

Allen Family Home, Queens  
August 10th, 4:32 AM

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Joseph Allen can't sleep.

30 years now that he worked for the Department of Transportation. The guys in high school never did respect him for wanting to get into civil engineering; lots of studying and number-crunching, all to see your vision slashed to pieces by limited budget and the cheapest contractor scamming you on the materials. Besides, it'd be working for the government. Liking the government wasn't cool back then, and it never really came into fashion afterwards.

But Joe never cared about that. It wasn't glamorous, but he did his part. In thirty years, he never cheated the government out of anything. Didn't embezzle funds, or call in sick every week, or even steal some office supplies. Ever. Joe was a rock. He was the standard everyone else was measured against. Was.

They didn't fire him. Joe might have been able to deal with that blow, even if it meant doing something completely new. No. He's retired now. By God, he's made it through the treadmill of his working life, and on the first week of his pension status, he's already halfway up to killing himself.

As if the great machine he helped build doesn't need him any more. As if it's okay if he dies right now, having done his duty to make the world a bit better.

His wife doesn't know. She's sleeping in the bedroom. Joe told her he just wanted a glass of water. He didn't tell her he was considering a handful of sleeping pills to go with it. It's a bad time to do this, Joe thinks. Not with Steve staying here for the night. Kid just got his Master's. Civil Engineering, of course. Steve's a good kid, Joe thinks. He'll get the job done. And if he could just get the courage to ask Linda out - there's a nice girl if Joe's ever seen one.

Everything's so darn perfect, Joe thinks. He looks at the sleeping pills. He can't do it. Not now. Not ever. It'd break Rosie's heart, and his son...no. Joe sets the pills down and looks into the mirror.

Don't be stupid now, old man. You have so much to look forward to.

Drinking the water, he walks back into the bedroom and looks at his sleeping wife. *I can't believe I actually considered that*, he thinks. He's about to continue his inner monologue when he's interrupted by a large knife being placed across his throat.

"Don't make a sound," a voice behind him says. Next, a strange-smelling cloth covers his face, then nothing.

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Joe comes to, and the first thing he realizes is that his hands are tied behind his back. He looks over to his wife's side of the bed in panic, and what he sees there does nothing to improve his mood. Her throat is cut and her eyes are cut out, and her dress is soaked in blood. He looks back to see where the intruder is, but he doesn't see him. He starts jerking at his bonds in desperation and fear when the intruder reappears with a baseball bat in his hands.

"Don't fight, daddy," he says. Joe notices that tears are streaming down the man's face. "Mother hates it when you fight."

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Lt. Helsing's Office, SCU  
August 10th, 5:39 AM

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Helsing's already on the way out of his office when the phone rings; grunting to himself over the delay in getting another coffee, Ray moves back to his desk, takes a deep breath, then takes the call.

"Helsing."

"Lieutenant? We've got a triple homicide in Queens, and we're going to need your team here ASAP."

"Who are the victims?"

"Family of three."

"Metahuman?"

"Not as far as the neighbours know."

"Why are you calling me, then?"

"Have you ever seen a wall bleed?"

Allen Family Home, Queens

August 10th, 6:04 AM

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This, Ray Helsing thinks to himself, isn't what he wanted to see.

Jack is leaning over the bodies of the elderly couple bound to the bed, searching both of them for evidence before having them transported back to the morgue for autopsy. The view is sickening; the woman is bound spread-eagle and has blood on her nightgown in all the wrong places, with her eye sockets oozing out blood; the man's skull is caved-in, and the view of the rest of his body shows a forest of blue marks and not-so-subtly broken bones. Amongst the picture of this and the bloodstained bedsheets, the cuts along their throats are merely the coda on this symphony of cruelty.

"Real convenient that the wall is bleeding," Jack says. "Homicide didn't turn up anything, now they've passed the buck to us."

"This *is* the first incident with something paranormal involved, though. That's why SCU got tossed the case."

"A mysterious, violent serial murder case with metahuman connections that's already got national media attention? Gee, just what I wanted when I woke up this morning. Son's already shipped off to the morgue, by the way."

"Where's Cass?" Helsing checks his watch. "Where's the rest of your team, actually?"

"Interviewing the neighbors, seeing if anyone heard anything, which they didn't. Marcos and Hansen are on their way now to help out with CSI."

Helsing looks up at the wall and the bleeding cross. It's not actually flowing down the wall like he was expecting, more like a picture of a cross that's made in blood that sits on the wall in raised pricks.

"How the hell are we supposed to get that back to the lab?"

"Well, if it's like the other bleeding walls I've come across, you just cut the drywall out. I've already swabbed it for DNA. You never know what you'll find." Jack says.

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JS Consulting

August 10th, 8:01 AM

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Mark's breakfast has gone totally forgotten once more, because the Paladin is far too busy watching the morning news.

"...fourth case, bringing the total number of victims to 9. The NYPD have yet to issue a statement..."

Looking down on a legal pad, Mark furiously scribbles notes. Lying next to him on the couch, torn-out sheets of paper document prior incidents in a stream-of-consciousness way, haphazardly arranged in scraps of info as Mark found them.

"...suggests metahuman involvement."

Mark perks up.

"According to inside sources, a cross made of flowing blood appeared on a wall inside the apartment. Several police officers known to be involved with the Special Crimes Unit have already been spotted around the crime scene."

The news camera pans onto Ray Helsing talking to Sharon behind a police line; after noticing the attention, they both walk back inside the building, Helsing giving the cameraman a good glare.

"We will keep you up-to-date on this case as it develops."

Mark finishes his notes, then grabs the other sheets and puts them back into the pad.

"Beijing. Tensions between The People's Republic of China and Taiwan have been rising all week, sparked by the latest military exercise of the PLAN..."

With a click, Mark turns the TV off. He glances back down at the pad, then closes it and dumps it onto the table. He steals a last look at the pad, re-reading the label to remind himself why he's doing this.

### **Family Killer**

Special Victims Unit Squadroom

August 10th, 9:42 AM

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Jack, Chrome and Az are waiting in the bullpen at the SVU squadroom. "I don't know why you insisted on coming along to SVU," Jack says.

"I've got something of a rep with the two detectives that had this case before us," Az replies.

Detectives Chapell and Sheppard walk through the doors and approach the trio. "So you're the unlucky bastards who got stuck with this case?" Sheppard asks.

"Yeah, what do you two have for us?" Chrome says.

"A whole lot of nothing," Chapell replies. "This guy is smart. Usually, it takes one or two attacks for the unsub to really up his game, but this guy was wearing gloves from the word go."

"So prints are out," Jack says. "What about DNA?"

"That, we do have for you." Chapell hands him a lab report. "Twenty hairs, all with skin tags. The wife at the second scene managed to get ahold of the guy before he knocked her out. No hits on CODIS, though."

"You guys have the FBI run a profile?" Az asks.

"Yeah, after the third strike, but it's the standard serial killer profile bullshit, mid-30s to late 40s, white, loner, you get the idea," Sheppard says. "Everything you need to know is in here," he hands a file box to Jack, "and in here," he says, tapping his forehead.

"One more thing," Chrome asks. "How did you guys get this case?"

"First scene," Sheppard says, "fucker smothered two infants in their sleep. Twins." Chrome winces.

"Well, that's all for now. If we need anything, we'll give you guys a call." Jack walks towards the door with the box and Chrome.

Az hangs back. "I've got some catching up to do with these two," he says, "I'll be out in a bit."

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They walk into one of the interview rooms and close the door.

"What are you two still doing here? If I'd pulled that bullshit back in the Holston case, I'd have thanked my lucky stars I wasn't caught and gotten out, pronto."

"We did keep a low profile for a while, went straight mundane, but nothing really happened, so either the bosses upstairs didn't mind or don't know. Given who it is, we're thinking the former," Sheppard says.

"Just great. So, what exactly is going on upstairs? I'm kinda out of the loop."

"They're paying a lot more attention to what's going on down here, that's for sure," Chapell says.

"There's been a lot of activity on both sides recently. Don't know why, but something's got them spooked. Not a lot of fighting going on between the sides, though. It's weird."

"Thank you for the insightful commentary."

"There's more than that. Even before the recent big build-up, we kept on running into more of our players, recruiters, though. Looks like we're making a full-court press to get the metahumans on our side before whoever's coaching the other team these days does. They're not particularly happy that a group of neutrals is running the only real show in town when it comes to keeping the metahumans in check, either."

"Well, then they should've gotten into the game earlier. Not our fault they didn't start caring until it

became dangerous."

"All the same, I wouldn't be surprised if things started turning sour for you guys soon, one way or another."

"You say that like there was a time when we weren't in trouble."

"Yeah, but that was your own fault," Sheppard says. "Next time, try not dumping both of the big games in town and signing up with Lucifer. As for the badness, you'll know it when you see it. That's all we know."

"Well, thanks for the good news," Az says.

Police Forensics Lab

August 10th, 11:45 AM

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Jack and Az walk into the lab like they own the place, motioning for one of the techs to come over and answer their questions.

"Anything on the cross?" Jack asks as the lab technician scrambles through a pile of notes.

"It's...a cross. Made out of blood."

"I see why we keep you around. Anything else I already know?"

"We're still testing the blood, but it appears to be Type A. I think we can get a good DNA sample, but...we don't have a clue whose blood this is, so it's probably pointless."

"Do it anyway," Jack says. "Anything else?"

"Some mold on the drywall. Want that checked, too?"

Jack looks over to Az, who shrugs.

"Yes, that too."

"You guys have no idea, do you?"

"Not until **you** guys come up with something useful."

"Point taken. We'll call you."

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Walking through the precinct, Jack and Az navigate towards the squad room; Az fetches two cups of coffee while Jack sits down; shortly, the two enjoy their caffeine, but the mood is not greatly improved.

"Waste of time," Az says.

"There has to be something," Jack says. "You can't pull this shit and leave no trace."

"Oh, we've got traces, but are they useful? I was thinking you'd come up with some CSI trick to save the day."

"I'm a coroner, Az. I stick to the dead guy."

"Maybe there's something with the symbolism. Cross, blood of Christ, the Holy Grail."

Jack takes a sip of the coffee. "Maybe the guy likes shapes with a good ratio in them. Maybe it's a sideways X. Maybe space aliens told him to do it. Is that all the maybes we have? Because *maybe* it'll add up to something resembling a case."

"Easy, chief. Just sayin'. You're the genius, I'm your loyal celestial lackey with the lucky eyes."

"I just don't like being handed a case that is an absolute dead end." He looks at Az. "Why don't we throw this one at Mark, see what he can find?"

"Ask the spider what's buzzing in the net? Sounds good to me."

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JS Consulting

August 10th, 1:03 PM

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Jack and Az enter the basement to find Mark doing his fitness routine, working a punching bag with a series of haymakers.

"What does he owe you?" Az says.

Mark throws another punch, then grabs a towel and walks towards the two.

"You're wasting your lunch break. I'm on a roll right now, can't stop."

"Well, can you listen while you simulate acts of extreme cruelty?"

"You don't like my combo?"

"Mark," Jack says, "we've got a problem."

"You got the serial killer case. I saw you on TV. If you're talking to me, I'd imagine that you've hit a brick wall in the investigation."

"The perp doesn't leave useful traces. We have hair, and DNA, but I don't think we'll get a match."

"Fingerprints?"

"Nope," Az says.

Mark ponders that for a second, then walks back to the punching bag, working it with a few kicks.

"I don't need to tell you guys, but he's a newcomer. Probably snapped from something, and now he's on a spree."

"Yet he's got pro skills."

"This guy's not a pro," Mark says. "The crime scenes have emotion written all over them. You don't survive in the biz with that kind of fire in your guts."

"What do you know about the crime scenes?"

"There's a notepad on the couch."

Az walks over to the couch to fetch Mark's notes; the Paladin gives the bag a few quick kicks against imaginary shins.

"Where'd you get this?" Az asks as he flips through the pages.

"TV, newspapers, some conjecture, couple of things I heard on the streets."

"Think you can find out more?"

"Why? You already know all this stuff, don't you?"

"We're more interested in what you can find out from more unconventional sources."

"Oh. Unconventional. That sounds nice and big."

"Just go out there and shake the bushes. This guy didn't come from nowhere, and people this crazy aren't exactly subtle."

"I really do like spending my leave with you guys, but tell me, why should I care about this?"

"You already do," Az says, waving the notebook. "Only difference is, now you don't have to sneak it past us. You might even end up doing the right thing."

Mark ponders this, then towels off and walks to the couch to grab his gear.

"As long as we get the perp..."

Near Walton Avenue

August 10th, 1:54 PM

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"Now, watch the lady. The lady wins."

Nick Costaz smiles to his small crowd as he puts the Queen of Hearts onto the table and begins to shuffle the three cards around.

"It's not an optical illusion, folks, no cheating, the card is really there, all you have to do is keep your eyes on it." He finishes laying out the cards, then asks a woman from the crowd to step forward. "Your guess, Ma'am?"

"20 on middle."

With an inscrutable expression, Nick takes the woman's money and turns around the card in the middle - revealing the Jack of Diamonds.

"Sorry, Ma'am, but the Lady" - he turns the left card around - "was hiding here."

The crowd erupts into "Aww"s and boos, but Nick keeps his game face on.

"Now, now, people, you know the rules. It's a fair chance, 1 in 3. Come on, how difficult can it be? Watch the lady!"

He shuffles the cards again, lays them out, then spots a dollar bill being put on the card in the middle. Looking up from the table, he sees Mark in the crowd, smiling.

"Uh, okay folks," Nick says, now visibly nervous, "game's over for today. You can take your cash, Sir."

Mark smiles and pockets the dollar, then walks off while the crowd still argues with Nick.

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Five minutes later...

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Mark's leaning against the corner of the dark alley as Nick walks by; he falls into step next to the small Italian hustler.

"Long time no see," Mark says.

"What do **you** want?"

"I need some info."

"It's 2 in the afternoon, I don't cheat, we agreed that I don't owe you shit."

"Come on, now, Nick, that's not fair. I'm not here to extort you."

"Does that 'not' mean what I think it means? Because I think it means 'definitely'."

"It's a real not this time."

"Whoop-de-fucking-do, Mister, you got some balls showing up like that and just asking for shit without sticking a gun in my face."

"I'm done sticking guns in faces for the mob, Nick. We're on the same side now."

"Yeah, that's real funny from the guy who hunted us down like animals in the 80s. Everything you ever got from me, you got through threats. So don't come to me all kissy-face now and ask for favors."

Mark rolls his eyes; negotiating with gang members always gets down to who pissed off whom back in the days...

"Would 2 grand change your mind?"

"2 grand?"

Mark smiles as he pulls out a wad of cash.

"2 grand," Nick says. "But you'd better say something Smiles will like."

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Sitting across the table from Mark, Tyrese "Smiles" Jowett watches the Paladin with suspicious grey eyes, the mixed gang membership of the Fort Charles Rollers reminding Mark of "Ebony & Ivory" and all the bad memories that come associated with that period of time.

"You just roll in here, old man, and now you want our help?" Smiles says.

"Basically."

"Fuck you."

"Yeah, that's what I expected."

"You can't push us around no more, motherfucker. We may have been kids back then, but now we're in the game. The Tong? They're still trying to figure out what NYC is all about, you hear? And your precious little mob is tearing itself apart."

"I'm not with the mob."

"And you're not with the Yellow Leaf, either? Nicky says you've been getting awfully cozy with them."

"I'm my own man now."

That brings a laugh from the crowd; Mark looks around to see some of the gang members moving to cover the exits while Smiles's smile goes from marginal to nonexistent.

"I should have my boys kill you right now."

"That'd be stupid, Smiles."

"Naw, I think that'd be real smart, whitebread. Nobody's covering your ass anymore, so that means we get to ream it. Ain't nobody gonna cry for you no more."

Mark's eye twitches behind his shades; the mirrored sides of the glasses allow him to see one of the gang members behind him reach for his 9mm. With a quick move and a flash of thunder, Mark's USP rests on his shoulder, the gangsta holds his arm in pain, and Smiles facefaults.

"I'm not here to fuck you," Mark says, with steel in his voice, "I'm gonna ask you some questions. And then I'll walk away. But let me tell you one thing: right now, we're the closest to even you're gonna get. Don't push it. You try to take your petty revenge, I'll have your kneecaps. All of your kneecaps. You guys got that?"

Some gang members still look at Mark in shock; others do their best to keep their hands away from their guns.

"Not kids anymore, eh, Smiles?"

"Fuck you."

"You're repeating yourself, and I don't have time for this shit. You ready to listen?"

"...go on."

"I'm looking for a guy, real head case, kills families. Some sorta metahuman powers, maybe a mage. Sick fuck."

"So what do we care?"

Mark reaches into his trenchcoat, the pulls out a photo and puts it on the table.

"I think that one's from your hood."

Smiles looks at the photo, anger rising to his face.

"Sick motherfucker. Yeah, we heard 'bout that."

"Oh, you didn't just hear. You listened."

"So we did. What's it to you?"

"I'm gonna find this asshole."

"Them's big words, killer."

"You know I'm gonna deliver. You want this guy gone, so do I. What I need is some info from you."

Smiles leans back and considers the issue, then turns to one of the gangstas.

"Tell him what you saw, Ant."

The kid steps forward, all 17 years of impotent rage bundled up in a self-made hardcore teenage gangsta.

"I was cruising after a game when I saw this guy jump the fire escape. Looked like a whitey, couple years older than me, slick motherfucker. I thought he was one of those crack fiends, so I stopped my ride and went after him, but the man was ghost when I got to the stairs. I cussed, because I hate it when people steal in our hood, then I heard the russling from above. Motherfucker was up on the goddamn wall, like he's waiting for me to turn my back. I reach for my Glock, he jumps down the other side. I recognised his face, man. That was Steel."

"Steel?"

"Back in the day," Smiles says, "couple of whitebreads started their own gang. Buncha pansies, but this one guy - we called him Steel -, that was one cold motherfucker, just 13, but already getting in fights and winning a lot of them; tough kid. Sent my brother to the goddamn hospital with five cracked ribs. Fucker loved his baseball bat. We saw him a couple times with his family going to the church. Dad looked all serious in his Sunday suit, so I guess this guy learned how to hurt people from personal experience. I'm talking caning, belt whipping, all the good stuff. Boy had scars, most of 'em not from any fights he got into on the street."

"You know where he is now?"

"You'd think he'd still be running around if we did? His family moved out couple years ago, we were just glad to be rid of the asshole."

"Anything else?"

"I can show you where he used to live," Ant says, "but that's not gonna tell you where he is now."

Mark smiles grimly.

"You'd be surprised."

Condemned apartment building

August 10th, 2:13 PM

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With surgical gloves covering his rough hands, Mark digs through the remains of a family's existence in an abandoned apartment. Even if the family themselves didn't take everything of value with them, other, more opportunistic people did the job for them. The only thing left to search after fifteen minutes of scoping out the apartment is a dustbin in the kitchen.

He takes off his coat and rolls up his sleeves, then begins to sift through the garbage, finding a handful of remains from the family's last dinner, teabags, a small bottle of liquor and, most surprisingly, a photo. It appears to depict the family - father, mother and son on a trip to Coney Island, standing in front of a popcorn vendor with stilted cheerfulness.

The son isn't smiling. Mark is.

*Got you.*

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Mark takes the stairs back towards the street with a spring in his step, now in full-swing hunting mode. Automatically, he grabs his cell phone from the coat and dials Jack's number.

"Schaefer."

"Mark here."

"What?"

"Just checking in. I put out the word, so if the city knows this guy, we should have some info soonish."

"About what?" Jack sounds tired and confused over the phone.

"The family killer. You wanted me to stick my nose into that, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, that. Look, Mark, we've got a big problem we're dealing with right now, so...well, you keep on looking into that, but it's gonna have to go onto the back-burner for the time being." Jack hangs up the phone.

Mark pockets the cell phone.

Looks like this is his case now.

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Corner of Avenue of the Americas and 46th Street

August 10th, 2:37 PM

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Jack puts his cell phone back in his pocket and turns back to the crime scene. *Well, this is probably the worst-case scenario*, Jack thinks.

On the street corner in front of him, surrounded by police officers keeping the throngs of tourists and other curious onlookers at bay, are two dead bodies, both metahumans. The fist-sized holes in their chests makes plain the way they were killed. Parked next to the sidewalk are a squadron of police cars and ambulances, checking the bystanders for injury and then questioning them about what they might have seen.

Chrome walks up in front of Jack, startling him. "Hey, I'm not the one who went to medical school here," she says. "Can we get them out of here before we go live on the 6:00 news?"

Jack shakes himself out his thoughts. "Yeah, they're fine." He walks over to Az, who's attempting to



find any physical evidence at the scene. "Any luck?"

"I'm sorry, but I doubt that even the Big Guy himself could find anything here. It's like trying to pick one drop of water out of the East River."

"Alright." He pulls his cell phone back out and hits the PTT button. "Sharon, how's it going with the witnesses? Tell me someone got a perfect look at his face and knows who they are so we can arrest them now and save us a month of headache."

"No go," she says. "All anyone remembers is that they were walking down the street when they hear one, two, four, eight, or twenty huge explosions, and then one, two, three, or eight people fall down with knife wounds, gunshot wounds, and their heads missing, or not."

"Great." Jack puts his phone away again. **Now this is the worst-case scenario.**

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Special Crimes Unit Squadroom  
August 10th, 3:10 PM  
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The team arrives back at the squadroom to see what's the closest to absolute bedlam that they've ever seen in a police station. All the desks have been moved into a row in the center of the room and are filled with detectives and officers manning a huge line of phones for the tip line. Others are setting up a series of cork boards and white boards along one wall, and still more people are bringing in more stuff.

Helsing pokes his head out of his office. "You four, get in here!" he shouts above the noise. They all work their way over to his office, and once inside, the sound levels are lessened, but it's still obvious that the squad has been put into high gear.

"I assume that we have absolutely nothing," Helsing says.

"It's a little early to say, sir," Chrome starts to say.

"Two metahumans gunned down in the middle of Midtown, right in the middle of Dick and Jane from Des Moines trying to find their way to buy Broadway tickets? They were both shot in the back with a sawed-off shotgun, and I know that we didn't find any shells at the scene because everyone from the Chief on down has been calling me every five minutes asking why we haven't found any shells at the scene yet. Witness are completely useless, and we have no physical evidence." He sits down in his chair. "Do we have any progress on the family murders?"

"No sir," Chrome says.

"The press has totally shifted gears. Some run of the mill serial killer just isn't as exciting as a guy who guns down two metahumans in broad daylight. They're already calling it the hate crime of the decade. I hate to do this, but I'm pulling you from the family murders and getting you on this one."

"Sir..."

"You have any solid leads on the family murders?"

Jack bites his lips. "Not yet, Sir."

"That trail is cold," Helsing says. "Start on our shotgun fanatic. We can't afford to let that guy slip away."

Special Crimes Unit  
August 10th, 5:58 PM  
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The team is standing in front of one of the whiteboards that they wheeled into a side room.

"And if we have the sweep extend to 40th Street, we can probably cover as far as anyone could have run within five minutes of the attack. How many officers are we gonna need for that?" Jack asks.

"If you want to get it done before our perp dies of old age, seven or ten," Sharon says.

Jack shakes his head. "Well, put in the request."

Helsing sticks his head into the room. "The 6:00 news is just starting," he says.

"Here we go," Az says with rolling eyes as the assembled crowd filters into the squad room for TV watching. The TV is surrounded by detectives and officers. Someone turns up the set as the segment on the murders comes on.

"The big story tonight is a violent double murder of two metahumans in Midtown today," the

anchorwoman says, her voice pleasantly flat. The view cuts to a reporter standing outside the empty circle of police tape at the scene.

"At the corner of 46th Street and Avenue of the Americas, a metahuman couple, Dorothy Buford and Ted Horne, were viciously gunned down today. They were standing at this street corner when an unknown individual snuck up behind them and fired two shots from a shotgun, killing both of them instantly. This would be a disturbing crime any day of the year, but this station has recieved a letter addressed from the killer, dropped off at our front desk."

Helsing turns around. "Oh, this should be good...Somebody call those jokers and get that letter, STAT!"

The screen shows a low-res scan of the letter, with superimposed white letters quoting several passages and read by a neutral voice-over.

*I killed them both, and you're damn right that I'll kill more of them - just as you should. Them, them, who are they? All we know is that they're "metahumans".*

...

*This is not a social problem. It's an invasion.*

...

*It is a grisly thing, but it must be done.*

The anchorwoman composes herself and clears her throat; Sharon smiles grimly, resigned to the inevitable.

"Wait for it...wait for it..."

"And if you have any tips for the investigators in this case," the anchorwoman says, "call the NYPD tip line at the toll-free number on the screen."

Everyone in the room groans at once.

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Three hours later...

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"Thank you, Ma'am," Az says, then hangs up the phone's receiver and buries his face in his hands.

"I don't know much about this case, but Bigfoot didn't kill those two," he says, but the rest of the team is too busy with their own phonecalls to take much notice of the angel's frustration. Az leans back and jerks his neck back into a more natural-looking position, the slight creaking from his spine all part of the movement.

The phone rings again. Az looks at the holster of his gun hanging over a chair across the room and briefly asks himself whether there are alternatives to his current occupation.

"NYPD SCU, this is Detective Marcos speaking," Az says.

"He will kill again, Detective. Tomorrow, on the Avenue of Americas."

"Sir, this line is reserved for witness reports on shootings that have already happened..."

"You don't understand. To me, all this is already the past, immutable. I am merely playing my part in telling you that."

"I'm going to hang up now, Sir."

"I knew you would say that."

Az hangs up. The gun's starting to look really good...

"Aliens?" Sharon says, her frustration a tad more outgoing than Azuriel's quiet suffering. "Ma'am,

we're fairly sure that nobody from Ceti Alpha Five would come all this way and only have a sawed-off to show for it...yes, Ma'am, it was a shotgun...well, if you think we faked that, why are you calling? Ma'am?"

She slams down the receiver. "That makes another Grey. Cass, you keepin' score?"

Chrome wedges the receiver of her phone in between her head and shoulder, swivels her chair around to a wall-mounted blackboard and adds a chalk mark to the "Aliens" column.

"Ooh, E.T. is gaining," Az says; Jack shoots him an annoyed glance while furiously scribbling down details on his notepad.

"Okay, let me go over that again," he says, "caucasian male, 26 years old, long brown hair, wears jeans and a Grateful Dead t-shirt...wait, his name? How do you know his name? Ma'am, please, this is important, where do you know his name from?...Ma'am, I'm just trying to solve this case...Ma'am, if you insist on being abusive, I will hang up. I'm hanging up now, Ma'am."

He puts down the receiver.

"Does everyone in this city have an ex?"

"Well, not everyone...but I think the age median is somewhere in the 30s, so Joe Average has someone to be bitter about, yes."

"Smartass. How many of them are trying to get their ex convicted for a double murder?"

"Cass?"

Chrome swivels once more.

"14 in the last three hours."

"15 now," Jack says.

Chrome struggles to add another mark to the tally.

"No, Sir, I'm still here," she says, "I'm sorry, I was talking to my colleagues...Sir, just stay calm, you can tell me...you did what? Sir, can you repeat that?"

Everyone in the room focusses on Chrome, who frantically scribbles down details.

"Sir, please stay on the line...Sir, yes, I need to know where you are right now...stay where you are. Can you...stay where you are, Sir, I'll send someone to pick you up. Yes, Sir, I'm afraid it's not looking good for you, but you're doing the right thing...yes, I can stay on the line if you want to...Sir, you can tell us all this in writing, when you write the conf...a 9mm? Oh, right, yes, a Glock 7. Yes, Sir, they'll be right there. I'm hanging up now, Sir."

She lowers the receiver and addresses the rest of the room.

"Well, he shot them with an imaginary gun, I guess that's new."

"Too much Bruce Willis?" Az asks.

"Happens all the time," Sharon says. "Don't confess to things movie villains did, that's always bad for your credibility."

The phones keep ringing; Az picks up his.

"NYPD SCU, Detective Marcos speaking..."

"Yeah. Listen, Detective, about that shooting on the Avenue..."

"I'm listening."

"I saw this guy waltz into Central Park, right by The Pond. He was wearin' shades and a coat and all that jazz, and then I saw him pull out a gun - and he dumped it right into that trashcan over there, you know, next to that bench."

"A gun?"

"Looked like a shortie to me."

"Thank you, Sir. Anything else you can tell me?"

"Yeah, I think he was wearing a grey coat. I'm sorry, it just happened so fast..."  
"That's okay, Sir. We're grateful for any hints."  
"Gotta run."

The line goes dead. Az takes a second to process the info, then turns to Cass.

"Cass, jog my memory. The guy who dropped off the letter at the front desk of Channel 4...what was the description?"  
"All they could agree on were shades and a grey coat."

Az looks at Jack.

"Worth a shot. When do they empty the trash?"  
"How am I supposed to know?"  
"Cass..."  
"I'll call them."  
"Good," Jack says. "If there's a pickup in the evening scheduled, do your worst to delay it. Raph, Irene, we're going dumpster diving."

Sharon groans.

"I hate it when you say that..."  
Central Park  
August 10th, 10:38 PM  
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Walking slowly towards The Pond, Sharon's eyes dart across potential hiding places, her night vision cranked up to full power. The earbud spews forth endless lines of tactical details as the ESU teams slowly set up shop in nearby buildings to cover her. She knows that Az and Jack lurk nearby in the Interceptor, waiting to chase down the perp if he tries to flee by car.

The trap is turning around.

Several vagrants have made the benches their own; it's not pretty to look at, but the Central Park at night rarely is. Sharon stops her approach and hunkers down, scanning the area for possible ambush locations.

*Probably long-distance shots from the buildings...don't see any place a guy with a sawed-off could hide nearby - unless he's dressed like one of the bums.*

She doesn't like that thought.

As her sweep comes to a close, she spots a man in a ruffled suit walking towards one of the trashcans.

---

Jessie Bones is back in trouble, but that's not news. Oh, sure, he held out a couple of months, trying to keep a steady job, but in the end, they all watched him like hawks and got rid of him.

But he does have nice clothes to show for it.

He acknowledges the other homeless with a knowing nod; he probably never met any of them, and if he did, he couldn't remember, but at least he understood them. Central Park wasn't safe at night; bundling together would help their chances.

Jessie's stomach grumbles. It's been too long since he's treated himself to a decent meal, trying to save up money to skip town altogether and try his luck somewhere else; his glance at a nearby trashcan reveals wrappers from a nearby Fast-Food joint, so with a bit of luck, he could find something edible.

He walks up to the trashcan, then notices something glinting in there. Curious, he reaches into the can and grabs it.

---

Sharon watches from a distance, her mind racing. If the tip was genuine, that bum could be ruining their case right now; on the other hand, he'd probably not be the first to fondle it.

If it's there, that is. What with the fishy nature of the call, chances are excellent it never was there to begin with...but that's a chance they can't overlook.

The fuzziness of the whole situation collapses into a stable waveform when the vagrant goes down, clutching his arm. Sharon's already sprinting towards him when she hears the gunshot.

"All units, shots fired, I repeat, shots fired!"  
"10-4, DT, searching for the sniper..."

Sharon reaches the bum by the time the sniper realizes that she's the target; a second shot rings out, impacting her center of mass, and the demoness crumbles into a roll before getting up again, noticeably shaken but still ready to rock. Reaching into her jacket, Sharon pulls out her badge and begins to shout.

"NYPD! Everybody get down!"

The next shot hits her arm, forcing her to drop the badge.

*Fucker!*

Disregarding the badge, she sprints over to Jessie, tackles him to the floor and rolls on top of him, shielding his body from further shots. Sure enough, the next round hits her in the back, but now that she's stiffened her wings, torso hits shift more towards the "painful annoyance" end of the injury scale.

"Stay down! Stay down!"

The earbud comes live again.

"We've got a fix on the building, we're going in..."

The shots stop. Sharon keeps lying on top of the vagrant for a minute, then slowly gets up. Jessie squirms on the ground, still clutching his arm.

"And send a goddamn ambulance!" Sharon shouts into the radio.

*They'd better catch him now.*

---

Brandishing their MP5s like they mean business, the ESU team sweeps the office building floor by floor, the occasional glimpse out of a window leading to that 5th Avenue vertigo that doesn't seem to correlate with the actual height.

Then somebody triggers the fire alarm.

The team spreads out, frantically trying to get the situation under control, but in a minute, a veritable torrent of paralegals and stock traders in expensive suits filters down the various fire stairs, running for their very lives - or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

Still sweeping the hallways, one of the ESU officers happens upon a closed fire door; the alert hasn't triggered on that one, so it should be empty...but upon listening, he clearly hears a door swinging open inside. The officer opens the door, noting with faint horror that the alert still doesn't trigger;

looking down the stairs, he spots a figure several stories below just making his exit through a backdoor.

"NYPD! Freeze!"

The man is gone.

Sprinting down the stairs at maximum clip and calling in his colleagues, all the ESU guys find is an open door, a tampered alarm system and footprints leading to a manhole.

"We've got a runner, DT."

"How'd you miss him?" Sharon says.

"He had a staircase all to himself for the getaway."

"Okay. You guys secure the area, we'll call in CSI. I reckon they'll be interested in the roof and the doorknobs..."

Bedford Hills Correctional Facility

August 11th, 2:39 PM

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Sitting across from Sabrina Smith, Mark's busy morning - haircut, fresh ID, new clothes, shopping for librarian glasses - comes to its conclusion in the face of one woman's disbelief.

"You're a reporter?"

"Freelancer," Mark says. "Ms. Smith, I have reason to believe that your son is involved in the recent killing spree..."

"Vic was always a troubled boy," Sabrina says. "He ran away, once. They caught him begging in Central Park. I was...I was so glad when they brought him back, but then I thought, I shouldn't have taken him back."

"Ma'am, I know this is difficult for you, but the more I know about your son, the faster we can find him."

"He's out there now, isn't he? Doing all those twisted things while we talk about him."

"...yes."

"I...I don't want to seem like a bad person, I'm not, but I just can't stand it here anymore. All those...those monsters around me. All these women, all these - these *killers* -, and I sit right next to them. I need to get out."

"Ma'am..."

"I **have** to!"

She recomposes herself while Mark looks on, doing his best to seem impassive.

"Your lawyer is still working on getting the conviction overturned, isn't he?" Mark says.

"He's a friend of the family," Sabrina says. "He says that I wasn't in my right mind when I did it."

"And yet you're serving 25 to life for second degree murder."

"I...I killed my husband. I just wanted to protect Vic."

Mark's face softens slightly.

"Tell you what. I'll leave my business card with your lawyer, and a contribution to your...legal defense fund. In return, you call me and tell me everything you know about Vic. Hobbies, friends, where he lived when you last saw him...anything."

"And you'll call the cops on him, then?"

"Yes."

"I understand."

She lowers her head, the last vestiges of youthful glow gone from her expression.

"I slit his throat," she says. "I grabbed the razorblades from the bathroom, and then I went into his room and slit his throat." She looks at Mark. "You do everything to protect your kid."

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Sanctuary Field HQ, New York City

August 11th, 2:56 PM

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In a third-story apartment overlooking the Hudson River, the very ideas of a bachelor pad and a high-tech stakeout have collided and merged into a new platonic idea; stacks of empty pizza boxes and military-grade experimental coffee brews share the room with a camera tripod and a gun rack. As the guy currently on stakeout duty, Scramble parks his lean frame in a fold-out chair and grabs a nearby energy bar. Scramble is the kind of guy who screams "world-weary rifleman"; physically fit, mentally shrunk to a self-induced stupor that lets him survive the dullness of everything non-combat. Even against his "typical" looks - brown hair, everyman face - his blue eyes seem dull and without spark.

He takes a bite, but the second attempt is stopped cold when the satellite phone blinks. Vaguely disaffected by the ongoing stakeout, Scramble briefly considers his options, then takes the call.

Five minutes later, Scramble - well - *scrambles* into the next room, waking up the rest of his team. There are no words; instead, one of the guys - small, bald, creepy - lays his right hand onto everyone's chest, in order; after all four are prepared thusly, Scramble walks back to the other room and picks up the phone, his eyes glowing mildly and his speech a cacaphony of voices.

"Legion understands."

SCU Squad Room

August 11th, 3:00 PM

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Sharon walks into the room, hiding her tired eyes behind shades. After getting back from the Central Park shootout in the middle of the night, the team barely had time for a few hours of sleep before being dragged back out to work.

Instead of the usual friendly nods, or even just acknowledgement of her taking a couple of bullets to protect the innocent, uphold the law and serve the public trust, people clear their seats as she walks by. Spotting one of the lab techs, she walks directly towards him, cornering him before even noticing that he's trying to put some distance between himself and her.

"Something the matter?" Sharon says, slowly but surely getting tired of the new attitude.

"I'm...look, don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not going to be here when you flip out."

"...excuse me, that sounded like something I should hurt you for. Begin again."

"That's **not** funny. You just stay back, okay?"

Finally, he pushes past her and heads for the door; Sharon fumes internally for a second, then turns around and addresses the room.

"Answers. Now."

The reply doesn't come as words. Instead, a lone finger points to the morning's newspaper, all crumpled over one desk. Sharon takes off her shades, grabs the rag and opens the front page.

*Monster in our Middle?*

The headline sits there, accompanied by a file photo of her and what looks like a grainy shot of a demon flying over the New York skyline - probably Susan. Reading further, she spots another letter to the editor included in the article, reads it, then settles into screaming incoherently.

The volume of that doesn't help any in fixing her reputation.

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*It was rather easy to set up a trap for the SCU; best and brightest indeed.*

*Or maybe it's because they're all metahumans. Once more, the state shows that all it can use is brute*

*force; who better to distribute it than a sanctioned squadron of killers with unnatural powers?*

*You may ask how you can see this corruption; surely it must be hidden, somehow. But it's not. It's blatantly obvious. Find attached the photo of a creature that stalked our city months ago. We've seen them before. Some call them The Others. They are abominations no matter the name.*

*Detective Irene Hansen is one of them.*

*And yet you still pay your taxes to the people who send her (it?) after your brothers...*

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SCU Press Room  
August 11th, 4:30 PM

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With the SCU in full damage control mode, there's only one thing to do about the press - confront them. A veritable army of journalists (or atleast, as many as could be fit into the room) wobbles through the room, eager to get every photo and soundbite they can from the elusive SCU members.

Helsing, Jack and Sharon step in; the Lt. takes the podium amidst a thunderstorm of camera flashes.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the press," he begins, "the Special Crimes Unit has invited you to this press conference to talk about the recent allegations against one of our members; specifically, that Detective Irene Hansen is of a metahuman species labelled 'The Others'. Our statement on this matter is short."

He pauses briefly for effect.

"These allegations are absolutely true."

Cutting off the stream of questions, Helsing raises his hand as if to silence them for a moment.

"Please, ladies and gentlemen, one at a time. I'll do my best to answer your questions..."

"Why does the NYPD employ such a dangerous type of metahuman, particularly in a investigative role, while armed?"

"Detective Hansen is one of our best detectives. Her qualifications and service record speak for themselves. I assure you that there is no cause for concern over her metahuman powers. In the past, she has conducted herself with the utmost respect and caution for the public's well-being."

"Can we see the wings?"

"I'm not even going to dignify that question with an answer."

"Why did you choose to keep this...little detail...from the public?"

"We completed a full and extensive background check on all employees of JS Consulting before we contracted them and took the unusual step of giving them peace officer status and rank, and we did not find a single incidence of the violence and other issues that you, the press, seem to be insinuating, and as previously stated, she has conducted herself in a completely professional manner during the entirety of her employment with the NYPD. The question of her metahuman powers in this context is as relevant to us as her religious preference or her favorite color."

"What is the NYPD going to do to protect the public from any possible risks arising from Detective Hanson's status as one of the 'Others'?"

"I don't see what possible risks you are inferring here - perhaps, if you could go into detail..."

"The most well-known case on record is one handled by Detective Hanson herself, involving Susan



Hartwick, who was killed during her apprehension for the murders of several individuals more than a year ago. Victims were found mutilated and hung from overhead wires and fire escapes with extensive internal damage. What is the NYPD preventing her from causing this kind of harm to others?"

"Are you implying that Detective Hansen is a sociopath?"

"I'm implying that there is a history of metahumans like her being tremendously dangerous to the public, and our readers believe that something should be done to prevent her from harming others."

"By that standard, we should be more worried about our human detectives, don't you think? After all, we have documented evidence of violent antisocial behaviour from humans going back a few thousand years."

"But she is much more dangerous than a single human being. Once again, what is being done to protect the public?"

"We, and the rest of the NYPD, believe that Detective Hanson is not only a valuable member of New York's finest, but poses no significant risk to the public safety. She has never, not once in her life, had the kind of outburst that you are all so afraid of, and we believe she never will. Thank you ladies and gentlemen." Helsing steps away from the podium and walks out of the room, followed by Jack and Sharon.

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SCU Squad Room  
August 11th, 4:44 PM

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They arrive back into the squadroom, where the entire squad is sitting around the desks, watching the press conference on TV. They all turn to them when they walk back in. Half of them are silently nodding their approval of what was said, the other half still eyeing Sharon nervously, as if she could take their heads off at any moment. They keep on walking into Helsing's office.

"Thanks for having my back out there," she says.

"It's not all sunny for you right now," Helsing says. "You're on inactive duty until you complete a psych eval by a department psychologist."

Sharon looks like she's about to shout for a second, then finds her center again.

"You think this will stop when the shrinks clear me?"

"It's the best we can do now, I'm afraid. We have to show them that we take the concerns seriously. Besides, the less exposure you get outside, the sooner this will die back down."

"What about the case?" Jack asks.

"You'll have to make do with the rest of the team," Helsing says. "I know, it's exactly what our perp wants. I'm not happy about it, either, but at the moment we're walking a PR tightrope. The sooner we get this sorted, the sooner you'll be back out there hunting the bastard. Questions?"

"No."

"...no."

"Then let's get to it. The sniper won't catch himself."

WNYX News Radio

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BM: "Welcome back to Open Forum, our debate and discussion segment here on WNYX, I'm Bill McNeil, your host for today. Today, we're talking about the recent double-murder and attack on police detective Irene Hanson, and the controversy surrounding these crimes. Joining me is assistant district attorney Karen Ayers, who is the lead prosecutor for the New York County DA's office Special Crimes Bureau and a noted advocate of metahuman rights, and Craig Sherman, the chairman of the Bonham Institute's work group on metahuman activities. Welcome, Miss Ayers, Mr. Sherman. The first question, and obviously the one that's on everyone's minds: Why? Why are these attacks resonating with the public?"

CS: "The uncertainty of it all plays a big part in that, Bill. We don't know nearly enough about

metahumans. Sure, we're having this debate right now, but many people feel that there's a lot of talk and no solutions. In that climate, any direct action - even if it is violence - is bound to get a reaction."

KA: "There is a lot of latent fear in the general population, on both sides of this issue. A great deal of the metahumans that I talk to regularly are in just as much fear, if not more, than the non-metas that I deal with, as they're afraid of not just what the average person on the street is going to do to them, but of what the government is going to do as well. They do agree that there must be some kind of solution, but we're afraid that the solution will be detrimental to our rights as citizens."

BM: "Well, what to you think of this statement made in an editorial today from the New York Post: 'Now, I'm not saying that I support the killing of innocent people, but I do think that it's about time that they felt some of what it's like to be normal in today's society.'"

KA: "I think that it's both saddening and frustrating. Hate crimes against metahumans have doubled those for all other criteria for the past three years. Metahumans know fear every time they go outside their front doors. Metahuman children are more than 50% more likely to develop emotional problems such as depression than other children, mostly because of how they are treated by society. Why someone would wish that upon us is beyond me."

CS: "But what do we do about the fear? It's uncertainty and paranoia. The only way we can get rid of that is to do more research into the metahuman condition, and finally acknowledging that we need to treat human and metahuman as different. There are special needs that we have to provide for with metahumans, and the sooner we can replace the fear that our neighbours have powers with the knowledge that our neighbours have powers, the sooner we can deal with the problem."

KA: "And how exactly would you propose to do this?"

CS: "Obviously, metahuman registration and reporting would be a necessary step. We have gun control, and yes, I know that metahumans are not living weapons, but they can be dangerous to themselves and others, especially if they don't know about their powers or how to control them. Actually, I think this could be done together with a national ID card, something that I believe would be a major boon to our internal security in general. Many European nations have had such systems for a long time, and the big privacy crackdown there just hasn't happened..."

KA: "What possible purpose would this serve than to highlight innocent citizens for prosecution by their neighbors and by the police? There have already been instances of harassment by both the authorities and by other individuals towards known metahumans. How does your system provide for our safety?"

CS: "I take hate crimes against metahumans very seriously, Ms. Ayers, but in the interest of public security, we have to know when somebody with potentially destructive powers walks into a vulnerable location. We don't let people walk into schools or banks with guns, either."

KA: "Yes, because we know that when someone pulls a gun, points it at someone, and pulls the trigger, it will hurt or kill someone. But you can't point at a metahuman, me, for example, and say that I will hurt someone simply because I'm a metahuman."

CS: "When can you tell? Do I have to wait until your eyes start glowing before I run for cover?"

BM: "Now, Mr. Sherman..."

CS: "Seriously, we have a whole police department for metahuman crimes and they're armed to the teeth, and it's staffed by metahumans. Clearly, somebody up there in the food chain knows how dangerous and out-of-control metahumans can be. I think it's reckless to just let that situation stand. And I do wonder, how many more Others does the SCU have up their sleeves? Are they gearing up for open warfare while you preach flowers and sunshine?"

KA: "I work with the members of the SCU on a daily basis, and especially with the outside consultants that you are referring to, and they believe as I do, that the vast majority of metahumans are peaceful, law-abiding citizens, and those that are not are just your average criminal, looking to make a fast buck or get their next fix, not overthrow the government."

CS: "Right, because a couple crooks with Glocks blow up the Love Towers every other Sunday."

KA: "That, as you well know, was an isolated incident caused by a radical group that has since been dismantled by the efforts of the very same detectives that you seek to brand as co-conspirators with the worst of the metahumans."

CS: "How many rogue groups do we dismantle before we admit that there might be a problem? Power corrupts, plain and simple. It's clear as day, and yet there's people who are still stuck in 90s psycho-babble wondering where things went terribly wrong, while we are researching ways to protect ourselves."

KA: "So you propose treating all metahumans as if they're just as dangerous as the ones that attacked Love Towers."

CS: "I treat all guns as if they were loaded, that's common sense."

KA: "What would you propose we do, then? 24 hour police surveillance? House arrest? Tracking bracelets? Forcing them to register with the local precinct as a danger to their neighbors? Where does it stop?"

CS: "Now that's just liberal scaremongering..."

KA: "How do you propose we deal with these loaded living weapons, then, before one of us goes off?"

CS: "Simple. We're working on tamper-evident bracelets. You wear them, people will know what you can do. It's the only fair solution. People have to know if you have powers, and if yes, what they are...this is a simple solution, it's cheap, it's effective."

KA: "Why not have them wear a yellow letter 'M'? It'd be cheaper and easier to impliment. All this does is single out metahumans for persecution."

CS: "I'm not going to dignify that with a response."

KA: "Why not? It's a perfectly reasonable next step. By forcing metahumans to be publicly identified as such, you're making them second-class citizens. Attacks against metahumans will skyrocket, and we won't be able to go outside our own doors for fear of being lynched."

CS: "So what? You'd rather have us all afraid that a random rampage will ruin our cities and kill our loved ones? This isn't about civil rights - if you're going to make any analogies here, we should go straight to nuclear proliferation..."

KA: "I get it, we'll just call metahumans guilty until proven innocent and lock them all up, save the taxpayers the expense of a trial. I can't believe I'm hearing such short-sighted and racist crap."

CS: "You tell my brother it's racist crap that keeps him in that wheelchair, you bitch!"

\*microphone cuts out\*

BM: "Well, we're going to have to cut this episode of Open Forum a little short today, folks. Tune in next time, when we'll be discussing the raising of subway tolls. Up next, traffic on the 10's."

NYPD Crime Lab  
August 11th, 6:22 PM

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Jack and Sharon have been leaning against the periodical table of elements poster for hours.

"How long does it take to stare at a print in a microscope?" Jack asks.

"How long does it take for you to realize that it takes time to make a positive ID? Or would you rather I make this up as I go?" the lab tech says.

"I don't know, how good are you at picking lotto numbers?"

The tech slides away from the microscope. "Luckily for all of us, I have a result for you." They both stand up straight. "It's not a match."

Sharon throws her arms up in the air. "So we have nothing?"

"Not quite. We also recovered a casing at the scene, and matched it against a rifle recovered from a theft ring sting operation. The rifle was returned to its owner, after it was tested and ran against the database, of course."

Sharon rolls her eyes. "So we've been standing her because we asked about 'prints' instead of 'evidence'."

"Oh, don't worry about that, we've already sent the ballistics report to your office, I'm sure they made do without you two." The lab tech shrugs. "After all, I wouldn't dream of holding up an investigation."

"So you're just getting back at us for prior lab-related inhumanities?" Sharon asks.

"It's not technically even until I've had you on the ropes for, uh, twelve all-nighters, but I'm generous like that..."

---

A rather comical scene ensues elsewhere as Az and Chrome sit down in a rather nice living room, preparing for a quiet conversation with a suspect with only their tactical vests clashing with the surroundings. A rather large gentleman - perhaps 50, with his brown hair slowly thinning out at the top - offers them tea, but they decline. Another man - younger, slimmer, apparently a fitness freak - enters the room, accompanied by two police officers.

"Don't tell me they stole it again," the young man says.

"Sean's gun was a real albatross," the older man says. "Two years ago, a couple of hoodlums broke in and stole it."

"Yeah, real bastards. Then I get the rifle back, and I just couldn't look at it anymore. Always thinking that someone committed a crime with that. So I pawned it off a month after I got it back."

"You really liked that gun, Sean. He did, officers."

"I just hope you can find the people who have it. Damn street gangs..."

Az holds up his hand, as if to stop him.

"So this is your official statement? You sold the gun two years ago and haven't seen it since?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Do you have the address of he pawnbroker?"

"Uh, sure. Leonard?"

The old man gets up and walks towards a cupboard, extracting a big file from it.

"Sean takes documentation very seriously."

"Glad to hear it," Chrome says. Leonard flips through the file, then extracts a single sheet of paper from it.

"Ah, here it is. Do you still use those transfer forms?"

"Of course they do, Leonard."

Az looks to the older man, who smiles.

"Sean's a lawyer, you know. He knows all about the paperwork."

"That's nice," Chrome says. "What do you do?"

"Oh, I just take care of the house," Leonard says as he hands over the form.

"That's a full-time job, too, Leonard."

"Yes, yes, it is. Do you need the original, or can I give you folks a copy?"

"You have a copier?" Az asks.

"Of course, Detective. Are you sure you don't want tea?"

---

Driving towards the pawnshop in the back of a squadcar, Chrome looks over the form.

"That was strange," Az says. "Give me a good, old-fashioned ESU raid any day of the week."

"You want to get shot at?"  
"I'm used to that, at least."

They pull up to the epitome of an urban pawn shop - set into an old apartment building front, the small windows liberally adorned with neon signs and reinforced with heavy steel bars.

"Careful what you wish for," Chrome says.

They enter the pawn shop, heightening the firearms concentration in the cramped shop by a good bit - not that it needed any help in the first place. A single man, thirty-ish with bald head and thick-rimmed glasses greets them from behind the armored counter.

"Can I help you, Detectives? How about a good tactical flashlight? I know, it's a bit of a hassle with the batteries, but you'll need them for a good raid..."

"Actually..."

"And don't give me that 'department issue' crap, I know you're contractors. Saw you on TV. You'd look much better with a shotgun, though," he says to Az. "A nice Benelli..."

"We have what we need, thank you."

"Are you..."

"Thank you. We're looking for a specific firearm. A Remington 700 sniper rifle."

"Hunting rifle."

"Pardon?"

"The Remington 700 is a very fine hunting rifle, Detective, I'd be pleased if you could make the distinction..."

Chrome pushes the transfer form at the clerk.

"Do you have this gun?"

"Hm...no. Sold it three weeks ago. Not much of a market for hunting rifles down here..."

"Well, that's great. We're happy for you. You wouldn't happen to remember who you sold it to?"

"Not by name, I'm terrible with names...I'm pretty sure it was a guy, maybe, thirty-ish...Caucasian."

Az looks to Chrome.

"What was that serial killer profile like again?"

"Uh, he's a serial killer?"

"A strong suspect in the metahuman killer case. We'd like you to come along and help us make a sketch."

"I'm terrible with faces, too...but you guys really should catch him. Very soon. I mean, not just the killing, but the guy runs around with a sawed-off shotgun, doesn't he?"

"We think so."

"That's bad for business, that is."

"Is it now?"

"Of course! You know how hard it is to run this shop now? Just wait until the media turns up the heat, then bam, new gun laws, I can't move any stock. That psycho is blowing me right out of business with every shot."

"I'm sure the metahuman community thanks you for your support, sir," Chrome says.

*It's a Grind Coffee Shop*

August 11th, 6:23 PM

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Mark steps into the Soho coffee shop, dodging the dinner rush from the Soho coffee shop and deli next door. He looks over the room, dismissing the non-threatening urban hipsters filling the room, and pulls a photo out of his pocket, showing what he's been told is Vic's ex-girlfriend, Leah Anderson. Spotting her working the espresso machine behind the counter, he walks over.

"Orders are at the register," she says.

"I'm not here for the coffee."

"Then I'd suggest you go somewhere else, because that's all we serve here."

"I'm looking for Victor Smith."

"Really. Let me see your badge, then."

"Private dick, I'm afraid. I really need to find Victor. Everything you know about him would be helpful."

Her eyes roll back a bit as she calls the memories up from their resting place, gaining a bit of a smile in the process.

"Yeah, Vic. He was sweet. A bit distant, but he really calmed down once he got to know you."

"Have you seen him recently?"

"Not since about a year ago."

"Do you know where he hung out after work?"

"He mostly stayed in. He got really nervous around crowds, and since this is New York City..."

"Do you have a photo?"

"At my apartment."

"I need it."

"My shift isn't up for three hours, and I'm not taking you home after dark. Nothing personal."

Mark flexes his fingers, fixes his eyes on a guy in a suit - clearly the manager - and reaches into his coat.

"Leah needs the rest of the day off."

"Are you nuts?" the manager says.

"No, but I am in a hurry and I don't have time for this bullshit."

By now, the hipsters are looking at Mark - some are even cowering down a bit.

"Sir, you're making a scene."

Mark turns to Leah. "How much do you earn?"

"What? Why do you ask?" she says.

"Please leave now, Sir," the manager says, looking ever more powerless to affect Mark with every passing second of being ignored.

Mark hands Leah a wad of cash.

"Because I tip really well," Mark says.

"Holy shit..."

"Can we get the photo now?"

Leah grabs her apron, undoes the strap and throws it to the side.

"Give me a second," she says, then hurries to the back. The manager, by now looking like the milk foamer exploded on his head, finally shouts.

"If you leave now, I'll fire you!"

"You can't fire me," her voice shouts back, then she comes out with a jacket, a handbag and a raised middle finger. "Eh...you know how it goes from here."

She walks over the door, turns her head to Mark and smiles. "Shall we?"

Mark nods to her, then grins at the manager.

"Guess I won't have to bribe you, then," Mark says.

Office of Monica Pizzorno

August 11th, 7:31 PM

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It's been a long day for Chrome; her entrance into Monica's office is accompanied by low levels of enthusiasm as she dumps her jacket onto a nearby chair and walks over to Monica, her shoulder holster swinging in sync with her steps.

"That time of the week again," Chrome says, extending her hand in greeting.

Monica shakes her hand, and they both sit down. "So, how are things going for you right now?"

"The case is kicking our asses, but I think we're getting there."

"What about the rest of the team? How are they getting along? All that tension usually makes you more...unstable."

"Does 'barrel of monkeys' work for you? Well, I suppose that isn't fair, it's mostly...well, Sharon. You know, the breakup, slapping Karen around, then there's this thing with Az..."

"How is she doing after being shot?"

"It's not like she got seriously wounded, you know her, she's mostly bulletproof. Mentally - I guess you'd have to ask her. Seems pretty angry to me, though."

"What about her relationship with Mark and Az?"

"You know, she and Mark, they've always been two sides of the same coin. But they can't get level on the whole police issue. It's a bit unfair, I mean, Sharon got a clean slate and she gets her kicks working with us, but Mark's in a bad way because he's always been a killer at heart. And of course, everybody around him is trying to change him, and I don't think that's going to work out, ever. Az - it was a spur of the moment thing, so I guess that's pretty awkward for the two of them, but they don't seem to be totally hung up about it."

"And Mark? What's he up to?"

Chrome shakes her head.

"The less I know..."

"Hm. Well, it's time we talk about you. How are you doing?"

"Okay, I guess. No big freakouts, so that's good. Jack's busy with the case like we all are, so...the drama is on hold, mostly, I think. I'm feeling...like I'm not under constant assault. As if things are finally, you know, settling into a kind of pace I'm mostly comfortable with."

"And how is that affecting your relationship with Avenger?"

"She's been quiet ever since she saved our bacon on the carrier. I'm in control, I can't even hear her most of the time now. She's there, just not - fighting me. It's getting to be...I'm kinda curious about her now, I think."

"What about Karen? Have you figured out why you lied to her yet?"

"I am going to tell her...one of these days."

"That doesn't answer my question, Chrome. It's important that you know why you lied to her."

"I'm...I don't - I haven't gotten to where I know who I am..." Chrome says, rubbing her temples and pinching her eyes closed in a migraine attack.

"Chrome?"

Her hair flashes to ebony.

"God, I can't take this. Time out, sister."

"Hello, Avenger. What do you want to add to this?"

"She lied to her because she's afraid of who she is. Of me. That's it. God, is that so fucking hard to say?"

"It seems to be for her. Have you considered helping her say it instead of just taking control and saying it for her? You have said that you want her to get stronger."

"You misunderstand me. I want us to be stronger. Either she grows a pair, or I'll be taking care of that."

"But then there's no 'us,' there's just you. Do you think that you'd be better off without her? Because I think that you need her just as much as she needs you."

"You don't have to hold my hand and tell me about the sunshine, Monica. All this psychobabble...stop talking like that."

Monica leans towards Avenger. "You've been actively resisting all of this from the start, Avenger. But you haven't hurt me, and I don't think you're the person who holds back. Why?"

Avenger flashes her a toothy smirk. "I guess she's got more control than she realizes."

"I don't think so. Do you know what causes multiple personalities?"

"Too much TV?"

"Severe and prolonged childhood abuse. The mind creates other personalities as a way of compartmentalizing the trauma and dealing with the pain by shuffling it off onto another persona. And since Chrome doesn't know anything about her childhood, I'm going to guess that you're the one who does."

"And I'm going to suggest you shut the hell up before I rip out your throat."

"What happened? Telling someone else about it could help Chrome understand who she is, become

stronger and more confident. Isn't that what you want?"

"You really believe your own bullshit, don't you?"

"I've seen and worked with patients like you before, Avenger. I know that you're angry at the people who mistreated you, who abandoned you. I'm saying that I can help you. Tell me what happened." Avenger stands up. "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on. I don't have to sit here and listen to this bullshit." She wipes some tears from her eyes, then realizes that she's done so. "You're just boring me to tears, I guess. I'm taking little sister for a joyride. I guess she'll call you when she wakes up."

She walks towards the door.

"Avenger?"

"Yeah, what?"

"I'll be here when you're ready."

"Then you'll be waiting a long time."

"We'll see. Tell Chrome we're meeting the same time next week."

"Whatever." She walks out the door.

Monica stands up from her session chair and walks over to her desk. When she reaches for her coffee cup, she sees that her hands are shaking uncontrollably.

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One hour later...

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Avenger feels the bass working through her bones as she takes the last few steps downwards. Her eyes adjust to the harsh, flickering spotlights and neons spinning over the dancefloor, and she works her way through masses of people, sweating, swaying, moving their bodies to the unforgiving beat.

The bar on the other side admits her easily as a couple of patrons clear out upon seeing her. The barkeep spots her, closes his current conversation and reaches under the counter.

"You're early," he says.

"I didn't know that bartenders needed a background check for serving booze."

"Like what you've done with the hair, by the way. Makes you look downright mean."

"I'm kinda experimenting."

"Oh, that's nice. Very...you know, kinda gothic, but in a good way."

"Alcohol. Now."

"Tequila Sunrise, as usual?"

"Yeah. Hold the sunrise, though. It's forgetting time."

The barkeep raises an eyebrow, then pours her a shot. Avenger slams it back like water, then puts the shotglass back onto the bar, upside down.

"I keep forgetting that it tastes like ass without grenadine." She shivers with the aftertaste. "You're gonna need more of that."

The bartender puts another shot in front of her. "You just take it easy, okay?"

Avenger downs the alcohol with another quick move. "I'm never going to get properly buzzed if I have to listen to my mommy between shots." She reaches into her jacket and puts down a bill. "Leave the bottle."

The bartender puts the bottle on the bar. "Just don't trash the bathroom again."

Avenger raises the bottle. "To bad childhoods," she says.

*Do you know what causes multiple personalities?*

*Telling someone else about it could help Chrome understand who she is.*

*I'll be here when you're ready.*

She starts drinking.

Vanderbilt Avenue, passing Grand Central

August 11th, 9:56 PM

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The patrol car slowly glides through the streets; Detective Goddard can't take his eyes off the street and the lamps for fear of falling asleep on the spot, while his partner sips on his mocha and makes a face.

"Did you strain this through a sock?"

"Shut up, Danny. At least you have coffee."

"You said 30 minutes, we're sticking to it. You just have -" Detective Daniel Watts checks the dash's clock - "four to go. Then you get your turn with the horse piss."

"Ah, the sweet breakfast of champions. How long now?"

"Four minutes, like I said."

"No, I mean the shift."

"Oh. Two hours."

"You remember that Trejo kid with the steak knife? It didn't even take an hour to catch that guy."

"Well, whatcha gonna do? Wetbacks can be pretty stupid, going straight home wasn't a winning move."

"This guy's a fucking ghost."

"Why do we always get the clever ones?"

"I could go for the clever ones," Danny says, "if the coffee wasn't that bad."

"I told you, you gotta get Starbucks. This department shit ain't cutting it."

"Hey, caffeine is caffeine."

The car creeps past a small alley; Goddard reflexively looks to the side, then slams on the brakes. Drops of luke-warm coffee spill over Danny's cup and fingers, leaving the Detective in an incoherent swearing rage.

"Sonuva bitch, can't you warn me?"

"Hold up, dispatch has something."

"10-10, shots fired at 54th and Lexington," the radio blares; Goddard steps on it while Danny grabs the microphone.

"Dispatch, this is unit 17, responding to shots fired."

---

The patrol car comes to a screaming halt just seconds after Danny hears another shot; the two cops bound out of the car, guns drawn, and charge into the alley. Goddard spots a silhouetted figure with a pistol in his hand, standing over a body; he screams out "Freeze!".

Naturally, the perp does everything but that.

While Goddard darts after the perp, Danny moves in on the body, only to have it twitch from under him. The victim is a woman in her 40s, with a gaping hole in her shoulder and a kneecap shot out. She cries out in pain as Danny calls in an ambulance, watching with amazement as her wounds slowly begin to knit themselves.

Goddard's chase isn't going so well; the perp is fast and agile, while Goddard's pushing 50. Finally, Goddard loses the perp at a corner and turns left, staring at a brick wall. Cursing under his labored breath, he turns around and starts heading back the way he came, but the perp is gone.

Goddard walks back to where his partner is. He's got the patrol car's first-aid kit out, and is pressing a gauze pad onto the victim's shoulder. "Dispatch, this is unit 17. I lost him, need backup for a sweep and a bus."

"10-4, unit 17, backup and EMS is on the way."

Danny's still dressing the woman's wound when she stops screaming for a bit and grabs his arm.

"Please hold still, Ma'am. Help is on the way."

"You have to...have to, my children, you hate to..."

"Ma'am, please stay calm, we're doing what we can."

"His face..." She pulls herself up to Danny's ear. "I saw his face," she coughs, then finally (and mercifully) passes out.

New York City

August 11th, 11:55 PM

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With a trunk full of guns, Mark's wearing his old times smile while he cruises into the Bronx. His window's down, and as he stops at a red light, one can almost hear him sing "Live and Let Die" over the sound of other traffic. In a case of linguistic aptness, a 12 gauge shotgun is, well, riding shotgun under a blanket. Mark uses the stop to pat down his vest, making sure that all the inserts are seated correctly.

*I'm coming for you.*

---

After another one of those long days at the office - is there any other kind? - Karen's on autopilot, driving down the streets that lead to her to the JS Consulting complex. She musters up enough control to park her car on the small inside yard, then gets out and shambles over to the door that leads to her temporary home.

*Me time.*

---

Sheppard slams a fresh mag into his MP5 while the SWAT van takes yet another curve; he and the rest of the team sway inside the back, but it disappears into a sea of concentration. They're all geared up, focused on the job, and willing to go the extra mile to make sure they nail him this time. There's a few things Sheppard still doesn't get about humans, but sometimes, the need for justice isn't just there, to be looked at and examined in a lab - it is thick and burning in the air, uniting the chaos that is other people into one body, one will.

*Justice will be served.*

---

Avenger's nursing a Screwdriver and waxing philosophically about the history of violence with a Somalia vet when she spots the rest of the gang at the entrance to the dance club, looking lost, like small children in the woods. For a second, she thinks about keeping her head down, but then she just sighs, puts down the glass and gets up from her place.

"Tab it. The killjoys are here." She turns around and walks up to Jack, Az and Sharon. "Changed the straw in my cage?"

"What do you think you're doing?" Sharon asks.

"Getting through my...fourth bottle of the good stuff tonight. How's your night going?"

"Avenger, knock it off. We need to get back."

"Don't you mean you need Chrome back? She's having a good time, too."

"No, we mean both of you," Jack says.

"Zip it, babyface. I'd crush your ass right now if your pet demon wouldn't take my head off."

"Try me," Sharon replies, snarling.

"I bet you taste finger-licking good. Who knows, maybe you'll like it, too."

"Ahem," Az goes. "If you are done trying to intimidate each other, we have a case to work on."

"It's in the middle of the fucking night," Avenger replies, now sounding more annoyed than confrontational. "The number you have called is out of service or has been disconnected."

"We've got a face, that means we've got a name, and if my clock's right, we should have a perp in five."

"Great. That calls for a drink."

Unseen by the rest, Az's eyes flash for a split second, but the reflection that plays off Avenger's eyes isn't lost in the strobes.

"You must be tired," he says.

"I...I'm...let me get my...coat." Avenger slumps down into a chair. Just as quick as she passed out, Chrome stands back up, then starts wobbling from side to side. Jack catches her before she hits the floor.

"Whoa, how much did I have to drink?"  
"A thimbleful," Az replies. "Still, I'd better take the car keys."  
"What's going on? How's the case?" she asks as they walk towards the door.  
"They're arresting him right now," Sharon replies.  
"That's good."  
"We've still got the trial to get through," Sharon says. "It's not over yet."

---

Mark gets out of the car, then walks over to the trunk and swings it open. A small crew of wiggers nearby has been paying too much attention to their game of craps, but when Mark hauls out an M16, they bug out. The general consensus down the entire block is that something horrible will happen. Doors and windows shut while Mark walks in blessed silence, cradling his weapon as if he'd bought wine for the weekend. Every one of his footsteps echoes clearly over the silent road, slowly building to a crescendo until he's looking at the number.

The number he wrote down. The number his contact gave him. The number that'll end this.

Nobody sees Mark kick in the door, though they all watch; he disappears, swallowed by the building, but his footsteps are still there, steady in pace as he takes the stairs without haste. Occasionally, he passes a window and the onlookers can catch glimpses of him checking the magazine one last time. Finally, the footsteps cease. There's a moment of total silence, absolute focus, then the horrible groaning sound of a deadbolt refusing to give in to the first kick. Nonplussed, Mark takes a step back and feeds the door several slugs from his assault rifle. By now, nobody's watching, not even secretly - they are on the floor, trying not to listen, hoping that it'll be over soon. Mark moves faster now, not hurried but with purpose, cracking more doors as he sweeps the apartment. More photos - yes, Mark sees, he's in the right place, but it's not like there ever was any doubt. Finally, he's standing before the bedroom door; without batting an eye, he unloads the rest of the magazine through the door, then lets the M16 sink and draws one of his USPs. With a final, swift kick, the last door gives in, and Mark's standing in the bedroom, surveying the carnage.

There's no blood and no body.

---

"Alpha!" barks Sheppard, a split second before the door charges go off and fill the house with a shockwave of compressed air. Three more seconds, and they're in the building through all possible exits, a good dozen SWAT-qualified cops in heavy body armor with SMGs executing a textbook dynamic entry.

"Clear!"  
"Clear!"  
"...clear!"

And so on.

Sheppard and three more operators storm the staircase to the second story, with more cops pouring in after them to secure the house. Sheppard's crew moves towards the bathroom, hearing the sounds of a running shower from that direction. Sheppard switches the MP5 for a shotgun, then shoots a breaching charge at the door's lock.

Open Sesame.

It's a bit comical to see two SWATies follow Sheppard into the small bathroom, but he's in there sticking the shotgun in the direction of a young man's face, which bears a rather smug grin.

"Pass the soap."

Sheppard decides to add another charge of police brutality to his resume and connects shotgun stock to head, letting the buck-naked suspect crumble to the floor in a heap.

"Bag him," Sheppard says, then walks out.

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Karen pauses for a second to search her purse for the keys to the apartment. Her concentration shifts away from the pile of folders in her other arm, and she dumps them on the floor. Kneeling down to pick the papers up, she sees shards of glass underneath the door.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," she says, and reaches up to check the door. It opens with a push.

She walks through the front door to see that the apartment has been turned inside out. Every stick of furniture has been torn apart and gone through, the cushions on all the seats cut open and emptied onto the floor. Walking past the kitchen, she sees that the cupboards and drawers have been given a similar treatment. Someone was here and was looking for something that they didn't know where it was, and was determined to find it.

Walking into her bedroom, it seems that someone decided to stop just tearing things apart with their hands and got out a chainsaw. Nothing is in one piece, everything is upside-down and mixed with bits of the rest of the furniture in the room.

Karen stands there for a second, trying to remain calm and see if anything is missing. *Books, clothing, computer, strange that they'd leave everything...* She pokes at the mess around her desk, and sees that a flap of carpet is torn out. *The safe!*

Throwing aside debris, she digs out the hole in the floor that the safe used to be in. All that's left now is a note, which she picks up and reads.

*Meet me.*