

Part 1 - Seeking
May 2002

You know you're really freaked out when you're sweating and shivering at the same time. This wasn't my deal.

I'm decked out head to toe in costume when I meet the detective for the second time. He looks more like a math teacher than a hard nosed cop, but he has a badge and a gun. He's balding on the front of his head, wearing narrow rectangular glasses and a dress shirt with no tie. His badge is hanging out the front pocket of his jacket, faux gold. His jacket is knee length and unbuttoned. His hands, a hat and scarf are jammed into the pockets.

Today it's overcast, suggesting rain or a snow that would probably melt before it needed shoveling. That's just a guess, though. With the weather we get in Ontario, you could walk down a busy street and see a girl in a bikini top, a guy decked out in coat, scarf and mitts, and a child in a raincoat. Case in point? Detective with a heavy coat and a girl in spandex and a cloak, walking side by side.

We don't talk. That's partially because we already had our long conversation down at the station. A teenager running around in costume alarms the natives, especially with a serial killer on the loose. He finds me, hauls me in, and tells me that I'm either going to lockup or I'm going to discreetly help him find the serial killer. Deal made, we went our separate ways and we've met once again. There's no need to talk, because it's mostly been said. That, and I'm all too aware that when you're wearing a mask over your entire face, your voice gets muffled a little.

Somehow, I get a vibe from him. He seems like the sort that gets things done. I well and truly believe that he's the sort that would throw innocent me in jail if it meant catching the Bank Street Killer. I'm not sure if it's just womanly intuition or my superpowers that are telling me this guy knows his stuff. For the record, life would be a lot easier if I knew how the hell my powers worked.

"So," he speaks. He's quiet, to the point and annoyed, "Runechild. What do you do?" He turns to look over the side of the bridge, staring at the Rideau Canal beneath us, or the Parliament buildings on the hills to our left. In the dusk, the tinted spotlights make the government offices look surreal.

I shrug, and tug my cape so it shields me from the wind that is blowing off of the river, "I don't do a lot. I find kids who are selling drugs or spray painting stuff and I scare them off. I clean up messes. I would probably get killed if I actually got in a real fight."

He turns his head to give me this blank look, and I cringe.

"You told me you could help me."

"I can!" I protest, "I think. I just don't know where to start."

"Okay," he sighs, "You've got powers, right? What are they?"

I have this increasing sense of guilt, like I'm just wasting his time. This was a question that even I found it hard to answer, and harder to believe.

"I cast spells."

Credit to him, he didn't laugh in my face. He did, however, look at me like I was an idiot.

"I do! I... I have a spell that opens or closes locks, one that finds things, another that kind of moves things, and a last one that... teleports things." It sounded lame even as I said it.

"Okay," he sighed again. He turned around so his back was leaning against the railing, "Can you find the King Street Killer with your spell?"

"Um, I can only find nonliving things. My spells don't work on people."

"What if I tell you what gun he's been using?"

"I... don't really know guns," I admit. By this point, I'm pretty humiliated, "I wouldn't be able to tell one from the other."

Detective Wickman pulls a cigarette from his pocket and lights it. I frown behind my mask at the odor of the smoke.

"Okay, Runechild," he says my hero name with the same tone of voice he'd use to call me 'Mary Poppins', "What do you need to make that spell work?"

"I can find something if it's one of a kind. Knowing what it looks like helps. More I know, the easier it is to find."

He puffs on his cigarette for a few minutes, then turns to give me a long, hard stare, "You don't repeat what I'm about to tell you, eh? Do, and it's jail."

I nod, resisting the urge to pull my cape tight around me like a security blanket.

"He carries a knife. Swiss army that he's modified. It's big, long as your hand from wrist to fingertip, thick, like a..." he pauses, pushes his glasses up his nose, "About like a two dollar coin in diameter. There's a knife inside it that he's using alongside his gun, a blade almost as long as the handle. It's been used to hurt people, so there's going to be dried blood caking up the

machinery, maybe a few hairs crammed in the works. There's a hook and small set of scissors he's used as well, probably not as well cared for as the knife part. The outer casing's going to have tooth marks on it."

"I think I got it," I whisper, a little disquieted by the thoughts of the killer using the thing. I reach for my belt and withdraw a piece of chalk. I bend down on the sidewalk and draw a diagram, a circle containing an S shaped figure that repeats as I draw it in continuous motion. A curved line, then a second, making it a wavy cross. A third divides the cross, then a fourth gives it symmetry again. The drawing of the circle is a pattern, and my body seems to know how to make it.

It hypnotizes me and draws me in. Through it, I see most of Ottawa, and part of Hull. I see the night lights and the stream of cars moving down the Queensway. I focus on the knife, and feel the image split into millions of separate parts. Now I see blades throughout the city, on scalpels, dinner knives and saws. Countless blades, each like a faint candle glowing within the city.

I focus again, and images fall away from the big picture. I focus on the fact that it's a knife that's a part of a machine, and there's only thousands now. I focus on the fact that it's drawn blood that hasn't been cleaned from it, and there's hundreds.

With each passing moment, I can feel myself losing my overall sense of the city. It's a race against time to eliminate the knives that aren't, before I lose all sense of where it might be and render the exercise futile.

It dawns on me, belatedly, that I'm looking at a single knife with small indents on the surface. The kind of marks you might see if someone had bitten down on the plastic. Hurriedly, I seize on the image and get a sense of where it is. It's vague, but when I realize I'm staring at a chalk diagram on the sidewalk, I also see that my arm is outstretched. I'm pointing east-east-northeast.

Detective Wickman is standing above me, hands in his pockets, "You sure?"

I only nod.

"It's a better starting point than we had," he concedes.

Part 2 - Stalking
May 2002

It comes from the sky, hurtling through the atmosphere and past layers of shadowy clouds. It stops mere feet from the surface of the river, with the momentum and the air pressure causing an impact that sets waves crashing against both sides of the water.

It moves towards the shore, sensing the buzz of thousands upon thousands of thoughts. It weaves and bobs through crowds, observing, tasting their thoughts. None are suitable.

The big picture slowly becomes clear. The visitor gradually begins to fathom how these people think, how their world operates. It senses the patterns by which they operate, their motivations and expectations. It sees how each human is interconnected, but yet so very far apart. Their thoughts are their own, never shared.

Unseen, it collects knowledge. It grasps how humans structure themselves into tiers. There are the weak and unfortunate who scrounge to survive. Above them are the ones who work at menial tasks for their lives, able to get by while never prospering. As one climbs the hierarchy, people can gain more by doing less.

It takes note of the parahumans. Apparently thousands exist now, spread across the world. They are people with power, who exist apart from the hierarchy. Intrigued, it gathers information on those parahumans in this particular area. Perhaps one of them could be what the visitor seeks.

Narwhal, Cantabile, Heartbreaker, Aurora, Runechild, Ursa Minor, Ursa Major, Soldat, Ménage à trois, Saint and Sinner. It begins putting the pieces together. Small pieces of information can be massed into a great puzzle. It slowly gains clues into what each of these parahumans is, and where they operate.

The Runechild is the easiest to find. There's a pattern to her movements that becomes evident when he gathers memories from those who have seen her, or heard of others seeing her. She's new to what she does, with a small territory extending a short distance from her home. It traces her path easily and finds her on a bridge. She is hidden from the world by a covering of cloth, a pointed hood covers much of her head and face, a matching cape shrouds her body.

It sniffs her, and senses power. Enough to set her head and shoulders above a common human, with the potential for much more. It reaches out to feel the power, and recognizes it. It is now clear where these parahumans came from.

It tastes her, touching on everything she is, everything she was and a little of what she might be. It finds her lacking. She is not what it looks for, not what it needs. She is prey by nature, while it needs just the opposite. She is a victim, or will be one soon enough. She would be a better fit

for one of the others.

It is surprised when it investigates the man that stands with her. It finds more of what it seeks. Definition, focus, a hint of ruthlessness. The man is not physically strong nor is he particularly charismatic. However, the man is a predator of sorts. He has killed before, yet sleeps easy, knowing that he had no other choice. He is a gunman that has surpassed his peers and superiors in skill. He tracks and hunts his fellow species for a living, ever careful to stay within the confines of his social structure.

Detective Wickman. The entity feels the name. It could be a Wickman, if need be.

Even now, the Wickman is seeking his target. He uses the Runechild as his ancestors have long used hunting animals, to find the trail so he can take the kill. The entity floats close to see the Wickman's expression, to revel in his focus and the scenarios playing through in his mind. With every alley he glances into, he ponders whether his quarry would lurk there, what his target might see or plan with each piece of territory. It floats back a few feet to watch the Wickman's posture.

The Wickman is after another kind of predator. One who kills, but does so outside the rules and restrictions of their species. He is a creature of law, order, structure, his target is not.

The Wickman speaks without turning to face the girl beside him, "Runechild, could you cast that spell again? Get a more precise location?"

"I get really ill if I try it too many times in one night," the Runechild replies.

The entity can sense the frustration of the Wickman. He wants to catch his quarry, and the girl complains of minor things. He doesn't speak this aloud, his thoughts focused on keeping the Runechild docile and helpful. It is just the way teenagers are, the Wickman thinks, pushing her might make her leave.

"I-I'm not saying I won't. Just... it might be better to wait until later. If I do it now, I might just slow us down or be unable to do it when we really need to."

"Fine," the reply the Wickman offers is short. He remains annoyed, but for different reasons. He is good at his job and expects obedience from those younger and those less experienced. For weeks, he has not gone a waking hour without thinking of his target. Now that he is so close, it galls him to move at anything but the fastest pursuit.

Almost, the entity chooses Wickman. Almost, it reaches out, to aid the Detective in getting his capture or his kill. At the last second, it holds back and decides to wait. It waits and watches, to see if the Wickman deserves it.

It lurks, unseen, coiling and folding into itself. It watches as the Detective and the Runechild make their way into the Byward Market, the neighborhood that characterizes downtown Ottawa.
Part 3 – the Kill

I'm concentrating hard to keep my general sense of where the swiss army knife was. It's a vague feeling, like recalling a place you visited two years ago. It's less about forgetting and more about keeping your own thoughts and preconceptions from intruding and misleading.

During daylight hours, Byward Market bustles with vendors and crowds. Stalls are nestled in cubicles of canvas cloth that keep the sun and wind at bay. Flowers, trinkets, vegetables and clothes are sold to tourist and longtime resident alike. Surrounding the stalls and crowds are stores, bars and restaurants.

Usually the market is even alive at night, with people drinking or just enjoying the nightlife. The surrounding buildings are well lit, tinted orange with lamps and lights, the roads often packed with cars that only add to the ambiance and the sense of movement.

Tonight, there are no cars. The only ones on the streets are vagrants and employees of nearby shops. There is a serial killer out there, and that's enough to keep countless people from going out at night. The open lots of the market are left empty and desolate.

I feel the silence between the Detective and me like a weight. He doesn't like me, I know, and I want to say something that will break the ice. A part of me wants to be more of a cooperative partner with the cops, rather than an errant kid in a costume who has to be coerced into helping.

"We're close," I announce, "When I cast the spell, the knife was within a block of here."

The detective drops his stub of a cigarette onto the sidewalk and crushes it with his heel. He avoids looking at me, instead glancing down the street. His left hand settles on his gun, and he reaches into his pocket with his right hand, drawing out another cigarette and lighting it with the one hand.

"Cast that spell again."

There's no way I can avoid it this time. It makes sense, getting a more precise sense of the knife's location now that we're close. My hand shakes a little as I get out my chalk.

The process is faster, both the drawing of the symbol and the locating of the knife. The image is heavy in my brain as I pull out, and I immediately feel the punishment approaching like a train with tracks set to go right through me..

"Second floor, 308. It hasn't moved since earlier, so he may not be there," I point for good measure, and I notice my vision waver. I'm all too aware of what's coming, and bend over a

drainage grill, lifting up the bottom of my mask and moving my face protector as my stomach dumps its contents out through my mouth and nose.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I told you,” I mutter, snorting and spitting to get rid of the taste of bile, “I can't use the spell too often back to back.”

“If I go up, are you going to be alright by yourself?”

“Hunky dory,” I mumble, “Get the bastard.”

There's a glimmer of recognition on his face - respect, dare I hope? Then he's turning away and heading up into the three story building.

I'm glad to have been left behind. Ignoring the fact that I feel like each of my senses were turned inside out, I'm not a fighter. The fact that I'm possibly within 50 feet of a serial killer scares me witless. A kid with a baseball bat could give me a run for my money, let alone an experienced killer with 9 bodies under his belt.

9 bodies... Ottawa doesn't usually see that many murders in a year, let alone a three month span of time.

My already battered senses are shaken by a loud boom. It takes me a good nine seconds to get my head around the fact that it's a gunshot. It's not like on TV or the movies. Too loud, too intense.

More shots, three in quick succession, break the stillness of the empty street. I'm now worried. What's going on that has someone shooting this much?

My pulse races, and I imagine the worst. I call to mind the symbol for my translocation spell and quickly draw it onto the concrete in chalk. Standing back, I will it to work, and hear the small noise, like a thunderclap, as my circle appears.

It's nothing special. Three feet across, an inch thick, simply sheet metal. On one side is the answering translocation symbol, on the other, my symbol for movement. A strap from an old seatbelt completes it, one end attached to a hole in the circle. I focus on the movement symbol, standing on the circle, and feel my pulse quicken as it rises into the air. I'm quick to attach the strap to my wrist.

Rising to the second floor, moving through an open window, someone's office. I step off the circle, tuck it under one arm, flick the door latch, open the door, and move towards room 308.

A fourth gunshot rings through the air, so loud I can feel my teeth rattle. There would be no reason for the Detective to fire so many times. I don't even think that cops are allowed to fire so recklessly in an inhabited area. Bullets go through walls, ricochet. I raise the circle of sheet metal defensively, holding it like a shield.

The door opens by the time I've made my way next to 308. My eyes widen as I see a man step out. He looks ordinary. His dark hair is parted to one side, he wears a dress shirt, khakis. Only the spattered blood on his clothes tell me who he is. His left hand holds a large army knife, his right holds a gun.

That's not what scares me. What scares me is the nimbus of light that surrounds him, the surges of energy running up and down his limbs, and the near translucent thing hovering just behind his head, sinking into him, merging with him.

"It chose me."

Part 4 - The Chase
May 2002

He snaps his hand up to shoot me, and I instinctively raise the circle of sheet metal. The bullet hits far harder than I would ever have guessed, knocking me down and knocking the circle from my hand.

“Two in one night?” he speaks with an eerie echo, “It's too easy. It wants me to hunt. Run, little girl. Run so I can hunt you.” The energy surrounding him has quieted, but his eyes are a deep amber. He sways as he takes a few steps towards me, as though he isn't used to the sheer strength at his disposal, as if he's relearning how to move.

I scramble to my feet, willing the circle to follow me as I duck back into the office. I slam the door shut and lock it. I debate sliding the desk to block the door, but realize the ineffectiveness of doing that against someone with powers I don't fully understand.

I go out the window, jumping even before I've made my circle float. Out of the corner of my eye, I see movement, see him standing right by the window. He was already outside, already ready to enter the room from the side of the building.

He jumps in my direction and I swerve, not even turning to see him fall the two stories. I take the route that puts the most buildings in between him and myself, and I move wildly, all too aware that he has a gun, and that one well aimed shot could take me down.

I fly for five minutes before I pause, floating above a rooftop. The night is utterly quiet, aside from the pounding blood in my ears.

“I can peel you away, layer by layer,” the voice echoes, “First your mask, then your skin. The soft flesh beneath...”

I don't make a sound, and I wish I could say it wasn't because I was scared witless, that it was because I was being wary. Like a rabbit suddenly aware of danger, I furtively glance in every direction. I see him standing on the corner of the roof. He tosses his knife between hands, slowly at first, then faster.

“W-who are you?”

“It calls itself Hunter. That name will be good for me as well.”

Multiple personality disorder? Something to do with that thing I saw entering him?

“What is it?”

He tilts his head to one side, as though listening for something. In the moonlight, I can see how well groomed he is. Jeans, a dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, his brown hair cropped short, and those alien eyes.

"It calls itself Hunter. It won't say much else, only that it will give me the power to do the things I want to do."

"To kill," I say.

"Yeah," he responds, with that strange echo just barely audible behind his voice, "Are you going to stand still, or will you run some more?"

"S-somehow," I manage to speak, "I don't want to do either."

He frowns, opening his mouth. I don't give him a chance to respond, darting off the building and down to the street. I hear the crunch of gravel as he leaps after me.

I can't just give him what he wants, for reasons beyond just self preservation. Though I'm genuinely afraid of emptying my bladder in stark terror, I gather my wits and start thinking. My mind races through possibilities for the last thing I ever wanted to do. Fight.

The way he follows me, I know he's fast. I'm not much faster than a car while riding my circle, and I suspect he's simply toying with me as he follows behind.

I remember advice from a book I read as a child, suggesting that if one needed to leap from a moving train, they should do it at a bend in the tracks, where the train is slowest. With that in mind, I veer around a corner to a major street. With a fit of concentration, I send the magic circle in direct reverse, and hang in the air for a half second before I hit the ground running. I can sense the magic circle through the movement rune, feel it strike him with a ringing thud. I concentrate, will it to zip around him like a buzzing insect, then send it flying off down an alleyway. The entire while, I'm running harder than I have in my life.

I think, I hope he was distracted by it, pray he followed it, and set to work. I draw a rune on a car door, counting the seconds. Eight seconds before I move on to the next, looking over my shoulder as my hands work.

I'm halfway down the block when I hear his laughter. I call my circle to fly from the sky to hover beside me, turning to face him, teeth clenched and tears in the corner of my eyes.

Pretty sure I'm going to die.

Part 5 - The Trophy
May 2002

I've been in one fight in my life, and it wasn't as Runechild. It was a schoolyard brawl, when a girl a year older than me pushed, and I fought back instead of rolling over. I vaguely recall landing more punches and scratches than she did, but that might be selective memory.

What I do remember clearly is how my hands hurt afterwards, how I cried out of shame while I waited in the office, how I shook like a leaf for reasons I still don't understand.

"I thought you said you weren't running anymore?"

"I-I'm not," I reply. I curse myself for the stutter that escapes past my chattering teeth.

His shirt came unbuttoned since the last time I saw him, and I can see his stomach, lined with muscles. I can't see his pupils behind those grim amber eyes, but I don't think they would be darting around as nervously as mine did behind my mask. He carries the gun in one hand again, the knife in the other.

I try to imagine how it will play out, wish I had more experience in this kind of thing. If he was just holding the knife, I could assume he was going to lunge for me, but I can't ignore the gun. I wish I knew how many bullets were left in that, or how many it usually held. Wish I understood guns in the slightest.

"Are you going to stand there the rest of the night?" I ask. Praying that I didn't just sign my own execution writ.

He lunges, and I can barely see him. I'm ready for him, though, and a car sails through the air like a bomb just went off, on a collision course for him. When I don't see a thud, I reflexively pull my circle towards me, interjecting the sheet metal between me and any potential attack. A bullet thuds against it, and I lose my grasp on the circle, numbed by the ear-shattering boom and the impact.

I think - for half a second - of trying to regain control of the circle, but I can't spare the time. I see him moving towards me again, and respond, pulling two cars from either side of the street, sending them flying in between us.

It takes me a crucial two heartbeats to spot him after the blur of motion. He's almost directly above me, and I lash out again, no aim, no strategy, simply swinging the two cars in his direction. I feel a tap against one of the cars, see him with one leg outstretched towards it, and realize he's using it as a platform to jump off of. I don't even hesitate, seeing the general arc of his leap towards the left side of the street and use the movement runes to fling three of the cars where he's due to land.

I lose my 'grip' on two of the cars in the impact, and I grasp for them without even checking whether he's down or if he was even hit. I regain my hold on one of the movement runes just in time to feel him push part of the car aside. He's bleeding across one side of his face, and I feel a thrill of horror at the sight. He's going to be angry now, serious.

Waist deep in wreckage, he's not holding his gun, and I pray he's lost it in the chaos. I realize my peril if he gets free, and taking hold of two of the cars, I slide the massed wreckage a half block up the street, dragging him with them.

He screams a swear word at me, and the sound is torn from his throat, touched with that strange echo. He pulls himself free, and when I try to toss the cars at him again, he slams both hands into them, throwing them aside as though they were cardboard. In the dim, I can see little else of him but his eyes, amber from corner to corner.

He moves towards me, and I note his limp. He's slower now, and I take the opportunity to throw the fourth car at him. He jumps using his good leg, and I react, barely thinking about it. The fourth car stops directly below him, then rises like a rocket, carrying him up. Further still, I push the car directly up until it strains the limits of my ability. Ten, twenty, thirty seconds, I push the car skywards.

When I can't offer another iota of strength to keep it moving, I let it go, staggering from the effort, moving backwards, eyes staring at the moonlit sky for any sign of him.

I see the car first, falling, turning bumper over bumper as it hurtles towards the ground. I gasp for breath, give it a nudge towards the middle of an intersection a block up, and watch the flare of the explosion as it detonates on impact.

The sound of sirens fills the night. As if in a dream, I gaze around me, see faces peering out of nearby windows, barely in focus. I approach the wreckage, and see the charred arm beneath it. I know I should feel victorious, proud, or even upset, but I just feel empty.

Clumsily, I sit down in the middle of the street, and wait for the police to arrive.

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"He's still alive," speaks the woman.

I don't care. Not about the fact that he's alive... what I did, how I did it, was bad enough on it's own. I don't care either, that it's Narwhal standing five feet away from me. De-facto leader of the Guild, Canadian League of Superheroes.

I glance over my shoulder, see her standing there, as glorious as on the newscasts and

magazine covers. Like a model in physique, but seven feet tall, nude and covered head to toe in silvery flesh, a single horn rising five feet up from between her eyebrows.

“What are you going to do with him?”

“There's resources for detaining parahumans, but we don't think we'll be needing them. As far as we can tell, he doesn't have powers anymore.”

“Oh, okay.” I tighten my arms around my knees, resting my chin on them, staring ahead.

“Were you and the detective friends?”

“No. I... I think he hated me. Or resented me.”

“It's been a long time since I was a novice, Runechild... I don't know what's bothering you, but it does get easier.”

I didn't know what was bothering me either, and wasn't sure if I did want it to get easier. I couldn't exactly reject the support of the second most powerful woman in Canada, though. I simply shrug, utter a monotone “Thanks.”

“Look, Runechild,” she spoke, pausing as if putting her words together. My mind hung onto that last word, how she'd phrased it. She'd said it with a measure of respect. She continued, oblivious to the effect that had on me, “There aren't enough good guys. We have so few to begin with, and fighting against the Endbringers... we can't afford to...” she trailed off.

She gathers her thoughts, speaks again, “I'm not offering you membership. I don't think you want it, and I don't think the Guild is ready to have a novice member. But... we don't want to lose you either.” She holds out her hand, extending a card. I take it.

“Runechild, it's never easy. It's rarely fun. It's a battle we're slowly losing against greater numbers and attrition. If you want to keep trying, you've got that number. If you need it, call. Our time and resources are limited, but we'll support you as much as we can, okay?”

I nod, numbly, watch her stride away.