

A misty forest path with a figure in the distance. The scene is dimly lit, with sunlight filtering through the trees, creating a hazy, atmospheric effect. The path leads into the distance, where a small, dark figure is visible. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

SOULLESS

ROBERT J. CRANE

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THE GIRL IN THE BOX, BOOK THREE

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Robert J. Crane
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Chapter 1

Someone Else

I wondered how many cops were within a hundred miles of me as I slammed the convenience store clerk's head into the counter. It made a satisfying thump and rebounded as he spiraled to the ground, his head hitting the shelf behind him before it made contact with the tile floor. He didn't move, which was fortunate more for his sake than mine, as I took the bills out of the register and stuffed them in a plastic bag. I fiddled around behind the counter for a minute, tidying up loose ends, then broke his cell phone and the landline, smashing the plastic into pieces. It'd be a long walk to the next one.

The smell of day-old hot dogs wafted around me as I walked past trinkets and tourist shirts that proclaimed *See South Dakota!* The slow hum of the air conditioner working overtime to keep the building cool in the prairie summer heat thrummed around me. I ripped open a candy bar and took a bite, savoring the sweet taste of the caramel and chocolate mingled with the salt from the peanuts. It was the first thing I'd eaten since I made a stop outside Gillette, Wyoming a few hours after sundown. I wondered if the clerk at that store had woken up yet. Probably. He wouldn't remember anything. Just like this one.

I walked to the back of the store and paused when I opened the cooler to grab a drink. The bitter chill of the freezer air overpowered the air conditioning, sending goosebumps up and down my arms. I threw three bottles of soda on top of the piddling amount of money I'd taken from the till; I'd thought it would be more. I considered trying to wake up the attendant to get him to open the safe but decided he'd had enough excitement for one night.

I stepped up to the door that led to the space behind the freezers. Locked. I rolled my eyes and kicked, sending it off its hinges and into the room. It wedged in the back wall, sticking out as though it was a tombstone buried in the brick. The symbolism was obvious, at least to me. I reached over and ejected the DVD that was recording from the camera feeds all over the station, put it into my plastic bag and pondered the safe in the corner. Wasn't worth the time. I only needed petty cash for this trip and it was better to remain as off the radar as I could. Not that robbing convenience stores was going to keep me off the radar, but let's face it: it was a means to an end, not an end itself.

And the end was ahead. Far, far ahead.

Everything on the shelves looked good as I wandered back out into the store, but I didn't need much. I threw a couple packages of chips into the bag and three boxes of white powdered donuts. White was better than the chocolate ones. I took one last look around and decided to try one of the hot dogs. Sure, they looked old, but I'd been eating food that came in a plastic wrapper since I left Casper, Wyoming yesterday. And before that, other canned and plasticized food. Laying low wasn't pleasant, but living off gas station food wasn't much better.

After I finished fixing my hot dog, I took a bite and stepped outside, the flavor of the ketchup and mustard masking the chewy, rubbery consistency of the meat. The convenience store was right off Interstate 90. The nearest town, Draper, South Dakota, was a few miles away and probably deader than a prairie dog on the freeway by this time of night.

I felt the hot summer air of the plains, my little bag in one hand, and a half eaten hotdog in the other, as I walked back to my car, an older model Honda. I'd stolen it before I left Casper, but I'd acquired some new license plates in Rapid City so I wasn't real worried about the cops taking an interest in me. By the time the sun came up tomorrow I'd be in southern Minnesota. I could melt away

onto the back roads, pick up some new tags, maybe even a new car. This one smelled like the previous owner had a problem with Mary Jane. Actually, not so much a problem as a deeply troubling relationship.

I watched another car pull into the parking space just down from me. I caught sight of the lights mounted on the roof and realized my earlier question about cops was answered: there was one here now. The lights weren't on, no siren was blaring and once the officer parked his car he sat there looking at a clipboard in his lap. I sighed; the minute he walked inside he'd discover what had happened and I'd have the cops after me. I needed time.

I walked to his window and rapped on the glass with my knuckle. He made a motion for me to step back, which I did, and he opened the door. Tall, heavily built, and in his early forties, he clicked on his big, heavy flashlight before he started to speak. "Is there a problem—"

He didn't have a chance to see it coming. It wasn't his fault; he followed procedure flawlessly, but he was possessed of strength and speed far beyond a normal person. His hand had reached his holster when mine broke his nose. I brought his head to my knee, giving him something else unpleasant to deal with when he woke up. He hit the ground and I stooped over him. After I was done, I grabbed his pistol, his pepper spray and taser. I smashed his cell phone to pieces, broke his radio, then picked him up and stuffed him back in his car. He'd live, but suffer for the inconvenience he'd placed on me by driving up at this particular moment.

I got back in the Honda and caught another whiff of the reefer that permeated the seats, the upholstery, the dashboard, everything. I looked at the map sitting on my passenger seat and traced my finger along the line I'd drawn to my destination. From the money I stole this time, I might actually be able to pay at the next convenience store. That'd throw 'em off the trail.

I stepped on the accelerator and took off, back to the freeway, back to the long ride. I was over five hundred miles from where I was going and it'd take me at least a couple more days to get there. But it'd be worth it; I'd show them all. I let a little smile of triumph float onto my face as I broke open the pack of donuts and pulled out the first powdered. I took a bite then spit it out the broken window.

Stale. I felt a flash of rage and had a fantasy about killing the convenience store clerk instead of letting him live. I threw the rest of the package out as I hit seventy, not a car on the road ahead of me. This time...this time they couldn't stop me.

Chapter 2

Sienna Nealon

My heart thudded in my ears as I ran, the green of the woods surrounding me. My breath caught in my throat; I was gasping from the exertion of running, and that wasn't easy for me. I'm a metahuman, with powers that include far more strength, speed and agility than humans. But apparently I needed more cardio in my workout.

I heard the footsteps behind me, pounding against the hard ground. I stopped, pressing my back against a tree. Scott Byerly ran past and did the same while Kat Forrest trailed a little behind him.

"Thanks for slowing down," Kat said, huffing as she came to a stop. She was taller than me, with long blond hair and green eyes. Her face was usually tanned but it was red now, spots of color standing out on her cheeks. She wore a simple T-shirt and gym shorts which seemed far too short, and socks and tennis shoes far too low for my tastes. Her long, smooth, tanned legs almost blended in with the backdrop of old pine needles on the forest floor. "Thought you were gonna leave me behind."

I grunted. It wasn't for lack of trying; we were on the run for a reason, and I had no intention of getting caught because Kat couldn't keep pace.

"Any sign of him?" Scott didn't bother to complain. He was tall, with short dark hair and a nose that was a little rounded. Kinda good-looking. Like me, his eyes were scanning through the trees around us, watching for the unseen threat that was somewhere out there. His eyes halted for a second on Kat's legs, causing me to snort, then they kept going. He wasn't breathing as hard as she was, but close.

"Not that I can see." I pushed off the tree, trying to steady myself. We had been running for over an hour before this, full tilt. I was tired; my legs hurt, my lungs hurt, and I was cranky. "But the way that three of us are gasping for air, a tractor trailer could sneak up on us and we wouldn't know it until we felt the treads on our backs."

"I'm exhausted." Kat stood up straight and her hair hung in strings over her shoulders as she joined us in looking around. "I'm in no condition for a fight; I'm not sure they're paying me enough for this."

Scott shot her a half-smile. "You don't think it's worth it to be the next generation of M-Squad recruits?"

"Not sure I wanna be an M-Squad anything," Kat said under her breath.

I had been offered a position as a trainee with the Directorate, an organization that helps track and police metahumans – metas – like me. They hoped to position me to help their agents in hunting down dangerous metas. Shortly after I'd gotten an offer, so had Scott and Kat. Their offers might have had something to do with the fact that the three of us almost single-handedly stopped a very dangerous meta who had threatened to blow up Minneapolis. I thought it was a signal that the Directorate was looking to expand their reach because of some growing threats.

"So are we gonna keep moving or wh—" Kat got cut off mid-sentence as something hit her from behind. I saw a flash of white fur, heard the WHUMP! as she went down, her hair a solid streak of blond. I was already in motion. My foot lashed out at the ball of white as she hit the ground, her shriek drowned out and muffled. I missed clean; the creature that attacked her rolled through and landed on all fours, ready to strike. I was off balance and it was impossibly fast. I stared at it, the red eyes of a wolf glaring back at me as I tried to recapture my footing.

It was long, bigger than the dogs I had seen, and the fur was stark white, the faintest reminder of the last winter, when snow blanketed the ground in the same shade. I saw it tense, watched it shift weight

from its hind legs to its front as it moved to pounce again. I had no easy defense; my leg was almost down when it left the ground and I flinched, already anticipating the pain as I saw it leap, mouth open and focused on my neck.

A solid wall of water hit the animal, causing it to yelp and hurtle sideways, knocked off course by the pressure of the blast. It slammed into a tree trunk and I lunged, foot extended in a running jump sidekick. I aimed at the neck, hoping to put the beast out of the fight. When I was a foot away from my target the hair changed color, shifting in a ripple down the fur like the summer wind had stirred it, and as it went brown the neck grew wider and longer and the shape of the creature began to change.

It stood on its hind legs, leaving all fours behind as its limbs grew longer, paws sprouting long claws. My foot hit it behind the shoulder and I heard bones cracking; a roar came from the mouth of what was now a bear. The brown mass twisted and batted at me with a paw and I dived, trying to avoid the swipe. I felt one claw hit me, raking behind my ear and drawing blood.

“Let’s coordinate our attack,” Scott said from my left, loosing a stream of water that missed the bear wide.

I ignored him as I rolled to my feet, already in a defensive stance. The bear reared up on its hind legs, standing an easy four or five feet taller than me. I glared at it, my hands raised, ready to try and counter whatever it tried. “You got blood in my hair.”

The bear cocked its head at me, distracted, for just a second. Long enough for the blast of water to knock it over again, taking it off its hind legs and down to all fours.

“I had him!” I said. A hot flush of irritation ran through me as I watched the bear stagger from the stream.

Scott had both hands out, the air around him shimmering as he drained the humidity from it. It was Minnesota in July; he had plenty to work with. A jet of liquid shot from his fingertips in a pressurized burst, splattering against the brown fur and driving the bear back. I’d been on the receiving end of that before; he could make it hurt, if he wanted to. “Sorry, I thought we were supposed to work as a team.”

I ignored his jab and pounced while the bear was distracted, jumping on its back. I didn’t pull many punches, and I landed three of them in rapid succession behind the ears. If it’d been a human, it would have been dead, I think. The bear, with its thicker skull, started to wobble and tried to bring up a paw to bat me off. I slid lower and wrapped an arm around its throat, locking it in tight while I hit it three more. It collapsed under my weight and fell to the ground. I hit it again and watched the tongue fall out of its mouth, unrolling on the ground as it went limp in my grasp.

“Is it over?” Kat brushed herself off as she got to her knees. “Can I get up now?”

I stared at the bear underneath me. “I don’t think s—” I stopped when I heard a whizzing noise; something was coming toward us, something fast. I felt something brush past me and threw myself down. Something soft grazed my cheek and pulled at my arm as it passed. I caught a glimpse of Scott out of the corner of my eye; he went down hard, something pulling him off his feet, a net made of beams of light, shining and intertwined. It pinned him to the ground, the energy forcing his hands and arms down, mashing his face as it cut into him. Kat was similarly pinned to a tree in a sitting position. I could see her feet sticking out the bottom of the net as she hung there, limp, a foot off the ground.

“You think it’s over?” A blond woman hovered in the clearing above me, her outfit a kind of shameless riff on things I’d seen people wear when riding bicycles, minus the helmet. Her hands were extended, pointing at me, and I lunged as I felt another net fly past me, disturbing my hair as it missed, passing down my back. It stretched in a four foot square, holding tight to the earth like a web made of light.

My shoulder hit the ground, little pieces of rock pushing up into my clothes and skin as I rolled back to my feet. I ran, not bothering to look back as I made for the cover of the forest. I heard a laugh from behind me, heard the air move around her as she pursued me. I dodged around a tree and chanced

a look back; she was lower now, only a few feet off the ground, and not far behind me.

I could smell the fresh air, feel the sun on the back of my neck as I ran, dodging past the trunks of trees and hearing the whoosh of the little nets she was sending my way. Scott and Kat were both down; they'd be okay. I just had to get away long enough to turn the tables. I had to beat her, had to win more than anything.

I came upon a small ravine and let myself drop. I hit the ground, absorbing the impact along my legs. I had fallen next to a huge rock, at least three feet across. I smiled as I hefted it in both hands and readied it to throw. A normal person couldn't have done this; the rock was huge, almost a boulder, the kind you'd use for decoration in a garden.

I heard sound overhead as she overflew me. I watched her disappear past, and waited, my muscles straining as I held the rock at the ready. I could hear the flutter of wings, and she came back around, her head visible through the boughs above me. I waited until I had a clear view and I let the stone fly. It soared and hit her in the chest with an awful cracking noise. I pumped my fist in victory until I saw her flip over and fall from the sky.

I felt a sick sensation in my stomach as I watched her drop. She followed a lazy arc as she fell; I heard her body hit the ground, the impact reminding me of the time I'd dropped a steak on a counter; a kind of wet slap.

I ran over uneven ground, feeling the dirt kick up as I raced toward the place where she had landed. I pushed aside tree branches to find her in a creek, the water running over her. I cringed and hurried over. I felt the cool water splash into my boot (black, pleather, fairly nice until I got them wet) and soak my socks, felt the chill of it on my hands as I reached down and grabbed her under the arms and drag her to the bank. My gloves were leather and not meant to get soaked, but I dared not take them off; her shirt was sleeveless and her pants were short. My touch as I pulled her out of the water would be much worse than the damage she'd already taken.

Her hair was wet with water and just a little blood, I noticed as I pulled her onto the stony bank by the creek. She snorted and choked out clear liquid and bile as I pulled her onto the rocks. I felt the dampness make its way through my jeans and my long sleeved shirt. It was desperately hot, I was sweating, and the cool wetness was a kind of sweet relief from the heat.

"Woo hoo hoo," came a catcall from the other side of the creek. "Look at that; Sienna and Eve getting all wet and clingy." A low guffaw came after it and I felt a bitter pang of annoyance. The speaker was a little taller than me but still short for a man. He wore a cutoff tank top and ragged blue jeans, and his hair was thinning on top, obvious since he wasn't wearing his usual baseball cap to cover it.

"She's hurt pretty bad, Clary," I said. I looked down at her and her eyes fluttered. A thin trickle of blood ran down her forehead.

"She'll be fine." He dismissed us with a wave, turning his head away and puckering his lips in amusement. "It's not every day I get to see the two of you rubbing up against each other. I might have to watch for a bit."

I picked her up and carried her off the rocks to the trail. She was wet, an unconscious, dead weight that wasn't fighting back. I set her on the dirt, long strings of her hair tangled. They touched the ground and I saw the little granules of sand cling to them. I felt guilty; she was going to be super pissed when she woke up.

I heard Clary splash through the creek behind me as I knelt next to Eve. Her hair had gotten long; it was short when I first met her. She was very thin, her chest flat, heaving up and down with great effort; her breathing was ragged. When I pulled her shirt back to look at the damage, I heard a moan of pain from her and a deep breath of interest from Clary. I shot him a dirty look and turned back to Eve.

Her sternum was broken, a hideous blackish blue bruise had begun to spread from the center of her

chest. I didn't dare unzip her shirt to look closer (especially with that pervert Clary behind me) but I knew enough that I was certain I'd have to call—

"Dr. Perugini is on the way," came the voice from in front of me. Roberto Bastian came toward me at a jog, his buzzed black hair dripping with sweat. "She'll be here in five or less. Until then, let's just assess the damage—" He halted and dropped to a knee next to Kappler. "Damn." He shot a look at me but there was a surprising lack of guilt in it. "You're playing a little rough for a training exercise, Nealon."

"The rock kinda got away from me," I said. "It's not exactly easy for us ground-based types to take down a flyer. She was throwing her nets at me and I just..." I searched my memory, trying to make my vicious ambush seem not quite so vicious. "...figured out a way to take her down and did it."

"Boy, did you," said Glen Parks, splashing across the creek with Scott and Kat in tow. Parks was an older man, his long hair gray, mustache and beard matching it perfectly; not quite ZZ Top length, but close. He brushed the beard to the side and I could see a contusion across his neck that looked like my wristwatch. "I'm not upset that you took this exercise seriously, but next time be more careful with the neck. Even as a bear I'm not immune to your strength."

"Sorry," I said, somewhat abrupt. I turned my attention back to Eve as Kat eased down beside me, her hands already brushing against Eve's neck. The German woman was rasping and her eyes were still rolled back in her head. "I was just trying to win."

"Damn, you sure were, girl," Clary said. "But you're gonna catch all kinds of hell from—"

"What is going on here?" The crackling of an Italian accent was laced with thunderous irritation. I blanched at the sound of it, and after examination, wondered why I was more afraid of the reaction of a human doctor than the metahumans I had been sparring with only minutes before.

Dr Isabella Perugini stopped on the bank opposite us, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, her white lab coat falling below her knees. She slid off her high heeled shoes and began to pick her way across the stream, trying to balance on the rocks jutting out of the water. Her dark complexion was more flushed than usual, her eyes narrowed at me. "You again?" She said it as she executed a hop from one rock to another. "I thought I sorted you out!"

"I got carried away," I said.

She made her last jump and flinched as her foot caught the edge of the rock she landed on. She cursed loudly, then covered the ground to get to us. She knelt and looked to Kat, who had unzipped Eve's shirt to expose her bruised and misshapen sternum. "How is she?" the doctor said to Kat.

"All the problems you'd expect her to have." Kat ran a hand through Eve's hair. "Fractured skull, presumably from the landing, broken sternum." She gave the doctor a wan smile. "I'm working on it. The broken bones will be mended in just a minute."

Perugini turned back to me, one eye cocked and twitching, the other narrowed. She didn't say anything. She didn't have to.

"Training's rough," Bastian said as I avoided her gaze. He looked at me, expression neutral. "It's gonna be fine. We've got Forrest; she'll fix it."

Perugini's mouth became a thin line. "What happens on the day she isn't around?"

Kat let out a sharp exhalation and fell back on her haunches, then lay down on the rocky shore. "That day is not today," she said with a gasp as I watched little blades of grass and weeds spring up from between the rocks she lay on, reaching up to stroke her exposed skin. "She'll be fine." Kat lifted her head to look at Dr. Perugini. "I might need a minute, though."

I heard the sound of feet splashing in the water and looked up to see Ariadne Fraser making her way across the water. She held her high-heeled shoes in her hands, and her black jacket and skirt were taxing her balance. I raised an eyebrow in surprise when she made it across the bank, her pantyhose having developed three runs along her thighs and two holes in the toes from her crossing. Her red hair

was the only splash of color visible on her as she made her way over to us, serious as ever.
“Situation?”

Perugini answered, frost under her words. “She’ll be fine. Training exercise got out of hand.”

Ariadne dropped to her knees next to Eve, looking down at the German woman, who was still unconscious but now breathing easily. “Why is she out?”

“She landed on her head,” Perugini said, her eyes glancing at me for a brief second. “Kat has healed her skull fracture but I suspect she won’t be awake for several minutes, possibly an hour.” The doctor put on her stethoscope and placed the metal end on Eve’s chest. “There doesn’t appear to be any lasting damage but I’d like to do an MRI just the same.”

“You’re sure she’s all right?” Ariadne looked back up at the doctor, her eyes slitted, her hands clutching Eve’s in a way that caught my attention. I looked up and saw Clary looking back at me. He gave me a subtle nod, a wide grin on his face.

“I’m sure.” Perugini wrapped her stethoscope around her neck. “Have someone come out here with a Humvee to pick us up with a stretcher. I want to get her back to the medical unit for tests and observation until we’re certain she’s fine.”

Ariadne hadn’t taken her eyes off Eve the entire time Perugini was speaking. “Okay. Bastian, do it.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Roberto stood up and took a few steps away, speaking with his hand up to his ear.

“How did this happen?” Ariadne’s voice was quiet, but it crackled with accusation and left a silence no one seemed eager to fill, least of all me. I started to speak, but was interrupted by Clary.

“Sienna hit her with rock while she was flying and she came crashing down into the creek.” Clary’s tone was purest joy, as though he were a kid tattling on his wicked sister. “She put some heat on it too, took Eve right outta the sky like a friggin’ plane comin’ down—”

“Thank you, Clary.” I don’t want to say I was frightened of the icy edge in Ariadne’s voice, but it was probably the harshest I had ever heard her sound. I didn’t back away, but my eyes locked on hers and I caught an undefinable hint of something that made my heart beat a little faster. Ariadne let go of Kappler’s hand and stood. “You’re all dismissed.” She locked eyes with me. “You too. We’ll discuss this tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It was an accident—”

“Did you intentionally knock her out of the air with a boulder?” Ariadne’s voice came out low, almost whispered. When I nodded, she followed with, “Then that tends to rule out the possibility of it being an accident.” Her eyes were dark and they watched me. “We’ll discuss it tomorrow. Just go.”

I paused and started to reply – something about them pitting me against unfair odds, since Eve could fly and had been a member of M-Squad dealing with dangerous metas long before I even showed up, about how maybe I was doing her a favor by pointing out a pretty big vulnerability in the way she did battle – but every one of those arguments died on my tongue. I nodded and turned away, forcing one foot in front of the other as I walked out of the clearing and into the trees.

Chapter 3

I heard the sounds of conversation die down behind me as I grew further and further from them. The heat in the woods was oppressive, even under the shade of the trees. The air didn't feel like it was moving, even when a brief gust of wind shifted more hot air in my direction, turning the sweat that was already trickling down my back into a tepid river that slid down the crease of my spine. I took a deep breath, sucking in the warm air, feeling it seem to stick in my nose and mouth, felt the perspiration drip from my forehead into my eyes, mixing with a little of the moisture already there.

Dammit. I got so caught up in the training exercise, in winning, in beating the others, that I let myself get carried away. For years I'd had no one but Mom to spar against, and now, only a few months out in the world, was testing myself against people that tracked and caught metas for a living. I felt a twinge of relief at the knowledge that Eve Kappler was going to be all right, and a little bit of pride knowing that I'd knocked her out of the sky.

Kappler was a severe woman by nature: she was thin, austere, too dry in personality and reserved in her manner to draw much attention. She had never really been nice to me (not that I'd smite her for that; there were a lot of people in the Directorate that had never shown me kindness; I'd be smiting for a long time to get to them all) but that didn't mean I wanted to hurt her. It was practice. Mom had never intentionally hurt me during practice. Well, most of the time, anyway.

I ran my sleeve along my cheek, slopping off the salty mix of sweat and the first annoying hint of tears. I wanted to believe they were from all the perspiration that was in my eyes, but I suspected they might also have been from the pride stuck in my throat, that burning feeling that I couldn't swallow away even though I wanted to. I had just gotten called out on my performance in the midst of my peers and fellow trainees. I hated that.

I took another breath, in and out, then another. I had stopped walking and was just standing, feeling the hot air gathered around me in a wall, like some sort of fortress of heat that had enshrouded my body. My long sleeves, gloves and pants didn't help, and even though I wore tennis shoes, my socks were long. They were all soaked, some from sweat but most from wading into the creek to recover from Eve. Every single article of my clothing was starting to stick to me, even as the water that had taken up residence within had matched my body temperature; only a little dash of coolness was running down and surprising me every once in a while. The rest just felt like sweat.

The first days of brutal summer had started only a couple weeks ago; before that it had been beautiful, sunny-skied and cool-aired spring, all the way to the last of June. Since then, it was though the weather had decided to get hostile. I had to say I preferred winter as a season to summer; it was colder, but even factoring in the number of times I'd landed in the snow while fighting, I didn't get as wet as I did sweating during these training exercises, which were an everyday thing, in one form or another.

"Hey." I had missed the footfalls behind me, caught up in my own thoughts. I turned without drying my eyes, hoping that the sweat would mask the other, marginally less stinging liquid. I doubted it would. Scott was there, along with Kat, who was leaning on him. They walked like I envisioned a couple would, her arm around his waist, her face looking more drawn than it had a few minutes ago. She rested against him, leaning her weight against his muscular chest. If we had been in a different place, and different people, she could have been a drunken sorority girl, leaning on her boyfriend for support.

And I could have been a...I dunno. Something else.

"You took down Eve pretty hard." Scott stopped, repositioning himself as Kat pushed off him to

stand on her own two wobbly feet.

~~My hands came up to cover my mouth as I wiped the sweat that was beading on my upper lip.~~
“Yep.” I let them rest there, as though I could cover the lies that were bound to drip out when he asked the inevitable question.

“Why?” It was Kat who asked it, her hair looking stringy because of the humidity, but without a hint of the frizz that was afflicting mine. Thanks, humidity. It’d take a miracle and an hour with the flat iron later to get the kinks out.

I didn’t move my hands away from my mouth. “Why what?”

“Why’d you take her down so hard that I had to fix a skull fracture, a broken sternum and three ribs?” Kat let go of Scott and dropped to her rump, sitting with her legs in front of her. “I know we don’t do these kind exercises where we beat the hell out of each other for real very often, but we’ve done it enough to know you don’t lose control like that.” She laughed and tossed a blond lock over her shoulder. “I mean, when it comes to the training, you’re like the queen of control; it’s why you’re Parks’ favorite—”

“I just didn’t think.” I was sweating even harder now, my lip pressed up against my hand, moisture perspiration trailing down my forehead from my hairline. I felt my shirt sticking to me and all I wanted was a shower. “It got away from me, the rock. The adrenaline was pumping after we took down Parks—”

“After you took down Parks, you mean? When you left us behind?” The accusation came out of Scott, his arms folded but his manner cool.

“I drew her away from you,” I said. “I don’t know what else I could have done to help you. I wanted to win, and it was just...” I pulled my hands away from my mouth and licked my lip, tasted the salty residue of sweat.

“It’s not Wolfe, is it?” Scott stared me down. His T-shirt had been white when we started, but now it was gray in the places where he had sweated through, and bore the stains of dirt and grime from where he’d been pinned to the ground. “He’s not breaking out or whatever—”

“He’s not,” I said. “I haven’t heard from the rogues’ gallery in my head in months. I think Zoller and I have that under control.” That was mostly true. The medication Zollers had given me was working, but I had other help as well.

“I guess it was hard for us to tell by the way you acted back there,” Kat said, sarcasm oozing through her words, which were laced with a kind of bone-weariness. Her eyes flicked down, and they were lacking the brightness that was ever-present in them. “I didn’t mean that. Accidents happen especially when they’re trying to train us for all the possibilities that could happen out there. It’s just not like you.”

“It happens.” Another voice joined our conversation. My head swiveled and I saw Glen Park shifting out of the shape of a wolf again. “You get reckless after playing this like it’s a game for too long.” He got taller as he walked, leaving behind all fours as his fur receded into the long beard and hair that I was accustomed to seeing. “Too much of this type of training’s not good. We need some real world experience for you three.” He halted behind me. I didn’t look away, even though my eyes were burning, this time from the sweat. “Especially for you, before your killer instinct gets away from you.”

I felt a burning again in the back of my throat. “I...do not...have a killer instinct.”

Scott coughed. “Um...haven’t you already killed three people?”

My tongue seemed to stick to the roof of my mouth and my jaw fell open. “I didn’t...I mean, Wolfe was unintentional and Gavrikov...he was gonna nuke Minneapolis.”

“And the other guy?” Scott stared back at me. “Henderschott? The one you tried to teach to fly?”

The angry red settled in my cheeks, burning me as I took a breath before answering. “That wasn’t

me.”

Scott looked back the way we had come, back toward the creek, which I could still hear running the distance. “Yeah, well *that* was all you. And Eve wasn’t an enemy.”

“This is a pointless discussion.” Parks’ voice was rough, like a flint striking a rock or a knife running over a sharpening stone. “Byerly, help Forrest back to her room. And let her rest, will you? You know how using her power takes it out of her.”

The burning in my cheeks got a little worse; I was pretty sure that Scott and Kat were sleeping together, but I didn’t really want to know for fact if it was true. Most of that was because there was someone I wished I could be sleeping with, but it wasn’t possible for me to touch him for more than three seconds without causing him excruciating pain followed by death. They walked away, Scott half-carrying Kat toward the dormitory building, which was quite a distance.

“What’s your problem, Sienna?” My head snapped back around to find Parks still looking at me, the rough, wrinkled skin around his eyes folded more than usual. They weren’t quite slitted, but they were a lot closer to closed than normal. It was the same look he got when we’d go to the firing range for weapons practice and he had to focus on a target at some distance. Parks was blunt to a fault, but it didn’t mean anything bad by it. He just said what he thought and let you sort it out.

“I’m just tired.” I couldn’t get a hand up to cover my mouth without Parks knowing I was lying. Hell, he probably knew anyway because his eyes grew more closed and he nodded. For the last six months he’d watched me as he trained all of us. We were a class of three, so it’s not like he had a ton of people to pay attention to. “We’ve been at a higher tempo of training lately, early mornings, late nights, all that. Like you said, it just wears on me. I’m ready to get to it.” I tried to hold my head higher, look him in the eyes, all that point-the-chin-in-defiance stuff. “I’ve had enough of the games. I want to get out in the field and go to work chasing down rogues.”

His gaze softened, the wrinkles spreading out. “Ariadne says you’re not ready.”

“That would matter to me if Ariadne was my training officer and worked with me every day.” I found I no longer needed to fake the defiance, the chin jutting. “I’m ready. Like it or not, me and the Junior League just took out two members of M-Squad. What do you think?”

He played it cool, too damned cool, not looking away but not registering a thing until he kicked his old, brown cowboy boot into the dusty ground. “We’ll find out soon enough if you’re ready. I must be getting old and senile to have taken down Kat first instead of you.”

“She’s easier to sneak up on.”

“Don’t get cocky.” His eyes found me again, his fingers stuck in the loops of his old jeans. “Facing a way to get yourself killed, underestimating the people you’re fighting – or did you not learn from my example today?”

“I got it.” I cleared my throat. “I won’t underestimate anybody.”

“Bold statement to make. Hope you’re right about that. You need to trust your teammates though, watch their backs, because they’ll be the ones watching yours, not anyone else.” He got a sour look and turned away from me for a second. “Get on home, then. Looks like you got the rest of the day off. You might want to take your liberty when you can get it. Not much time off around here, you know.”

“I know.” Believe me, I knew. It’d been six months since I had a day off. I walked back to the dormitory thinking about how different training to be an agent of the Directorate had been from what I thought it would be when I started. Looking back, I felt naive, like I was a kid when I began wandering in because I had no idea what else I should do with myself. I had, after all, been cast out into the world after the ultimate sheltered life. Sort of.

It was only a couple weeks after first leaving my house (for the first time in over ten years) that I decided to enter the training program. I hadn’t even come close to living a normal teenage life when I decided to really leave normal behind and become what amounted to a paranormal cop. The

Directorate paid me a lot of money to do this, all in hopes that someday I'd be a useful member of their policing force. And I was good, at least if we went by the training results. I put Scott to shame and made Kat look like a helpless little girl by comparison in every exercise they threw at us, from martial arts to weapons to chase and apprehension.

It was the "soft skills" that I lacked. Diplomacy, presenting a kind face and sympathetic ear to a metahuman who has just manifested their powers or to a human witness, freaked out by something they've seen that defies explanation. That was part of the job I was training for, being what they called a "Retriever" – trying to convince the newly powerful to come to the Directorate to get some purpose and direction in their abnormal lives. I sucked at that. Probably because it was foreign to me.

Maybe it was because I left home at a dead run with only the clothes on my back, being chased by two guys with guns and then, shortly thereafter, a crazed homicidal meta who nearly killed me. I guess after my own experience, it was hard for me to feel a ton of empathy for someone who gets a gentle knock on their door from someone without a gun who explains that they're different, they're special, and that there's a place for them, then offers them a chance to join a training program to channel their powers. It's a little different than my first real encounter with powers, which involved me being nearly choked to death in a grocery store parking lot after watching a maniac kill two innocent people.

I entered the dormitory building and felt the beautiful bliss of the air conditioner unit working overtime, sending a sweet chill across my body. The smell of the air was even different in the dormitory than it was outside, holding some kind of magical scent, like the processed and machine-made smell of the indoors, so much different than the overpowering, heated and wet atmosphere of the outdoors. By the time I got to my dorm room all the sweat on my body had congealed, evaporated, and turned to a freezing layer of moisture.

I closed the door behind me and peeled off the layers of sticky clothes. I grabbed a bottle of water out of the mini fridge by the desk and drained it on the way to the bathroom. As I stepped under the shower head I reflected that this wasn't so bad; the cool water washed down, rejuvenating me. I was there for about thirty minutes, which was a short shower for me. When I stepped out I heard someone come out in the room, and brushed open the door.

Zack was standing in front of the windows, looking out on the sun-beaten grounds. The sprinklers were going just outside, spraying the thirsty grass with water. I leaned against the bathroom door when I saw him, a smile spreading wide across my lips as I felt the wood of the frame through my bathrobe. "You're watching sprinklers water the lawn instead of me in the shower?" My smile turned wicked as he spun to face me.

Zack was tall, at least six feet, which was a bit of a stretch for me. His hair was a darkish blond, and he usually wore a self-aware smile. He was impassive now, though, with a hint of hesitation. I didn't like it when he wore that expression; it meant he had bad news. "I didn't want to gawk." I knew him pretty well by this point; he was my boyfriend, after all.

"You've got bad news?" I stepped out of the bathroom door, taking a couple steps closer to him, who was waiting for him to break it to me.

"I'd call it 'disappointing', not 'bad'," he said, crossing the distance between us and carefully placing his hands on my hips as he pulled me closer. He kissed me, but only for two seconds. After three, he'd stagger and get lightheaded. At five seconds, it'd start to burn. He broke away, but kept his hands where they were, avoiding any other flesh-to-flesh contact. The effect of my powers was cumulative, so if I kissed him again, it would start to drain him. "I have to cancel our date tonight."

"Oh." I tried not to show my disappointment, but it was definitely there. We had planned to go into Eden Prairie to eat at my favorite Greek restaurant, and after that see a movie. It was my favorite kind of date night.

"Kurt and I have to go to Michigan to track down a meta that's causing a stir in Detroit." He looked

pained as he said it, his handsome face pinched with the regret of having to tell me. "Not sure when I'll be back."

"Hopefully soon?" He rested a hand on my shoulder and I wished I could pull him closer, kiss him again. And again. "Maybe tomorrow?"

He grimaced. "Maybe, but I doubt it. This one sounds complicated – a couple of assaults, a robbery. Might not be that quick."

I rested my head on his shoulder for a second, smelling his cologne, then remembered my hair was wet and pulled away, my hand feeling the cloth of his black suit, where I'd left a damp spot. "I'm sorry."

There was a twinkle in his eye as he laughed. "It'll dry on the way to the airport, and if it doesn't, I'll probably be glad when Kurt and I have to haul our bags through the parking garage to the terminal. I don't know if you noticed, but it's kinda hot out there."

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to untangle it. "I noticed. The most comfortable part of my training exercise was when I ended up having to drag Eve out of the creek."

His brow lowered as he frowned. "Out of the creek? What happened?"

I felt my teeth click together and my jaw tighten. "I...um...kinda knocked her out of the air with a rock."

"That must have been a helluva a rock."

"It was a helluva throw, actually. The rock was just average."

"It's always a helluva throw if you're doing it, Miss Meta." He found his way back to a smile. "Why did you have to pull her out of the creek, though?"

I flinched at the memory of Eve, broken, lying on the rocky shore of the stream. "I kind of...broke her sternum...and ribs...and maybe fractured her skull a little."

His right eyebrow crept up until it was an inch higher than the other. "A little? I've had a fractured skull before. It's not a minor injury."

"It was an accident. Things just got a little out of hand." I took a deep breath.

He chewed his lip, opened his mouth and started to say something, then stopped. He blinked, then started again. "It wasn't Wolfe?"

"Ugh." I turned away from him, exhaling sharply. "Why does everyone keep asking me that? It's not Wolfe, okay? He's buried, safe and sound, way in the back. It was just me, slipping the leash a little, sick of training and thinking I was actually fighting someone. It's kinda been a while since I felt a real threat and peril, you know."

"Yeah, I know." I felt his hand on my shoulder and it took everything I had not to put mine on top of his. Passing out on my floor wasn't something that would make him very happy. "Not much longer and you'll be done with training and into the real world." I turned to look at him over my shoulder. "Then you'll long for the good ol' days of training."

I hung my head. "I doubt it. I just wish things were easier sometimes."

His eyes watched me. "With training?"

"Like...with everything. With training, with us...everything."

"With us?" His hand dropped to his side and he cocked his head. "What's wrong with us?"

"Let's see...I'd like to be able to touch my boyfriend for more than two seconds without stealing his very soul." I spat the words out like they were some kind of foul venom. He took a step back and closed my eyes and took a breath. "I'm sorry. That's my issue, not yours."

He stared at me, almost a blank look, and I caught the subtle calm of his gaze. "No, it's an issue for both of us."

"Yeah, but it's my fault." The full meaning of his last sentence made its way through my warrior emotions and I felt a sharp drop in my stomach. "What do you mean by that?"

He perked up, his mouth forming an oblong “o” as he recoiled slightly. “I...nothing.”

“It meant something.” I could feel the tension in my face. “It’s because we can’t—”

“No, I told you, that doesn’t matter—”

“It matters to you like it matters to every guy—”

“—there’s more to us than just—”

“*It matters!*” My shout ended his protest and he took another step back, as though he were afraid me unleashing Wolfe on him. “It matters. I know it matters to you. I may have to wear heavy clothing but it doesn’t mean I can’t *feel* anything through them—”

“I was out of line.” He held up his hands. “We knew getting into this that it was going to be different, because you’re different. That’s not bad, it’s just...” His eyes went to the side as he searched for the word. “...really inconvenient at the end of the night.”

“Yeah. Well.” I looked at the floor. “You’re not the only one it’s inconvenient for.”

“I just meant that—”

“You think I don’t want to?” I was back on his eyes again and he grimaced, balled up a fist and looked away. “You think I don’t think about it all the time? You’re not the only one that feels the effects after a date. We can’t even sleep in the same bed without worrying that I’ll roll over and press my cheek against you in the middle of the night, making you another ghost in my head.”

“I didn’t come here to fight.” He was focused on me, his eyes earnest, face oddly blank. “I came to say goodbye. I have a plane to catch in an hour and a half.”

“Well, you better get moving, because the airport’s at least a half-hour away at this time of day.” I pulled my arms tighter against me and narrowed my eyes at him.

He started toward the door and I watched him go. He stopped and started to say something, his fingers and knuckles white as they held the edge. He made it through a half-spin and halted, and I heard him breathe deep as his head dipped down. Whatever he had on his mind didn’t come out though, and after a minute he turned back and walked out the door, closing it much gentler than I would have expected.

My hand went to my forehead and covered my eyes from the light. I hoped he’d be all right on his trip, but I didn’t have the guts to call him and tell him that. I heard my smartphone beep – the one the Directorate had given me – and felt a thrill as I ran to where I’d left it on the desk next to the computer. I turned it on and swiped the screen to find I had a text message waiting. It appeared and I sighed – it wasn’t him. My eyes played across the words and my hand went back to my forehead blotting out the light, as if that could make the world, all my troubles, and that damned text message go away.

I’m back in town. Come over so we can talk. - Charlie

Chapter 4

About an hour later I shifted my car into park in the driveway of my house. The tree-lined street provided a little shade, but when I opened the car door, I felt the blast of warmth and hurried to get inside. The soles of my shoes seemed to stick on the driveway as I walked to the front door, pausing on the closed-off porch to shut the outside door before I opened the door to the house. The light was dim and mostly came in from gaps in the boards that covered all the windows, just the way Mom had set them up, screening me, the girl in the house, from the world outside every time she left.

I took a deep breath and slid my key in the lock. While Mom had been missing for the past six months, Ariadne had checked the records and told me that there wasn't a mortgage on the place. I had used my ample earnings to keep the property taxes and homeowner's insurance paid and a lawn and maintenance service helped keep the place up for me. I stopped by every week or so, just to make sure everything was okay, but otherwise the house was empty.

Except when Charlie came to town.

The smell of something cooking on the stove hit me as I shut the door. The air conditioner was running and I felt the effects, the cool air filtering in like a sigh of relief after holding my breath. The alarm was deactivated; no reason to keep it active since no one was living here. When last I had left the place was clean, a little musty, but otherwise all right. I had left all Mom's clothes in her closet, the dishes in the cupboards, but cleaned most of the food out save for the things like Ramen Noodles that didn't have an expiration date looming.

I heard her clanging some pots in the kitchen before I saw her. She peeked a head around the doorway and flashed me a smile. Her hair was dark, long, and stood out against her tanned skin and white teeth. Her lips were curled, and painted the deepest shade of red the cosmetics companies made. "Hello there." She emerged from the kitchen and I almost blinked in surprise. I shouldn't have; nothing about my aunt Charlene – Charlie, she liked to be called – should have surprised me by now.

She wore a white tank top that was partially sweated through, and jean shorts that were cut off way too short. Her bare feet were leaving moisture spots on the linoleum floors as she stepped, walking delicately on her toes over to me. Her midriff was bare where her shirt didn't quite reach the waistband of her shorts, which was frayed badly and washed out, white threads where there might once have been blue, the button at the top of her fly a clash against her belly. I shook my head and she smiled wider. "Your mom didn't like how I dress, either."

"I don't care how you dress." I walked toward her, suddenly self-conscious in my heavy jeans and button-down shirt that covered me to the neck.

She spread her arms wide, prompting me to give her a careful hug, avoiding the prodigious amount of skin she had exposed. "Be careful," she said in whispered caution, "you know the stronger succubus will drain the weaker." I pulled back and she made to muss my hair, but I pushed her away with my gloved hand, drawing a laugh from her.

"What brings you back to the Cities?" I asked, using the local slang for the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. I walked my way to the couch as she leaned against the pillar at the edge of the kitchen.

"Just passing through." She said it breezily, like she did almost everything, not a care in her world. She smiled. "Figured I'd drop in on my favorite niece."

"Your only niece, to hear you tell it."

"That too. You know, you could do a better job of stocking this place. All I found was Ramen."

"Want to go out to eat?"

“No plans with your boyfriend, the agent, for tonight?” Her leer was suggestive, in a way that if my mom had ever let slip onto her face, would have freaked me out. They were so different.

“No.” I didn’t look away, exactly, but neither did I look toward her.

“Uh huh.” She bored in on me and stepped back into the kitchen, peering through the tiny pass-through that looked out into the living room. “You guys break up?”

I sat down and tugged at my jeans, which felt tight, restrictive and hotter than they had any right to be considering how low the air conditioner had been set in here. I’d feel the electricity bill this month, I bet. “No. Not exactly.” She stared through the little square hole at me, not looking away. “We had a fight.”

Her face disappeared, but her voice was still loud. “Lemme guess: about touching.”

I felt my lower lip jut out, puckering. “What else would we fight about?”

“Couples fight about lots of things, sweetie.” Her voice came from the kitchen, over the clanging of a pan. “But succubi tend to argue about one, if they’re crazy enough to be part of a couple.”

“You calling me crazy?” I said it with an air of amusement.

“Little bit. You are just like me, after all.” I caught a grin through the pass-through and then I heard water pouring down the drain in the sink. A minute later Charlie emerged from the kitchen. “I mean, there’s a whole world of men out there. You don’t really have the luxury of sleeping with the ones you like and expecting them to be alive in the morning, so...”

I looked away from her. “Yeah. I know it, he knows it, but it still makes us both crazy.” She sat down on the couch next to me, splaying out and putting her bare feet on the glass coffee table I’d bought as a replacement for the one broken months ago. “How do you deal with that?”

She had her mouth open, her tongue rolling over her molars, the very picture of disinterest. “You don’t sleep with the ones you don’t want to die, and you don’t get close enough to anybody to have a matter.”

“I just...I’m sick of being the world’s greatest tease to my boyfriend. He’s a good guy, and...” I stopped as her chest jerked in a case of the giggles. “What?”

“You don’t have to be a tease. I mean, there are other ways to—”

“Well, yeah, I mean, I know but—” I stuttered as I answered her.

“Just making sure. I wouldn’t have expected your mom to teach you anything.”

I blushed. “She didn’t. But I mean, I know stuff—”

“Sure you do, sweets. Sure you do.” Charlie slapped me on the thigh and clicked her tongue against her teeth. “So are we going out to eat or what? ‘Cause I’m starving and I poured the Ramen down the sink.”

“What?” I blinked, still thinking about what we’d been talking about a sentence before. “Oh, sure.”

“Your treat, right?” She gave me a wide grin. “Not all of us have high-paying gigs with the media cops. The rest of us have to make our money honestly, and I blew the last of my cash getting back in town. Haven’t had a chance to stop by the...ATM...yet.”

“Sure.” I nodded at her and reached for my purse, which was hanging at my side. “My treat. There’s a Greek place over in Eden Prairie that’s really good—” My attention was caught by the sudden ringing from my bag. “Sorry.” I grabbed my cell phone and answered it while Charlie looked on with an eyebrow raised. “Hello?”

“Are you off-campus?” Ariadne’s voice was clipped, urgent, washed out slightly by the connection.

“Yeah.” I looked around the living room. “I’m just at my house, checking to make sure everything’s still all right.”

“I need you at Headquarters immediately.” Her voice was pinched, more hurried than usual. “The Director and I need to speak with you.”

“Umm.” I swallowed, heavy. “Is this about—”

“I’m not going to discuss it on an open line. Report to the Director’s office in forty-five minutes.” I heard a click and looked at the screen of my phone. She’d hung up on me.

I looked up to see Charlie staring at me, her head slanted to the side. “About this Greek place?”

I felt the tension in my guts and wondered if I was about to get a thorough ass-chewing back at the Directorate. “I can’t. I just got called back to work.”

Charlie’s jaw dropped slightly and then twisted to a kind of cold disbelief. “I just threw out the Ramen.”

“I’m sorry.” I put my phone back in my purse and my hand pushed my hair behind my ears before I fell over my eyes. “I have to go.” My hand came out with ten crisp twenty-dollar bills and I handed them to her. “This should cover dinner and a little more. I’m sorry to leave so abruptly, but—”

Her eyes lit up and she took the money a little quicker than I would have thought. “It happens.” She tossed her hair over her shoulder and bit her lip as she counted the bills.

“How long are you in town this time?” I tried to catch her eyes, but they were on the money still.

“Not sure.” Casual indifference. Great. “A day or two, maybe more, maybe less.” She smiled, oddly infuriating me. “You know how it is. Sometimes I get the call and I have to get outta town.”

“Yeah, maybe you can explain how that works to me sometime.” I laced it with irony. “I need some help, when we get a chance, you know, keeping them under wraps—”

“Pfffff.” She turned her exhalation into a full-blown insult by rolling her eyes at the same time. “We’ve been over this. You absorbed them, not vice versa. It’s not that hard. You just make them do what you want them to do. It’s your body, not theirs. If they give you any flack, tell them to sit down and shut up, that it’s your head and you’ll run it however you please.”

I pondered how to explain to her how powerful Wolfe could be when he wanted to assert himself. The drug that Dr. Zollers had put me on helped keep him on a leash, along with some other pointers about building a wall in my head that Charlie had given me over the last few months, but I didn’t feel like it was enough. He was still back there; I could feel him sometimes, and I hated it. “All right, gotta go.”

“Call me, kiddo. We’ll do lunch sometime.” She winked at me and started toward the bedroom.

“Just make sure you do the dishes before you leave.” She stopped in the hallway and shot a look back at me, a little frown with a slanted down eye that made me wish I hadn’t said anything. “You left them in the sink last time and I didn’t find them for a week.”

“Ugh, fine, yes, Mom.” She said it with a laugh and another roll of the eyes. “Tell your bosses I said hi.”

“Yeah, right. Because you want the Directorate to know about you.”

“Hell no. I’d like to remain far off their radar, if you please.” She tugged on her waistband. “They’ve probably got a file on me. You should check sometime.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “They don’t have any record of my mom having a sister.”

“Uh huh. If you were the suspicious sort, you might think something of that – like I was lying?”

I started toward the door. “I don’t think you’re lying, Charlie.”

“Why’s that? Doesn’t everyone in the meta world want a piece of you? Having someone pretend to be your aunt when you still don’t totally know who to trust? Seems like kind of a winning strategy to get close to you, if it worked.” She was stock still, waiting for me to respond.

“You’re right.” I opened the door. “But that’s the problem, isn’t it?” I smiled at her and a puzzled look crossed her face. “You may be my aunt, but I don’t trust anybody.”

I caught a flash of a smile from her as I backed out the door. “Heh. You really are just like me. See ya later.”

I closed it behind me, stepping out onto the warmth of the porch, and felt the heat pervade me again. “Guess it runs in the family.”

Chapter 5

I wondered if I was in trouble the whole way back to the Directorate, pondering if the man in charge (Old Man Winter, we called him, because he was old, a frost giant, and his name was Eric Winter) was going to run me through the mill for what I'd done to one of his stars. I parked in the Headquarters building and took the elevator straight from the garage to the top floor, where his office was. It was still sunny out when I arrived, in spite of the fact that it was nine o'clock at night. A ninety degrees. I love Minnesota.

It was damned quiet when I knocked on the door, and a muffled call of "Come in," was followed by the door swinging open to reveal Glen Parks, his gray hair pulled back in a ponytail. I checked to make sure I was in the right place. Old Man Winter was sitting at his desk, his back to the window, gray hair and cold blue eyes visible even at this distance. Ariadne was at his shoulder, but her clothing had changed since I had seen her on the grounds earlier. Her red hair was pulled back and her blouse was white.

Parks moved aside for me to enter and I blinked as I stepped into the office. Scott Byerly and K Forrester were seated in the chairs in front of Old Man Winter's desk, Kat still looking slightly washed out, and Scott was quiet, his fingers resting on his chin, eyes forward. "Looks like the party started without me." I clutched the strap of my purse a little tighter, wondering if I was about to get smacked down. No one said anything.

Scott stood as I approached the desk, offering me his seat. I smiled and shook my head, then turned my concentration back to Ariadne and Old Man Winter, who both stared at me, Old Man Winter with his usual stoic calm, Ariadne intense, her eyes almost on fire. Scott found his way back into the seat and the silence continued, unabated, as I shifted my weight between my feet for the next thirty seconds or so, hoping someone would say something before I had to resort to small talk.

"I suppose you're wondering why we called you all here." Ariadne was the one that spoke, the lines visible at the corners of her eyes.

Kat and Scott exchanged a look with each other. Kat sat up straighter in her seat, her eyes a little wide. "Um...because Sienna nearly killed Eve?"

"I didn't..." I stopped myself just in time. I didn't look at Old Man Winter. "It was an accident."

"Unfortunately, we don't have time to hash over training accidents at the moment." Did I detect a note of regret and acrimony in Ariadne's voice on that one? Her mouth remained a severe line. "We have other business." She looked over Kat's shoulder to Parks.

I turned to look at our trainer and he stepped forward, a folder in his hand. "In the last twenty-four hours there were a string of convenience store robberies from Gillette, Wyoming across the Interstate 90 corridor in South Dakota that have caught our attention."

Scott snorted, and when we all looked at him, his face went red. "Sorry. It's just funny to hear I-90 described as a corridor. It's a big, long stretch of dusty plains and nothing."

Parks stepped between us and set the folder on the desk, opening it to reveal some photos. "Corridor or not, this could be a problem. No fatalities so far, but there were assaults during each of the robberies. The one in South Dakota included an assault on a local police officer. Several concussion injuries for the store clerks, some trouble remembering what happened, including the assailant, who," he coughed, "appears to have overpowered all the victims without a weapon." He pointed to one of the photos. "This clerk was lucky: his head nearly went through the counter, but he lived."

I stared at the picture he indicated. The shelves behind the counter were trashed, the glass broken and blood stains ran in a circular splatter down the surface. It looked like whatever had happened had

been painful. “You think it’s a meta.”

Parks paused before answering. “Yeah. It’s the Sherriff’s Deputy in Draper that puts it over the top for us. He was knocked out before he could draw a weapon or react. That’s not normal. Assuming he was following procedure, he wouldn’t have let someone get so close to him.” He looked at each of us in turn. “We’ve seen this sort of pattern before. It’s probably a young meta, a junior hellion who’s getting hold of his oats, thinks he’s a badass, not quite ready to cross into the realm of killing just yet but getting there.”

“Probably dangerous if cornered,” Ariadne said, leaning on the desk with both hands. “M-Squad’s been dispatched to help some of our agents from the Texas branch deal with a severely dangerous meta that’s wreaking havoc in western Kansas, and our other agents are on assignments, which leaves us with no one to follow up on these incidents.”

I perked up and saw Scott and Kat do the same. “No one?” My question was tentative, and I was reminded of the times when I would get Mom to break her rigid and inflexible rules. I called those occasions miracles, because they didn’t happen very often.

Ariadne’s mouth became a thin line. “We’re strained. Meta activity is up – way up. We’re spending a lot of time chasing ghosts lately – things that don’t pan out.” She brought a hand up to push her hair back and I caught a glimpse of something, written hard across the faded lines of her face. Ariadne wasn’t old, more like middle age, but in that moment she sure as hell looked it. “We have no one else to send, and this needs to be followed up on. Congratulations.” Her eyes bored into each of us in turn. “You’re up.”

“This is serious business,” Parks said, his arms folded as he stood apart from Ariadne and Old Man Winter. “You’re not kids anymore and I vouched for you, told ‘em you’re ready to give it hell. Don’t take any stupid chances, and watch each other’s backs.”

I swallowed my excitement. “What do you want us to do, exactly?”

Ariadne exchanged a look with Parks. “The last robbery was about three hundred miles south of the Twin Cities, at six o’clock this morning, in Owatonna, Minnesota.”

“I know where that is.” Scott was awake with a little excitement. “They’ve got an awesome outdoors store down there—”

“You’re not going down there to go shopping.” Ariadne cut him off without mercy. “You’re going down there to ask questions and establish a direction to head.” She opened a packet and slid the contents across the desk to us. I saw my face on a driver’s license, as well as one for Scott and Kat. There were also three leather holders that looked a lot like wallets, but when I picked one up and flipped it open it held the credentials of an FBI Agent named Katrina Ahern, with a picture of Kat.

I held it up and dangled it in the air in mild surprise. “Impersonating a federal agent is a felony.”

Ariadne met my stare, grim and serious. “It’s real. Your names and pictures are in the FBI databases and you’ll pass muster unless you do something deeply stupid. My advice?” She let a little half-smile loose as she said it.

“Don’t do anything deeply stupid,” I said, staring at the FBI ID with my picture in it. “You say these are real—”

“They’ll even get you into an FBI field office if you had some reason to go there,” Parks said. “I wouldn’t recommend it, though, because you’ll likely have to answer questions you won’t want to answer. These are so you can bypass local law enforcement if they give you any guff, and to get civilians to answer your questions. Now, you all look like friggin’ kids, but we’ll dress you up professionally and that oughta take care of most of the problem.”

I stared at the Driver’s License with my picture on it. I wondered idly why I’d been given it, then I realized it fit my new name, Sienna Clarke. I also noticed it added about five years onto my birthday. I tried not to think about the implications of being twenty-three years old in a single stroke.

“All this is part of your cover story.” Ariadne’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “You’re rookie agents, chasing down leads on a robber that’s crossed interstate lines.”

“What happens if we run across the real agents who are investigating it?” I asked because I was curious. I had a feeling it would be bad.

Parks smiled. “According to the FBI’s computers, agents Clarke, Green and Ahern,” he nodded to each of us in turn, “are the only ones assigned to this case. Your only issues will be the ones you make for yourselves, which is why Ariadne was cautioning you not to make a spectacle.”

“So you want us to track this guy down?” Kat looked a little confused. “Catch him or kill him...?”

“Capture, please.” Ariadne’s tone turned to ice. “If things escalate, we’ll examine other options, but for now it’s capture only. While the robber has used brutal means, as yet he or she hasn’t caused serious, lasting harm to any of the victims. Like Parks said, we suspect a teenager, manifesting the powers and getting out of control with the taste of freedom they’re experiencing.”

She drew herself up, removing her hands from the desk and tucking them behind her back. “This is their tipping point. If we act quickly, we can save them and bring them back here. If you screw it up, they go the other way, become a criminal for life and either spend time in our Arizona facility or end up dead.”

“You’ll draw weapons from the armory in case things get out of hand.” Parks was stern as he said it. “Just make sure you aren’t the ones who make it go that way.”

Ariadne shot a look at Parks. “They’re all qualified to carry a sidearm?” After he nodded, she went on. “Remember that your best weapon is yourselves. You’ll leave within the hour. Pack a bag and be prepared to be gone for a week or more. Any questions?” She waited for us to ask anything, but none of us did. “Keep your cell phones on you at all times. I expect progress reports every three hours while you’re awake, even if it’s only something as mundane as ‘We stopped to pee at a gas station’. If we suffer from anything on this excursion, it will be overcommunication, not under.” She glared at each of us in turn. “And no fighting amongst yourselves.”

“It’s been like...months, since any of us fought,” I said.

“And keep your temper in check.” Ariadne looked daggers at me. “Are we clear?”

“Like Saran wrap, but without the flexibility.” I smiled at her.

“You are being entrusted with a responsibility that is most serious.” Old Man Winter finally broke his silence, leaving behind the role of set piece that he so often cultivated during meetings and gracing us with his deep, thickly accented voice. It was so smooth he could have been on the radio, but it was intimidating too, the way it spilled out, with more authority than anyone else I’d met. “This is your first step out of training. Agent Parks has assured us that the three of you are ready, but remember that you are still being tested, that you are not yet agents. Succeed and follow the rules and this can be a significant mark in your favor; fail and we will have to evaluate how effective your training has been.”

His ice cold gaze fell on Kat first, causing her to shudder, then on Scott. “Be careful and achieve your objective. This is your chance.” His eyes fell on me last of all, and I felt a freezing chill as he looked through me. “Do not fail us.”

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