *If Simmons can do it...* Her first shot outside a gun range is a careful one, her second somewhat less so, and by the fourth the lock stops resisting. She raises her right foot and gives the door a low side kick, forcing it open.

"Hurry up!" Mark shouts as the smoke drifts toward him. He ducks down behind the pallet and coughs with his eyes watering up - tear gas. With no recourse but to leave his position, he runs towards the corner of the office and slides inside, then closes the door behind him and puts his body against it. Karen's busy dialing Jack's cell phone. Just as she gets the first ringing sound on her end, the line goes dead.

"Phone's out!"

"Come here," Mark says. "Gotta go through the factory. There was a door back on the other end of the dock, so we're backtracking. On three, you open the door, I go out and start shooting -"

"Got it," Karen whispers more to herself than Mark.

"- and you run," Mark says obliviously. "You run until you're out of the dock, I'll be a step behind you. Got that?"

"Huh? Yeah, I got it," Karen repeats. In her mind's eye, she's already out there and running; her breathing speeds up.

"One...two...three!"

Karen opens the door just as a woman clad in Sanctuary's black BDUs circles around the office corner with a shotgun in her hands. Mark gives her five good reasons to get out of his way, and she slumps to the ground with a thin spray of bloody mist from a nicked carotid artery. Karen runs. Her path is beset by half a dozen people who didn't expect her to come out first; she can see them drop as she runs past them, cut down by bullets fired right behind her. Her ears are ringing now, and she can't tell if it's sweat or gas burning her eyes. She sees another Sanctuary operative run through their factory entrance before he does, so she fires a few shots on the run in the door's direction to keep him out. She slides at the end of the dock, aligning herself left to spring for the door connecting the dock to the main printing floor; Mark's caught up to her and does the same in the other direction, his back just a foot from hers as the outside of the door comes into his sight. The delayed soldier is still cowering outside, trying to gather enough courage to try his entry; Mark shoots him through the balaclava covering his face, the bullet curves from the bridge of his nose up through his brain, and the soldier drops dead on the spot. Karen runs toward the door, Mark backpedals just behind her, still firing. In one of God's small graces, the door isn't closed properly and just swings open when Karen hits it. The two rush through, Mark throws the door closed and shoots the keypad securing the electronic lock. In the now sealed-off loading dock, he can hear more soldiers rushing in, and some of the ones he shot shouting and being attended to.

What I really need is a holy assault rifle, Mark thinks. "That won't keep them away for long," he shouts.

The main printing hall is a multi-floor affair, with six behemoths of steel and paper stretching all the way to the ceiling. Two of the printing towers are running, depositing their products to a subfloor for cutting and binding. The noise is enough to drone out the chopper idling outside on the parking lot.

"Where's the exit?" Mark says, looking around. The only doors he can see are the ones he just sealed, a large gate to the loading dock (currently sealed and unpowered), plus a staircase, presumably leading to the offices and the higher levels of the printing towers. "Come on, this way." He grabs Karen and shoves her toward the staircase door while he turns around in place, scanning the surroundings for vital details. Karen takes a few quick steps, then pivots in place as she brings her gun up and higher. "The windows!" she shouts. Mark looks up at what must be the fourth and highest floor of the printing hall: large windows spot the outside walls. "Oh crap," he says, then brings his gun up, too.

Before he can take proper aim, the windows shatter from the force of entry charges and spew forth a veritable army of black-clad operatives, wearing climbing harnesses over their standard vests. Karen aims low and almost hits one in the leg, but at this distance, precision shots are difficult indeed. Mark doesn't have much more luck; he wings two troopers with his shots, but the rest jump the handrail of the small walkway and fastrope down, firing their automatic carbines at Mark and Karen. The two wisely decide to beat a hasty retreat towards the staircase leading up to the offices.

"Fire escape?" Karen asks, almost screaming to drown out the noise of everything around them. "Yeah!" Mark replies, finding no fault with a straightforward plan like that. The stairs lead both down to the sublevel as well as up; Mark and Karen choose the latter. The rappelling operatives are literally five steps behind them; just as Mark takes the first half the stairs to the next floor, they burst into the staircase, and exchange a brief flurry of fire with the Paladin. He doesn't see any of them go down in the split second it takes, and it's only after he runs after Karen that he notices the bullet wound in his right leg. With a curse on his lips, he limps upward, firing blindly behind himself.

The staircase has exits to the offices at the third floor; when Mark reaches it, Karen already has the door propped open, her gun aimed at the stairs leading up! "Get in!" she shouts; Mark dives through the door as a Sanctuary trooper runs down the stairs from the top floor. Karen's perfectly braced, however, and drills a neat hole in his leg. She closes the door behind her to the tune of his painful tumble down the stairs; Mark's already putting his back against another file cabinet and tips it in front of the door.

"Can't," he says, then catches his breath. His hands hovers over his leg, and Karen sees that he's got one of Azuriel's powers - but the glow isn't nearly as strong. "Can't keep this up much longer," Mark finally gets out. "We need to get out, now."

"Fire escape's this way," Karen says, pointing to the signs indicating emergency evacuation routes.

"Just have to get there."

"Mighty big just," Mark says, just as another squad of troopers comes at them from the direction of the fire escape. Mark snaps his gun up, but Karen gets the first shots in. Three troopers fall before her, with two more coming; Mark blows one's left thigh out and hammers six bullets into the other's vest before he falls to the ground with hashee inside his torso. "You killed them," he says, surprised.

"Running out of options."

"We should've teamed up sooner."

With the immediate threat gone, they make their way forward, heads down and creeping past the cubicles. Mark's leg wound still isn't gone. "Usually," he coughs between heavy breaths, "this works better."

"Hate to say I told you so," Karen says, a bit of a smile on her face as she unloads some stress into gallows humor.

"Hey, it's your ass on the line, too, you know!"

"Yeah, I can't imagine what the people at the office will think if we get killed together." She points to his leg. "Can you make it down the fire escape?"

"You'll have to get there first," a new voice says. Mark creeps out of the cubicle they're taking cover in and spots another black-clad figure with an automatic carbine, but this one isn't wearing a mask.

Sensei. Mark draws his head back in.

"He's just a guy," he says, more to himself than Karen. "On three, step out and kill him." Karen nods, a determined look playing across her face. "One, two..."

"That's wrong..." she says, puzzled at what she's seeing.

"Three!"

Mark dives out of cover, Karen slides. Three guns are up. Nothing goes BLAM!. Well, two things go click. Sensei just didn't pull his trigger.

"Little something we picked up on your last vacation," Sensei says. Mark steadies himself and drops the USP.

"You gonna shoot me, shoot me," he says. "Let her go."

"Why should I? Two test subjects are far better than a corpse and a runaway. I must say, Ms. Ayers, for someone who fights so hard to put metahumans away for killing others, you seem to be quite adept at it yourself."

"Only when I have to," Karen spits back at him.

"You're forgetting something," Mark says, and smiles.

Sensei rebraces his gun. "What's that?"

Mark dives to the side, his left sleeve aimed at Sensei. Just as the Sanctuary instructor follows with the muzzle of his weapon, Mark's sword shoots out. Sensei barely gets out of the way, but his weapon isn't so lucky - the sword snaps the sling and rips it out of Sensei's hands before embedding itself in the wall. Mark shoves himself up off the ground while Karen, already moving the instant Mark started to throw his sword, runs up to embed the tip of her shoe into the bridge of Sensei's nose. Sensei rolls backwards and counters her advance with a low kick of his own, but Karen jumps over it and comes to a sliding stop on the other side of him. The two of them slowly right themselves and circle around.

"You see every move," Sensei says, "I know every move. You can't outfight me."

Mark rolls up from behind Sensei and plants a hard uppercut into his kidneys. Sensei staggers back to the door of the fire exit and now faces both Mark and Karen in fighting pose. "Yes, **we** can." They both put their arms over each other shoulders and simultaneously kick him through the door. He's flung against the safety rail outside and goes over, falling all the way to the ground. "Always knew he'd go out like a punk," Mark says, then spits some of the thick saliva assembling in his mouth onto the ground.

"Freeze!" comes the shout from behind. Mark closes his eyes and shakes his head slowly, then turns around. Another team of Sanctuary operatives - how many of those are there, anyway? - has assembled behind them. Four guys, all with weapons trained on Mark and Karen. The fire exit is literally three feet away from the two.

"This can't be fucking happening," Mark says, a tiredness in his voice.

"No more tricks," is the reply. Karen realizes that it's coming from all of the squaddies, at the same time, in one voice.

"Please tell me you've got more tricks," Karen says to Mark. Mark shakes his head silently as lights and sirens appear in the background. Karen turns to the troopers. "You can't take us. You hear this outside? Your chopper's going. Police sirens. They'll be here in a minute. You try to take us with you, you won't get out of here before they have the place surrounded."

"Oh," is the reply. "Plan B, then." They all flip their carbines to full-auto.

Karen knows what's going to happen and closes her eyes.

"That's the problem with you Sanctuary types," Mark says. He's neither smiling nor grinning - he's snarling. "You just don't know when to quit."

Karen knows it happened when the wave of warmth rides over and through her, a sensation she can't quite place. It almost feels like being asleep and flying, no gravity slowing her down, nothing in her way. She opens her eyes and sees everything play out. It's a different Karen who lunges for Sensei's carbine and snatches it up just as the Sanctuary squaddies starts firing wildly. She lands on the ground and rolls, then brings the rifle up. One, two, three, four, the first squaddie falls with wounds peppering his right arm and torso. FiveSixSevenEightNineTen another one, FullAuto gogogo. The carbine chatters right next to her head, a piledriver going through her brain as she pounds bloody holes in the third and takes her arm off at the elbow. The last one is almost aiming at her, his bullets seek her, hungry for the one who struck down the rest of them, but her last shot rings true and his head snaps back as the major contents of his brain erupt through his helmet and paint the ceiling a nauseous shade of purple.

Karen hits the ground. The carbine runs dry and obediently waits for her next move. Without another thought, she drops it and turns to Mark. The Paladin is half-lying, half-propped against the wall, several bloody wounds in his legs and torso, oozing blood at a pretty decent rate. Most of the shots missed him. It's the other 7% where his luck didn't hold out.

"Mark!" she shouts, but he waves her off.

"I'm fine, I've been-" he wipes some blood off his face, "I'm good. They're dead. Good...good job, Karen." He smiles. "Great teamwork."

"Don't bullshit me, Mark," Karen says. "We've gotta get you out of here before you bleed out."

"Fuck that," Mark says, the glow in his arm starting up again, even more fickle than before. "I can fix this. But you have to go, they might...might just blow the building. If they don't, hell, the cops are here. They can call an ambulance." He looks at her. "And don't even try, I weigh twice as much as you. Get out, Karen. I'll see you later."

"Fuck you, Mark Aaron Simmons," Karen says with a weak smile, tears beginning to form. "The last time you said that, you escaped from Death Row on me. I'm staying right here where I can keep an eye on you, you hear me?"

"Whatever," Mark coughs, "I ain't going anywhere. Watch me bleed, okay, but maybe you could go out and call the cops up here first."

Karen nods, and runs out to the fire escape, where the police cars are beginning to line up. She sees Jack, Chrome, Az and Sharon climb out of one of them and waves to them. "Jack!" she shouts. "Up here!" They all look up and see her at the same time, and start running towards the fire escape. Jack TK's the bottom ladder down, and all four of them start climbing as fast as they can. Karen runs back inside to Mark. "They're coming right now, Jack's coming, Az is coming, they can help you."

Mark's hand has slumped down by the time the four of them makes it up. The angel kneels down as Karen watches frantically.

"Oh my God, Mark!" Chrome shouts.

"Do something!" Karen yells at Az.

"I'm trying," Az says, summoning up focus and holding his hands over Mark's wounds, but nothing happens. Azuriel's eyes glow fiercely as he pumps more and more power into his attempts. Karen can see the immaterial wings sprouting from his back. Those are definitely not a trick of her imagination.

"Work, damn it!" Az screams, his voice a shockwave that knocks the air from Karen's lungs. Azuriel's whole body is glowing brightly, and the image sears itself into Karen's eyes.

It's all loud and bright enough that Karen almost misses Azuriel's next words, for he can do nothing but whisper them.

"Oh...oh no."

A dreadful noise tears through Karen's head as the image in front of her freezes, then slowly dissolves - her eyes can't even begin to process the amount of light produced. By the time she can see again, Az is almost halfway across the room, crashed into one of the cubicle walls and out cold. She turns to Mark; Sharon's kneeling next to him, desperately trying to keep his heart going with CPR while Jack provides rescue breathing. Chrome's collapsed next to him, in a state of catatonic shock.

"Fight, dammit!" Sharon screams. "For once in your worthless fucking life, why won't you fight!"

"Medic!" Karen hears herself yell. "We need a medic!"

Far away from the confusion, Hannibal McNary stands on top of a roof and watches the scene with a pair of binoculars. His other hand contains a stone fragment covered in runes. Playing against type, they aren't glowing - in fact, they're perfectly black.

He lowers the binoculars, then moves his hand as if he was conducting a small orchestra. The strings, the brass - and then he leads it all to a crashing stop. For a second, his hand hovers in the air without moving, then he smiles.

"Goodbye, Paladin," he says.
Sacred Heart Hospital Secure Isolation Ward
August 14th, 11:28 PM

Considering the regularity that dangerous and powerful metahumans show up in New York City, it would make sense that Sacred Heart Hospital would have a secure ward for them. It's less of a ward and more of a isolated lockdown containment cell with medical equipment in it, complete with armed police guards, and right now it contains one Nathan Kettner, the sole survivor of the Sanctuary assault on Mark and Karen.

Helsing talks with Karen while Sharon waits nearby. "We found him in the office when we cleared it out," Helsing says. "He's got a few holes in him, and when we found him he was babbling on, not making a lick of sense. Paramedics sedated him for transport, and he's doing better now, more lucid at least."

"And the DA?" Karen says.

"They're ready to throw a damn parade for you downtown," Helsing says. "Both One PP and the DA's office are calling you a hero. Don't worry Karen, you'll be fine. Was that really Simmons you were with?"

"Yes."

"Well, fuck me," Helsing says. "It's like they shot Bigfoot or something. How the hell was he still alive?"

"Stonegate was a front for those paramilitary guys that were trying to kill us. They got him out and put him to work."

"Just...Jesus, Karen, I'm trying to wrap my head around this. These guys are government, right? They'd have to be to have access to Stonegate. They kept Simmons under the radar for what, three years now? That kind of shit doesn't happen in the world I woke up in today. There won't be a shitstorm, it'll be a shit hurricane."

"I know, we have to get out in front of this before they can really start covering this up and rolling up all their assets and locations," Karen says.

"How do you plan on doing that?"

"Well, I had flipped Simmons--"

"Of course you had," Helsing says, exasperated but too tired to protest with more intensity.

"--but now I guess we have to take a run at this guy. Who is he?"

"Nathan Kettner. Bright kid, law school on a scholarship, crashed his car five years ago and, surprise, has been officially dead since then. Haven't had a chance to really talk to him yet. But if the gaggle of labcoats I met on my way in was telling the truth, we should be able to squeeze him for some info now."

"Alright, wish me luck," Karen says.

Sharon pushes off the wall she's been leaning against. "I'm coming in with you."

Karen is about to protest when she realizes that it won't do any good and could possibly tip off Helsing as to exactly where Mark has been. "Let's go, then."

"I've got to go," Helsing says. "But Karen? I'm opening an investigation in the morning into what rock Simmons crawled under for all these years, and I'm gonna need your help. You in?"

"Of course," Karen says. "See you in the morning, Helsing." The lieutenant nods, and walks out towards the elevators.

"This could be a problem, Karen," Sharon says.

"One thing at a time, please," Karen says. "Let's get Kettner on our side, and then we worry about Helsing." The two walk through the double airlock doors leading into the isolation room.

Kettner's lying in bed, reading a book - Stanislaw Lem's "The Invincible". The IVs dripping blood and painkillers into his body show that he's not quite over the hill yet. One arm and both legs are handcuffed to the reinforced steel bed. He looks up at Karen and Sharon, then goes back to his book.

"Mr. Kettner?" Karen says. "I'm assistant district attorney Karen Ayers, and this is Detective Irene Hansen from the Special Crimes Unit." Sharon just stands behind Karen and glares at Kettner, seemingly trying to light him on fire with her mind.

"And you've got questions," Kettner says, not looking up.

"Yes, we do."

"Well, Miss Ayers, I've got nothing to say. There's nothing you can do for me, and if I say anything--"

"Sanctuary will kill you, I get it," Karen says, clicking off the intercom. "You don't think they won't already? That's right, I know all about Sanctuary, about Stonegate, about Hannibal McNary, about all of that."

"Then you know what they can do. I'm surprised they haven't triggered me yet, but I don't intend to spend the last hours of my life playing 20 Questions with you. Now, if you don't mind..."

Sharon tosses an evidence bag onto Kettner's bed. Inside is a small circuit board in a hard plastic shell. The inside looks like it's covered in black soot and melted slightly. "They did trigger you," she says. "Good thing we know about the implants, too. Surgeons found it on your aorta when they were pulling bullets out of you. They say that it would have opened it up like a zipper, you'd have been dead in less than a minute."

"I..." Kettner says, putting his book down and covering his mouth with his hands in shock, before looking back up, suspicion in his eyes. "They should have triggered everyone when the operation went south. How do I know -" he locks eyes with Sharon - "that this is my implant, that you didn't just cut this from one of the other bodies, that this isn't some kind of fucked-up loyalty test you're playing on me?"

"Because we're not Sanctuary," Karen says. "I want to take those bastards down, roll up the whole operation."

"Heard that before," Kettner says, "from the guy they sent me to kill. Took Sanctuary a long time to pay him back for it, but they did."

"Simmons just hit one cell," Sharon says. "He didn't know about the whole organization at the time."

"You were sent after Simmons and me because he was going to testify for me," Karen says. "We know that Sanctuary is bigger than that."

"Okay," Kettner says. He turns to Karen and holds up his hand. "There's an easy way to test what you're telling me. Take my hand."

"What can you do?" Karen asks.

"Read your memories. I'll know if you're lying, and I also know that I'm the only guy at Sanctuary who can work with minds like that. If you really believe what you're telling me - well, somebody could still be messing with me, but it won't be them."

"Fine," Karen says. She's about to take his hand when she pauses. "Any bad side effects?"

"Only if somebody shoots you in the head while we're connected," Kettner says. "The rest is all intentional."

"Comforting," Karen says, and grabs his hand.

Sharon watches as Kettner's face softens. The defensiveness, the guarded expression, it all melts away in an instant. For a second, it looks like he's going to start crying, but he pulls himself together. With a smile, he turns to Sharon. "You should step behind your friend," Kettner and Karen say with Kettner's voice.

"Why?" Sharon says, weirded out by the experience.

"Because she's getting everything I know about Sanctuary, and that's a lot."

After a pause, Karen releases the grip on Kettner's hand. True to his word, she faints almost at once, and Sharon catches her as she stumbles back. As she lays Karen on the ground, Kettner smiles.

"I hope she doesn't mind that I copied some case law," he says, and grins. "I was just six credits short, you know. I followed her cases, she's pretty damn good."

After a few seconds, Karen wakes back up. "My God," she says.

"Yeah, they're a lot bigger than you think," Kettner says.

"They kidnapped you?"

He nods. "And press-ganged me into working for them. Do you remember the boot camp?"

Karen thinks for a moment. No sleep, electro-"therapy", drug treatments. She puts the muzzle of a gun against Taylor's head. He failed. They tell her to shoot him, shoot him or she's next. The gunshot echoes through her mind, still terribly crisp after all those years, all those bodies. Tears well up in her eyes. It's almost too much to think about at once. Kettner nods to her disturbed look.

"That's who you're up against," he says. "Come on, one more go. You don't have to live with those memories, they're separate from the rest of your mind."

"No, once was enough," Karen says, in shock. "Testify. Testify for me and we'll make sure they pay for what they've done to you and everyone else in the program."

"After all I've done? I'll be lucky to get out in a few hundred years."

"Full immunity, if we even need that," Karen says. "You were under coercion the whole time. You remember those classes, right? What's the law's position on crimes committed while under threat of immediate bodily harm or death?"

Kettner thinks for a moment, then smiles. "Yeah, that's right, and full immunity would cover the

murder charges that the coercion defense doesn't." He looks over to Sharon. "Your friend doesn't disappoint."

"I do my best," Karen says. "We'll get you set up with witness protection--"

"All I need is a guard detail," Kettner says, and that smile on his face takes on a wicked edge. "It'll be fun to turn Sanctuary's training against them." He extends a hand to shake. "And it'll be fun working with you, Miss Ayers. I might finish that JD, I'm hoping to learn a lot."

"Karen, please," she says. "And likewise." She shakes his hand.

Karen and Sharon walk out of the room. "What's the next move?" Sharon asks.

Karen flips open her cell phone. "We shut them down," she says. "We need to get LA and Denver PD into those Sanctuary offices before they burn them down. Newark and Colorado Springs can take care of the training camps, and you call ESU and tell them to get to 14th floor of 70 Chambers Street, down by City Hall. Tell them not to wait for a warrant, we have exigent circumstances to prevent the imminent destruction of evidence and preservation of life. If we're really lucky, they haven't authorized Code Black yet. Call the FBI, see if they can get HRT there quicker than ESU. God, I hope we get there before they execute the prisoners."

"Wait, what? Execute the prisoners?"

"Yeah, Sanctuary protocol Condition Black. Kill the prisoners, shred the documents and computers, then burn the office. It takes authorization from at least two section heads and the board, so if we're lucky, we can catch them napping." Karen pauses and realizes what she just said. "God, Kettner's got one hell of a trick." Sharon's still looking at Karen somewhat skeptically. "Come on, make the call." Sharon motions for one of the police standing guard to toss her his radio. "It's really happening now, huh?"

"You're damn right it is," she says. "It's time to take Sanctuary down for good."

56 Commerce Street, Brooklyn
August 15th, 12:00 AM

For the first time in three years, the lights have come on in the old storage depot of the paint factory. Rows of black-clad people stand at attention, several of them still visible injured from the attack on Mark & Karen. The entrance in front of them opens, and with the light of several high beams behind him, Hannibal McNary steps inside, followed by a dozen rough-looking men and women.

"Company, eyes front!" shouts one of the soldiers, and their stance tightens as McNary stands before them.

"At ease, soldiers," he says, and they shift accordingly. His gaze scans the room with some consternation.

"I'm glad," McNary begins. "I'm glad to see you all here. When I heard the reports, I hurried to be here, to see for myself what had happened. I feared the worst. But you have survived. No, more than that, you have prevailed. Although we are beset by traitors on all sides, people among and above us who have sold us out, you have prevailed. And I'm proud of every last one of you."

He pauses briefly.

"But what have I told you? Not enough. Hidden agendas poisoned our mission, and tonight I'm laying my cards on the table. What many of you have wondered, what some of you have suspected - yes, there is a rhyme and reason to your existence, to your powers. You are not the flukes of a natural process. In your bodies - no, in our bodies - there lies ancient power. Diluted, yes, but no less wondrous. You wish to know who you are, and where this power comes from. Well, this is a deep truth, and I will reveal it to you. But first, I would show you the power's messengers, and you can make your own judgment."

McNary turns to the men & women who followed him into the depot. At his signal, they begin to transform. Some literally split apart as their forms grow grotesque and twisted, leathery wings sprouting from their backs and hellfire burning the remains of their human disguise. Others shimmer and shift; their bodies grow ephemeral, and soft wings of black, of fire and of light unfold from them.

"They are not 'shifters,'" McNary yells. "They are not 'Others'. And what you know in your heart you must know in your minds: there is a Heaven, and a Hell, and the waste of human lives, the strife, all the forces aligned against us - they wish to perpetuate a war that has lasted for all of existence. A war where humans have been nothing but cattle, warm bodies, souls to redeem and condemn to eternal torture in the name of 'balance'. But no more. I will not stand for it. And you have the power to resist it. I call upon you, as my trusted warriors, as my...friends. Follow me, and together we will fulfill the only true duty of soldiers."

As he speaks, wings of steel sprout from beneath his clothes, tearing his jacket off. His eyes burn with molten gold, and his voice roars defiance. Even the most battle-hardened of the soldiers shudder. Some cry tears of joy, others stand frozen in terror. The Hannibal McNary they knew never was.

"I am Catariel," he shouts, "and together we will end the Eternal War!"

Constantine's Rare Books
August 15th, 2:27 AM

The back room at Constantine's Rare Books is, like so many things about the store, much more than it appears to be. Monica's sequestered in a hideout-cum-holding cell. The first few hours were immensely painful, the rest merely torturous. Part of it is the constant hunger, a boiling heat where her stomach should be. The regular food sitting in the fridge didn't cut it for long. Right now as Sharon checks in on her, she's sitting on the cot, quite busy working her way through the second case of Red Bull while attempting to devour a delivery of twelve pizzas, with only a bit of pride preventing her from supplementing the actual pizzas with the boxes and just chewing the Red Bull cans whole.

"You didn't mention that demons need to eat this much," Monica growls, tail flicking back and forth in annoyance. "How do you manage to keep going like this?"

"Because I'm not permanently at full throttle," Sharon says. She doesn't notice the tone, she knows what Monica is going through. "The first thing you learn as a demon is to regulate your body's power output."

"How long does it take?"

"Ten years or so." She looks at Monica and realizes what she's saying, then looks a bit guilty.

"We...had a lot of time, back when we fell."

"The anger is the worst part," Monica says. "The stuff I can't eat, I want to break."

"At least you've got it under control," Sharon says. "Guess where all the raging demons come from. You're already far ahead of the curve, even if you don't feel like it now. And it will get better. I promise. And then in a few weeks, it'll all be over."

"Hopefully sooner," Monica says with a laugh. Finishing off the last pizza, she feels slightly better, at least enough to stop trying to extinguish her hunger. "I heard about Mark. Sharon, I'm so sorry." Sharon collapses into the room's one chair. She seems more exhausted than sad.

"No, you warned me. I just had to try, you know? And it turns out I couldn't help him. I just -" she cracks a small, wistful smile - "it could have gone differently. I still think that, but it doesn't change what happened."

"He had to save himself, Sharon," she says. "You couldn't make him do it. At least you were there for him, at the end-"

"I was going to kill him, Monica," Sharon blurts out. "And I come there, he's lying on the ground, his heart's stopped. All I had to do was nothing. Just...walk out. Job's done. And what did I do? I went back on it. I tried to keep him alive. Even after all of this, the things he did, the times I promised myself I'd be swift and thorough and professional about it...I couldn't let him die. I couldn't have killed him if I had had him in my sights." She sighs. "Something with me is either very wrong, or...right." "Right, Sharon," Monica says. "It's right that you didn't want to kill him. How did it feel when you decided to kill him?"

"How do you feel right now, Monica?" Sharon asks, then shrugs. "The hunger, the anger...they were right back when I made the choice."

"And when you saw him?"

Sharon's tough exterior cracks just a little bit. "I felt afraid. I felt sad, panicky...I felt human." She exhales sharply. "You tricked me, I didn't think this would turn into a therapy session."

"Hey, it's me," Monica says. "Despite how I look, I just want to help."

"Well, I think that's enough for today. Want me to get Chrome?"

"Yes, that would be great."

"I don't know how much you'll be able to get done, she's still in shock. I don't think she's said a word since the factory."

"Let's give it a shot, shall we?"

Sharon gets up, and after the two of them almost hug before they remember Monica's current condition, she walks out the door. Chrome walks in a minute later. Well, shuffles in is more like it. She slumps into the chair and just sits there.

A minute passes in silence before Monica speaks up. "Chrome? Chrome, you should talk to someone about what you're feeling right now. Chrome, talk to me."

Chrome's hair shoots to black and Avenger sits bolt upright in the chair before slinking back down to a more comfortable position. "Yeah, that's not happening, she needs some alone time right now. But you're looking good, Monica. Exercise much?"

"Hello, Avenger," Monica says. She sits a little more upright, her tail freezing in place. "Yes, I'm looking a little different right now. Can you tell me how Chrome's feeling right now?"

"What kind of fucking question is that?" Avenger snorts. "How do you think she feels? Her beloved daddy figure Mark fucking Simmons is dead. He pulled our asses out of that fucking grave and brought her out of me, and ever since she's had this sad 'daddy dearest' attachment thing for him. It'd be kinda pathetic if it wasn't so Goddamn cute. Well, now they did him in and all she can do is sit around while other people make the calls. I keep telling her that we need to take care of business ourselves, but of course that doesn't work for her, either. In the words of the masters, we have reached an impasse."

"Don't you think she has the right to feel the way she does right now? You must have felt some kind of attachment to Mark in order to stay around back when you were more in charge, try to understand at least a little bit of how she feels."

"Oh, I understand just fine, sister. She's been doing nothing but weeping and wailing for the last few hours in our head. I get the whole sorrow thing, I just don't give a fuck. She wants to have herself a little cry, be the little pussy bitch I know she is, that's just fine, I'll go ahead and let her."

"Maybe that's for the best at the moment," Monica says, tail and wings again twitching in annoyance.

"Yeah, sure. You know, you're more fun when you have a tell like that," Avenger says.

Monica grabs her tail and holds onto it. "Have you thought about what I told you earlier in the week? About telling me about Chrome's and your childhood?"

Avenger laughs. "Thought, yeah. Answer's no. And you should take that 'no'. Look at yourself, Monica. You just had to know, didn't you? Had to find out, dig deeper. And if you think you're hungry now...wait 'til you try to touch me."

"I don't think I'll need to push all that hard," Monica says. "You're not the first person I've met like you, Avenger, and people, even metahumans, aren't all that different."

"Yeah, whatever." Avenger tilts her head sideways. "Oh, hey, guess who's ready to come out. I guess this is goodbye for now, Monica. I get the feeling that we'll be seeing a lot more of each other real soon."

Avenger slumps down into her chair in depression as her hair shifts to blond. Chrome wipes away the tears in her eyes, then looks up at Monica, startled. "Wow, Sharon told me what happened, but you really did wind up going all the way."

"Yes, that's what I've been told. Chrome, talk to me. Tell me how you're feeling."

"Do you have parents, Monica?" Chrome asks.

"Yes, I do. My mother died a while ago."

"Because I just lost my Dad," Chrome says quietly. "And it feels like nothing makes sense without him."

"I know how that feels, Chrome," Monica says. "If you need to, don't be afraid to lean on your friends, and especially Jack. That's how I got through my mother dying."

"Do you know how Mark found me?" Chrome asks.

"No, I don't."

"He pulled her out of the ground, Avenger. Literally out of our grave. Being a vampire is...you can't die. But you can't go crazy, either, it doesn't work that way. She didn't know how long she was down there, no light, no sound, nothing. And the first thing -" Chrome laughs despite herself - "the first she tries to do is drink. But that's her. All her, always traveling in the dark, knowing that Mark's the only one who can protect her, keep her safe. But she can fight. She wants to help him. When the time comes, she fights for him, even when the night was almost over." She bows closer to Monica. "Do you understand? Avenger was ready to die for him, maybe do something...I don't know if it's noble, or

good, or just stubborn. But she did it. And when the fight was over, when she had sacrificed herself to save him...in that sunrise, that's when I was born." Chrome leans back in the chair and sighs. "And so you finally were able to come out of her. Mark got Avenger to lower her defenses enough to let you show yourself."

"I'm not sure I was in there to begin with," Chrome says.

"Of course you were," Monica says.

"Thanks for the support," Chrome says. "But I don't believe that."

"You need to give yourself more credit, Chrome. Aggressive personalities like Avenger don't need kind people like you to lean on. I'd bet that you've been around a lot longer than either you or Avenger think. You're strong, Chrome."

"Well, I work out," Chrome says, and cracks a small smile. "Thank you."

Monica smiles as well. Despite the demonic appearance, it somehow manages to look caring. "No problem. Talk to Jack about all this, Chrome. He loves you, he'll do whatever it takes to help you."

Chrome nods. "I know." She stands up. "I think I can do this."

"You'll be just fine, Chrome. See you next week."

"Yeah, I think I might be. See you then."

Up in the store, Gamariel is quite busy reshelving a few books Monica had asked to read. He whistles a cheery little tune as he climbs up a ladder to reach the highest shelf, then barely manages to insert the book. Nodding to himself for a job well done, he climbs back down.

Sitting on his couch, Azuriel reflects on the last few hours. And it is Azuriel, undoubtedly, not Raphael Marcos, because the latter does not have to deal with the hassle of shifting his wings into a position where they don't try to occupy the same space as the couch's backrest.

"Have you spoken to Lucifer yet?" Gamariel remarks casually. "After all, it is his power that is out of your control now, pressing into the open. Your bonds are shattered. He might be able to mend them."

"It was an angel," Az says, ignoring the fellow celestial's remark. "I could hear it, feel it, taste it. It was everywhere for a second."

"And yet I felt nothing of the sort."

"Great, so I'm imagining things. The center couldn't hold...because of nothing."

"I did not say that," Gamariel clarifies. "Our opponent knows how to hide himself. I did not consider that to be possible, but..."

"What?"

"I consider your words to be truth, Azuriel. More than any other's, your mouth speaks gospel. And if our enemy can hide his song, then this explains a few...phenomena...we have been exposed to these past months. We might not be alone after all, my friend. Rogue angels - rogue demons. This is a serious threat. I received a visit from two Avatars recently, one of Justice and one of Empathy, both with a message for Miss Ayers. They feel the same as I do, that there are forces arraying in the shadows, that someone or something powerful is gathering an army."

"Unfortunately, that's something that I can't worry about," Az says. "They will call me soon. Mark's position can't stay vacant for long."

"Then you would leave at an unfortunate time. I do not think Lucifer this reliant on tradition. It is his command that you must follow, but he seems to be quite content with staying silent."

"So what do you think I should do, then? Go rogue like you?"

"We do not walk the same path, Azuriel. Lucifer's silence, were it put to me for divining his intentions, I would interpret twofold: that your Lord knows no more than you - and this is a troubling thought indeed - or that he trusts you to do what you think right in his name. Mayhap that both apply, but I could just - as Dante would put it - be talking out of my arse."

"I'll talk to him," Az says. "If anyone has answers, he has them. And I think we all deserve them."

One Police Plaza
August 16th, 10:01 AM

Sharon finds herself seated in front of a panel of five senior officers of the NYPD, all in charge of various departments around the city. The decision to convene a review board to determine her fitness to continue working with the NYPD was made back when the issue was simply whether or not her

particular status as metahuman could potentially be an issue, and that seemed bad enough to Sharon at the time, but a lot has changed since then.

Chief of Detectives Landon Sykes asks the first question. "Detective Irene Hansen, as pursuant to the agreement that the city of New York has with your consulting firm, you agreed to abide by the rules and regulations that apply to any other New York City police officer, correct?"

"That's correct, sir."

"And these rules are very clear about the subject of concealing your identity as a metahuman, are they not?"

"Yes sir, they are," Sharon says. "I made no effort to hide my status as a metahuman, I just didn't feel it was the business of the department or anyone else what my particular abilities are."

Chief of Personnel Mark Moynihan responds. "Despite the fact that others like you have been known to be extremely violent, dangerous and unpredictable? You yourself have been involved in a case where a 'Others' metahuman individual had hung, tortured and eviscerated two people."

"As you said, sir, others like me, not me personally. If you look at my file, you'll find that I have as clean a record as anyone else in the department." Sharon crosses her arms. "I think that my personal accomplishments should speak for themselves, not guesses based on what others have done."

Sykes nods. "I think we can all agree on that here, so let's take a look at your history." He opens another file. It's empty. "Or lack thereof. We knew that you and two others with JS Consulting have short pasts, and while it wasn't a problem before, we have to ask, what did you do previous to working with the NYPD? Why is your life a blank before three years ago?"

"Because I didn't spend any of it in the US," Sharon answers. "I was employed by several security consulting corporations and traveled frequently. The details are a bit difficult to reconstruct after the fact."

Special Crimes Unit head Captain Joseph Kepley leans forward. "Do you mean to tell us that you were employed as a mercenary prior to your employment with the NYPD?"

"That is...technically incorrect, Sir, but I understand what you are getting at and the answer is 'yes'. I'm sure you understand my reluctance to use the M-word. All of the corporations that I was working with had legitimate security contracts, everything was completely legal."

"How can we be assured that your time spent as a soldier has not colored your responses to civilian problems?"

"The same way you can be sure that any other soldier returning home is safe for duty. I left the conflicts I participated in where they belong."

"What about your personal contacts? You seemed to know Mark Simmons quite well when he was found at the recent shootings at a Midtown printing company."

Sharon bites her lip for a second. "We met several years ago, before I joined the NYPD, and we had a brief relationship, but that's all it was. I hadn't seen him in years."

There's a brief pause before Kepley continues. "If you had such a successful career as a...security consultant, why work with the NYPD? Why would someone with your past and metahuman abilities choose to work in law enforcement?"

"Because I was tired of living in war zones and looking at little kids in terms of whether they could be trying to blow me up with a hand grenade. Because I was tired of getting up in the morning and checking my rifle before I could hit the shower. And because I think that, working with the NYPD, I can do good things instead of just keeping bad situations from becoming worse."

Chief of Internal Affairs Kyle Schultz finally speaks up. "And what about the future? What do you the rest of your career with the NYPD being like? Is this just another security consulting job for you?"

"No sir," Sharon says. "In fact, my colleagues and I have put in a petition with the SCU to normalize our employment situation. We are quite willing to work directly for the NYPD and shut down JS Consulting, if necessary. We - I - could find a cushy contract training police forces anywhere in the US in the tactics and methods we have developed here over the last three years. But we're still here, and we're here to stay. I'm here to stay, if you will allow me."

Sharon walks out of One Police Plaza to a cacophany of noise. On one side of the plaza, a crowd protesting her presence on the NYPD, and in some cases, metahumans in the department entirely. They're loudly booing her and shouting obscenities at her, now that she has been cleared for duty by the police review board.

On the other side are supporters of hers, metahumans and metahuman rights protesters, and in a sight that deeply moves her, at least a hundred or so uniformed members of the NYPD, metahuman

and otherwise, shouting, waving, and saluting her. She salutes them back, then looks for Jack and Chrome. She finds them standing over by Lt. Helsing. "Congratulations, Irene," he says. "It's great to have you back."

"It's great to be back, lieutenant. I'll see you at the station tomorrow."

"Bright and early," he says. "Now, I've got to go off and stand around at a press conference." He pushes off into the crowd, while Dante walks into the spot that Helsing previously occupied.

"Good show," he says, looking around. "Karen wanted to be here, but...you know, Sanctuary cleanup."

"How did that go?" Sharon asks.

"Better than could be expected," Dante says. "It turns out that most of Sanctuary's staff and soldiers were working for them on a strictly involuntary basis, and prisoners don't put up much of a fight when you free them. So, what now? Richard told me all about what happened last night. Do you really think that it's possible we have a rogue group of celestials causing havoc in New York City?"

"Az is sure of it," Sharon says. "Something was blocking his powers last night, and he's dead certain it was angelic in nature. Unless Heaven suddenly has a grudge against us, there's only one thing that could mean."

"They went to a lot of trouble to take out Mark, but ignored the rest of us," Jack says. "He must have known something that they didn't want the rest of us to find out."

"Or they thought he could have stopped them," Dante says.

"Or both," Sharon says. "Come on, people. We've got work to do."

Richwood, West Virginia
???

Mark stands on the path through the woods, looking out ahead at the road into town. After letting his eyes sweep the scene, he turns around and heads back towards the Simmons family home. The wind plays through the trees with a soft hum, and the songs of birds call in the distance. It's as good a spring as Mark has ever seen, and it puts a smile on his lips.

With every footstep he takes, echoes bounce through his mind - sounds, faces, shadows of things past. The hot kisses of the woman he loved all the way to the end. The screams, the eyes, all the gunshots he ever heard. The sadness when he left home. Shaking hands with the devil.

The smell of his mother's cooking doesn't hang in the air. He nods his head and opens the door. Sitting at a wooden table he made himself, Thomas Simmons has leaned back into his chair and is whittling a small toy from a piece of wood.

"The horse," Mark says, and Thomas looks up. "You gave me that horse for my fifth birthday."

"Hello, Mark," Thomas replies, putting the tool away. "It's strange what you remember, isn't it? Earliest thing I recall is when I was three - I was sick in bed. My mother made me eat so much hot soup, I thought I'd burst." He smiles. "But that's not important right now. This is about you."

"Funny," Mark says, as he pulls up a chair. "I thought it was all about you."

"I never told you about what you were meant to do," Thomas says, already aware of what Mark is playing at. "And maybe I should've."

"I ran away. You didn't get to see that."

"Oh, I saw that," Thomas says. "I wish I could've been there to tell you that, but I wasn't mad at you. I was in a bad place when my parents died, too. See, I thought I'd make everything right with you, bring you up as a good replacement so you'd pull through. I made you too hard."

"You made me hard enough to survive," Mark says.

"Surviving isn't enough, and you damn well know that, son." He looks at Mark. "But you're a better Paladin than I was. We're not meant to be happy, I think. Not built for it. We're weapons, and you're as fine a weapon as ever conceived. I just wish..."

"What?"

"That it didn't have to be like that, this choice I had to make. I knew you'd follow me. But if I hadn't brought you up like this...maybe there would've been room for love in your life, like there was in mine."

"There was love in my life, Dad," Mark counters. "Love killed me, and it was the best choice I ever made."

Thomas nods to that.

"Oh, getting involved with a demon," Thomas says. "You could have been a real straight arrow without her. Not fallen out of grace, not gone rogue, not gotten convinced that you should help humans instead of killing demons."

"Still," Mark says, sounding rueful, "my methods..."

"...are your choice. You think there's a better life out there for a different Mark? No, it's just different. People got saved, people got killed, but you did your job and that's what counts in my book. You can beat yourself up about it as much as you want to, but there's no one righteous path to walk, son." He smirks. "Besides, if they didn't like your style, they could have stopped you at any time."

"I don't know about that," Mark says. "Just because they allowed me to do it doesn't mean it was good."

"Heaven isn't always good," Thomas says, "and hell's not always evil, but I guess you found out about that yourself."

"Yeah, I did."

"But it ain't all grey, so don't go spouting any of this relativism nonsense at me now," Thomas says, "or I'll have to beat some sense into your ass."

"I'd like to see you try," Mark says, smiling. "I could take you, old-timer."

"Oh, we'll see about that. Now, you still got your weapons?"

Mark reaches under his coat and finds something.

"Yeah," he says.

"Don't need those anymore," Thomas says. "Lay 'em down. They're just burdens now."

"I haven't been without a gun in a long time," Mark says. He dilligently draws one of his USPs, takes the magazine out and clears the chamber. With a final move of his thumb, he uncocks it, and the gun shimmers into nothingness, along with Mark's coat and the rest of his arsenal. "Feels...better," he finally says.

"That's the weight of the world off your shoulders, Mark. Now, come on. I've got a sunset to show you and the trail won't hike itself."

"Up to Eagle Point?" Mark scoffs. "I could do that with a full pack and no shoes."

"Then keeping up with your old man won't be a problem, will it?" Thomas says, and gets up. Mark follows him.

"Dad?" he says.

"Yeah?"

Mark steps up to Thomas and wraps his arms around him. After a moment, Thomas returns the hug, and the two men embrace each other silently. Neither of them sees the tears in the other's eyes.

"Welcome home, son," Thomas says.