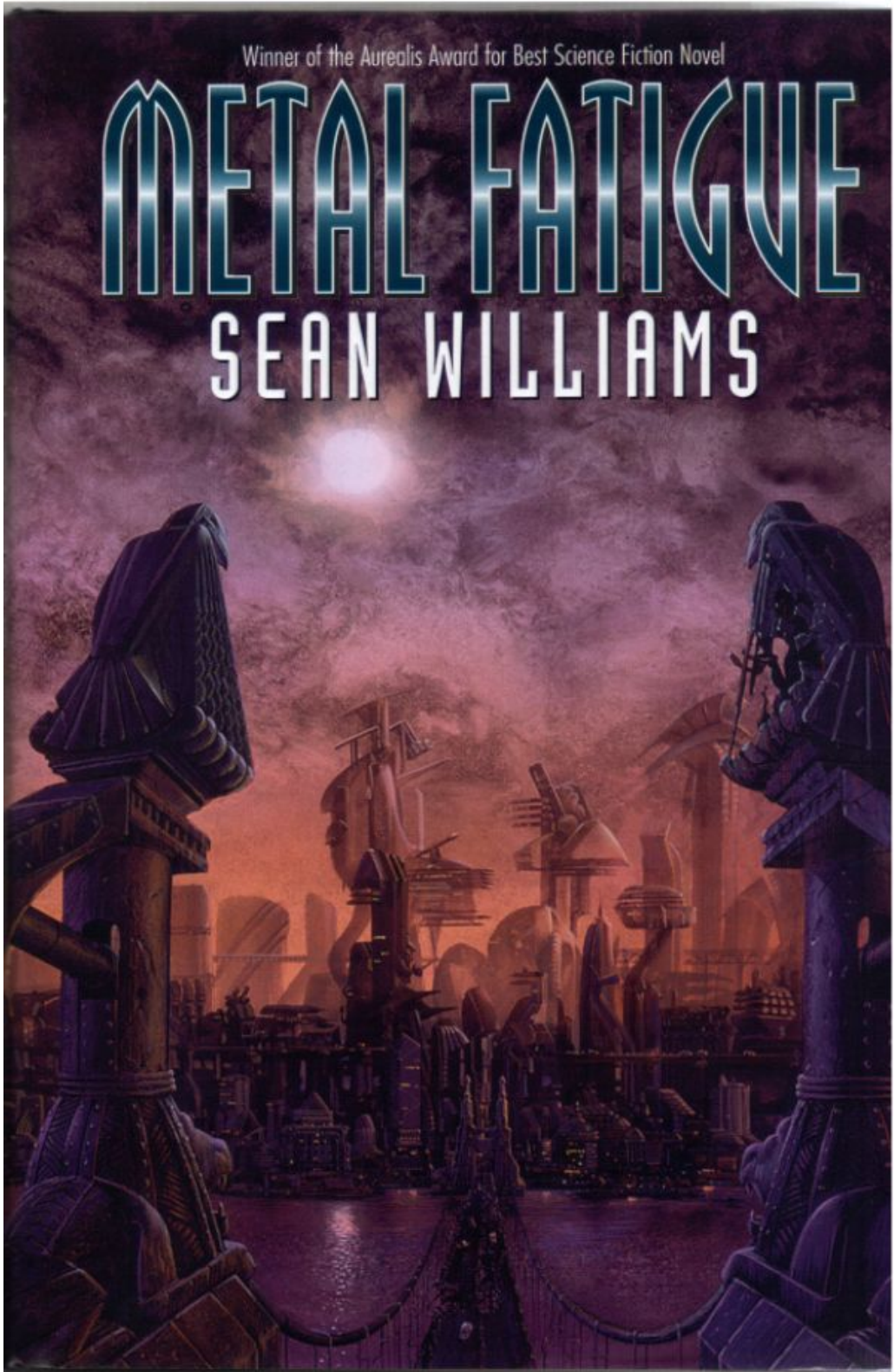


Metal Fatigue



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METAL FATIGUE

Sean Williams



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In memoriam

Harold Alwin Schiller (1903-1983)

David John Williams (1942-1995)

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"Each culture casts its own shadow, a shadow which is a perfect description of its own form and nature. The shadow which our technological civilisation casts is that of Lilith, 'the maid of desolation' who dances in the ruins of cities. Now that we have made a single polluted city of the entire world, she is preparing to dance in the ruins of our planetary megalopolis."

William Irwin Thompson: *The Time Falling Bodies Take To Light*

Part One

Thou Shalt Not Steal

"Prelude"

Friday, 14 September, 2096, 11:15 p.m.

"I am Lucifer," said the voice.

He woke with a start, and opened his eyes.

The room was lit by second-hand streetlight, an indistinct, yellow haze which spilled through the curtains and lapped at the damp-stained walls. The curfew had not yet fallen, which placed the time at before twelve o'clock; still, the faint electric light was not quite enough to fully dispel the night. Shadows crowded about the bed, whispering black secrets in the distant voice of the city.

He sat up, letting the sheet slip from his shoulders to his lap. The humid air, stirred by the sudden movement, brushed the rigid bulges of his muscles with the electric caress of an approaching thunderstorm. The woman beside him snuffled to herself and rolled over. There was a subtle tension in the air, an expectant pause, a moment waiting to be filled.

He listened . . .

People stirred in the buildings around him: someone screamed, another laughed, a third raised her voice in anger. A nearby couple made love with abandon, oblivious to his prying, sensitive ears. Far away, the languid tongue of the river licked its lips and tasted the rotten teeth of Patriot Bridge.

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When the voice spoke again, it did so without sound or expression. It whispered directly into his mind a second time, "I am Lucifer," then fell silent again, waiting.

He closed his eyes, concentrated, and visualised a reply, parcelling the soundless words into a bundle of electric thought and hurling it outward into the night.

The response was instantaneous: "Remember your duty."

He slid from beneath the sheet and stood upright. In profile and near-darkness, his naked body was sexless and smooth-skinned. His chest and shoulders were massive, and his limbs gifted with both power and grace. His poise balanced, trembling, on the brink of blinding motion.

He remained that way for some time - frozen, indecisive, reluctant to commit himself to any course of action - until movement through a part in the curtains caught his pinprick eye. Leaning closer to the window, he peered out and down at the empty street below. As he watched, a shadow moved, stepped onto the littered roadway and into a wash of streetlight.

The man stood a full foot shorter than he, with wide shoulders and a wrestler's build not yet soft with age. Receding mouse-brown hair exposed a high, proud forehead and generous ears. A thick moustache bristled beneath the snub nose, lending the man an air of familiarity that defied the best efforts of his memory. He might have seen this man somewhere before, although he wasn't sure where.

It didn't matter. The man, whoever he was, was irrelevant. Curiosity had been carefully bred out of him, replaced with an inescapable compulsion to obey orders.

There was something about the man's silent watchfulness, though, that made him nervous. Something indefinably wrong. The man was so still, he hardly seemed to breathe . . .

The woman stirred again, not quite awake. Her voice was muffled by sleep. "Cati?"

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He turned away from the window. The blackness of her hair formed a puddle on the pillow, a pool of darkness deeper than the shadows. Reaching down with one massive hand, he touched her reassuringly on the shoulder. The trembling of his fingertips eased as he gently caressed her soft skin, even when the voice called a third time. She was Sanctuary in a world he could not begin to understand, queen of a haven called Peace; he would protect his Sanctuary every way he could, even if it was his own nature that threatened her.

Slowly, her breathing deepened, became more regular, until she finally returned to sleep.

He went to the bathroom, where he would not disturb her further, and opened his mind to the insistent touch of the one who called himself Lucifer.

When curfew fell at midnight, he was leaping from rooftop to rooftop high above the streets, hunting. And the silent man who had stood on the street under his window had long since disappeared.

1

Saturday, 15 September, 1:25 a.m.

From the outside, it looked like an empty warehouse: its doors had rusted shut; its windows were broken and boarded up; its roof was slowly caving in.

Kennedy Polis had many such buildings. Once, six decades past, swift, solar-powered ferries had shunted back and forth along the river, bringing with them trade goods from nearby towns. The warehouses had been full, then, and business brisk. Kennedy had shone like a jewel in the North American Model City Project's crown. Completely free of petrochemical fuels, self-sufficient except for a few basic raw materials and equipped with the latest reclamation technologies, it had symbolised the new, cleaner lifestyle promised by politicians for decades - a harbinger of the NAMCP's utopian dream.

The War, however, had killed the dream, and the Dissolution that had followed had killed most of the dreamers. Now the warehouses stood empty, rotting slowly in the moist air drifting off the river. Some had become temporary homes for refugees, others were taken over by the Mayoralty; the remainder simply awaited the reopening of the city's self-imposed walls, if such ever happened.

The years rested heavily upon Kennedy, and upon its warehouses in particular. But it had not died.

Not yet.

This warehouse was located on a deserted cul-de-sac not far from the perpetual slosh and tumble of the river. A white, electric vehicle slid to a halt by a rusted phone booth at the end of the street. The letters "RSD" were painted in bold black down each side of the car and on its trunk.

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The younger of the two people inside the car, a woman in her mid-thirties with shoulder-length blonde hair and strong laughter-lines, peered sceptically through the rain-spattered windscreen.

"You're sure this is the right place, Phil?"

The man beside her nodded. With a slightly receding hairline, a thick moustache and a body that was past its peak without being infirm, he looked to be only a few years older than his companion; perhaps in his mid-forties. He was in fact much older. It showed sometimes in his voice.

"This is it, Barney. Trust me." He smiled, teasing. "You wanted to come, remember?"

"Only because you promised to buy me a drink." She pouted mournfully, and he knew she was ribbing him in return. Barney Daniels and Phil Roads had been close friends for most of her life, especially since her father's death, and knew each other's games well.

"Best bar in Kennedy, you said," she continued, nodding disdainfully through the window at the derelict warehouse, no different from the scores of others within spitting distance. "Doesn't look like much to me."

"Nevertheless." He locked the dash with his thumb-print and keyed the car's security system. Thirty seconds. "Coming?"

"Do I have a choice?"

They stepped out of the car and into the street, pulling coats closer to protect their bodies. The rain was heavy and thick, falling in a warm sheet from the dark sky, a solid mass only slightly less dense than the nearby river. Their clothing consisted of the standard casual uniforms of the city's Regional Security Department: grey synthetic fabric, recycled aluminium buttons and thick greatcoats. Roads' genuine leather boots were a rarity in Kennedy, and allowed him to walk through puddles with greater comfort than Barney.

"This way." He led her down a narrow flight of stairs between two buildings. Paint peelings from the crumbling brick walls littered the asphalt path. A left turn took them to a steel door, which slid aside on

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smooth-oiled runners as they approached. The passageway on the other side was gloomily lit, but at least relatively clean and dry.

As they passed through the entrance, Roads noted the tingling, skin-crawling sensation of security scanners, electromagnetic fingers that reached through their clothes to search for the telltale shapes of concealed weapons. Barney, beside him, was far too young to remember the technology that had been available, if not commonplace, before the War, and nervously rubbed the suddenly erect hair of her forearms.

Roads didn't break his stride; the security-sweep was just the first of many technological traps designed to unsettle the unwary or the ignorant, and he didn't want to stop each time to bring her up to date. Besides, she was canny enough. If he looked like he knew what he was doing, she would follow his example.

He only hoped he *did* know. It had been so long since he had last come this way . . .

The door at the far end of the corridor remained closed. A panel slid aside in the wall to the right of the door and a gender-neutral voice spoke:

"Please disarm. Your weapons will be returned to you when you leave."

"Phil?" Barney's voice betrayed her nervousness.

"It's okay." He opened his coat and removed his belt. The pistol - loaded with plastic bullets, lead being another rarity - and its holster vanished behind the panel; hers followed after a slight hesitation.

The door slid open.

They stepped through into a muffled riot of noise. Somewhere nearby, removed by only a wall or two, a very large, very noisy party was taking place. Roads smelled smoke and liquor in large quantities, and a general miasma of damp flesh.

Two large bouncers awaited them behind a low counter. "Names?" asked one without looking up from a neon-bright video screen. His left

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eye was covered with what looked like a simple leather patch. Roads didn't doubt that it hid more than an empty socket.

"Phil Roads." He pressed palm to scanner and waited for confirmation. "I still have access here, I believe."

"That is correct, sir," said the bouncer, his manner formal once the ID was approved. He waved Barney forward, and she likewise subjected her handprint to the machine's scrutiny.

It beeped a negative: as far as its files were concerned, she did not exist. That wasn't necessarily a problem; at least she wasn't a known threat.

"Ms Daniels is my guest," explained Roads. "We're here to see the Head. He's expecting us."

"I'll notify him of your presence." The bouncer listened to an earplug's whisper for a moment, then said: "He'll meet you shortly. This way."

Barney hesitated again, and Roads patted her on the shoulder, nudging her forward.

"After you."

"Will I regret it?" she asked.

"Probably."

She grimaced. "If you insist, then."

He smiled in return, and followed her inside.

#

The bar was full of half-seen, vaguely demonic shapes that twisted and writhed in the smoke of a hundred lit cigarettes, thrown into sharp relief by irregular strobes. Music blared from towering wall speakers as Roads and Barney headed in the general direction indicated by the bouncer. An expansive, horseshoe-shaped counter draped with bodies lay across their path. Short but solid, Roads used his weight plus the occasional elbow to clear a way through the crowd. Barney followed close at his heels.

The cubicle awaiting them was the only empty space in the entire venue, one of ten similar cubicles raised half a metre above floor level.

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Containing nothing more than a table and two leather-bound chairs, it was tucked into an anonymous corner opposite the entrance. A yellow lamp provided its sole illumination.

Roads shrugged out of his damp overcoat and slid awkwardly into the cramped enclosure, noting with relief that it was acoustically shielded. Behind them, the bellow of the crowd diminished to an irritating rather than painful mumble. Barney settled into the seat across the table from him, looking bedraggled and slightly stunned.

"Drinks?" asked a woman via the booth's intercom.

"Water, thanks." He glanced at Barney. Drinking on duty was forbidden, but she looked like she needed it. "And a Scotch."

"Any preference? We have -"

"Something from the cellar. Glenfiddich, if possible. No ice."

"Certainly. Your drinks will be with you shortly."

He leaned an elbow onto the table and smiled at his assistant's expression, waiting for her to speak. She seemed to be having trouble choosing one question out of the thousands she obviously wanted to ask.

"Where's your friend going to sit?" she eventually managed.

"He'll cope."

"I guess he'll have to." She looked around. "Are you going to tell me where we are, or -?"

He hushed her with a finger to his lips. "Wait until he arrives. Then he can explain."

They scanned the room to pass the time. Kennedy no longer boasted a decadent social set, but this crowd wouldn't have been part of it even if it had. Roads recognised a number of people, several matching records in the city's Most Wanted datapool. It was almost as if all the riff-raff of Kennedy Polis had gathered for a quick drink before venturing out into the night to pursue their regular activities. A disconcerting number were young - from teenagers to mid-twenties - reflecting the city's growing youth crime problem.

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"If only I had my gun," whispered Barney. "Isn't that Danny Chong, the bounty-hunter?"

Roads nodded. "It is, but forget it. This is neutral territory. No-one has jurisdiction in here."

"Except 'the Head'?"

"Right. And I shouldn't have to add that we're outnumbered as well."

"Point taken. As long as the restriction works both ways, I'll keep quiet."

"It does." He was glad she understood. Barney wasn't stupid, but she was still young. At his age, he tended to forget about justice and aim for workable compromises instead.

He was about to point out another celebrity of the underworld when a third voice from within the cubicle cleared its throat and spoke:

"Would you care for a conversation?"

They turned to face a holographic image of the head of a man in his late forties. The head was bald and angular, somehow twisted from true; the nose in particular was obviously crooked. Its lips curled with wry amusement.

The head floated in the air one centimetre above the tabletop. Barney's gasp of astonishment was clearly audible.

"The cost for my time is negotiable." The head continued, radiating dubious goodwill. "It can be debited from your R&R account or settled in cash. Whichever you prefer."

"Really?" Roads settled back into the chair. He doubted that the first option was accepted very often; the Rations and Resources transaction could be too easily traced, for both patron and establishment. Although the alternative, cash money, had only recently reappeared in the city, as a result of the latest downgrade of the R&R commerce network, unofficial currencies had always circulated through the underground economy.

Barney reached out to touch the hologram, as though she couldn't believe what she was seeing. Her hand passed through it unimpeded.

"What is it?" she hissed to Roads.

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"I am a computer-generated psychogenic template," said the hologram before he could reply. "A simulated personality, if you like, provided for nothing more than your entertainment."

"But —"

"My existence is highly illegal. I can assure you of that." The head grinned, obviously enjoying her discomfort. Hardware sophisticated enough to generate real-time holograms hadn't been used in decades for anything as frivolous as entertainment.

Roads leaned forward to butt in. "Quit playing games, Keith. I haven't got all night."

The head froze in mid-expression, caught between a frown and the beginning of a word like a movie in mid-frame. An instant later it returned to life. Although its grey features hadn't changed, Roads detected a subtle difference, a nuance of facial tension that suggested another, quite separate personality.

"Ah, yes," said the head, tilting in acknowledgment. "I apologise for the previous personality. A simple ruse to affirm your identity."

"And you are?"

"Tut-tut, Phil. It hasn't been that long, has it?"

"No, but it pays to be sure."

"Quite so, for both of us."

Roads felt the pressure of eyes upon him, and belatedly turned to his companion.

"Keith, I'd like you to meet my assistant, Barney Daniels. Barney, this is Keith Morrow."

Her eyes widened.

"Pleasure," said the Head, bowing at the neck.

She stared at the hologram, then at Roads. "*The* Keith Morrow?"

"At your service."

"Oh my God."

Roads knew what Barney was thinking. Keith Morrow was on the city's *other* Most Wanted list, the one the general public didn't see.

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There was no physical description for anyone on that list, just a tally of suspected crimes against the city – including conspiracy, murder, and resource misappropriation. Standing orders were not to arrest, but to 'decommission'. In Morrow's case, in all the years Barney had been on the force, no Regional Security Department officer had come close to doing either.

Not just 'a' head, but *the* Head.

Barney's hand slipped down to the radio in her coat pocket.

"Don't." Roads reached across the table to stop her. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the bouncers hovering. "This isn't a bust."

Her eyes flashed. "Then what is it?"

"A very bad pun," said Morrow, looking pained. "I am a businessman, my dear, not a petty criminal. Ask Phil. Just a smuggler with connections, I swear."

"Hoarding is still illegal," she protested.

"It is, yes, for the moment. These are desperate times. I do what I can to survive, and no more, until the day when I am no longer considered to be a criminal."

"On those charges only."

"On all charges. I do not prey on the weak; only the strong."

She hesitated, but her hand remained in her coat. "Phil?"

"Trust me," he repeated. "I'm not bent, if that's what's worrying you."

"Alas," rued the head. "How true."

"And besides," Roads went on, "we couldn't arrest him if we wanted to."

"Why not?"

Morrow smiled. "Because I'm dead, my dear, that's why not. I died over fifty years ago."

"That's impossible!"

"'Impossible' is a ridiculous word." Morrow rolled his eyes. "You children of the Dissolution are all the same. You always have difficulty accepting the fact that the present is not representative of the past."

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Many things that once could be done cannot be done now. That is all, my dear."

Barney still floundered. "I don't understand."

"No," said Morrow. "And therein lies the difference between us."

"I'll explain later," said Roads, leaning over the table to place a hand on her arm. "We've got more important things to talk about at the moment."

Barney nodded dumbly, casting a What-the-hell-have-you-got-me-into look back at him.

Their drinks arrived at that moment via a trapdoor in the rear of the cubicle. Roads put his in one corner of the table, away from the flickering hologram. Barney drank half of hers in one gulp.

Roads reached into a pocket, produced a cigarette and a lighter. He lit up and took a deep, sour breath.

"I need your help," he said to Morrow, getting down to business.

"I guessed as much." The Head rotated to face him.

"How much do you know?"

"That you have a serious problem. I'm glad it's you and not me, no offence."

"Thanks. Are you going to help me?"

"That depends. Are *you* going to help *me*?" Morrow countered.

"If I can."

"How?"

"I don't know. Put in a good word, perhaps."

"That won't be necessary. I have something more concrete in mind."

"Tell me."

"First, the problem," said Morrow. "You've got a thief to catch. And a killer too."

"How much do you know?"

"Enough. Since the first of August, there have been thirty break-ins and eighteen political assassinations within the city - all of them unsolved. The bulletin boards think that both series of crimes were

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performed by one and the same person, although RSD is treating them as separate matters entirely. No-one has given the killer a nickname yet, but the thief has been coined 'the Mole'. What little evidence you have in either case is inconclusive. In particular, the identikit pictures of the Mole are . . . how do I put this? . . . *interesting*." Morrow smiled apologetically. "You can't blame me for having been suspicious of you, at first."

"No, I don't." In the six weeks the Mole had been operating, RSD had learned only one thing about him: that he looked exactly like Roads. After the first break-in, Roads had been on suspension until he could prove his alibi; he didn't like remembering the experience. "Is that all you've found out?"

"Absolutely not, my friend. I know that the murders were of highly placed officials who actively supported the Reassimilation Bill. Mayor Packard is down-playing the political motive behind the killings, but the thought of joining the Reunited States of America has obviously ruffled someone's feathers. I know security has been upped at Mayor's House, and another hundred officers have been drafted from RSD to help with the arrival of General Stedman on Tuesday." The Head winked. "I'm sure that's ruffled still more feathers downtown. Or have RSD and the MSA finally reached a consensus that I'm not aware of?"

Roads didn't dignify the comment with a reply, although it certainly hit home. RSD had evolved after the Dissolution from a small, privately-owned security company. Kennedy's former police department and a small Army garrison had been combined to form the Military Services Authority. While RSD officers patrolled the streets and maintained civil law, the MSA's main tasks had originally been to keep external forces out of the city. In recent years, however, the MSA's authority had been extended to cover many matters dealing with the city's internal safety - a fact many of the old-hand RSD officers, including Roads, resented.

Roads put aside the cigarette and leaned forward. "Go on."

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"The thief is another kettle of fish," Morrow said, his face sobering. "And the one you're after in particular - the Mole, rather than the assassin. That's been your assignment for the last six weeks. But you've had no luck thus far, and I can well see why."

"Oh?"

"Of course. The thefts were not of valuable items that would reappear later, as the b-boards depict them, but of information concerning RSD resources, movements of the MSA, reactor status and population figures, among other things. Correct?"

"Yes." The MSA break-in tended to overshadow the other thefts, but Roads knew them all by heart.

Morrow went on: "It's hard to see why anyone would bother stealing this data at all. There's so much of it, for a start, and of such variety. Who could possibly find a use for it all?"

"That's what we've been trying to determine." Roads leaned back into the seat, away from Morrow's probing stare. "As you say, the evidence is nonexistent, and the few suspects we've uncovered all had alibis. Motive is all that's left, and it's getting us nowhere."

"So you've finally come to me for help," Morrow said, the suggestion of a grin at the corners of his mouth. "Do you suspect that I am involved, perhaps?"

"No," Roads said grimly. "You could break into any system you wanted without sending in the heavies."

"Exactly. The computer sciences employed by this city are not what they used to be." A fleeting regret clouded the Head's face, almost as though he missed the challenge.

"They're still not exactly easy to break into," said Barney irritably. "Whoever the Mole is, he knows what he's doing."

"True," the Head conceded. "So it would seem."

"I'm hoping you might have heard something," Roads prompted. "A rumour, anything."

"If I had, I would tell you for free."

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"Does that mean you haven't?" Roads tried to keep the disappointment from showing.

"Not exactly." Morrow hesitated. "But it's strange," he said. "I thought you would have guessed by now."

"What?" asked Barney.

"Let's study the Mole's behaviour, shall we? He works under the cover of darkness, often three or four nights in a row. He is a meticulous professional, and he works alone. He does not socialise or talk to others, for, if he did, someone would surely have seen him doing so by now."

"We know this, Keith," Roads said.

"Yes, but have you ever stopped to ask yourself what he does do on his nights off?"

He had, frequently. "I've got a feeling you're going to tell me."

"Exactly. And the time has come for me to ask for that favour in return."

"Go ahead."

"It's quite simple," Morrow said. "I too want you to catch the Mole."

Roads performed a mental double-take. "You what?"

"I want you to catch him, for even I am not immune to this invisible thief. On every night the Mole has not been robbing you, he has been locking horns with me. And winning, I should add."

Roads almost laughed at the Head's expression. It must have hurt Morrow plenty to even contemplate asking an RSD officer for help, albeit that Roads had come to him first.

Barney shook her head. "Shit."

"My sentiments exactly."

"What have you lost?" asked Roads.

"Not much. Invoices, inventories, securities, private records and so on. I get the feeling the Mole is simply testing my defences, waiting until he's ready to pull off the big one."

"Have you kept a record of what he took?"

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"Naturally, and of the time each break-in occurred. Like you, I have been unable to determine a pattern."

"Regardless . . . I need your data."

"And you shall have it. But only you, not the entire Regional Security Department."

"You have my word. They don't even know we're here."

"Good."

The trapdoor opened in the back of the booth, revealing a data fiche the size and shape of an old smart card. Roads gently picked it up and pocketed it, keen to study it but trying not to raise his hopes too high. The revelation, unexpected thought it was, might still might lead nowhere.

Morrow had closed his eyes, and appeared to be thinking to himself. Roads looked at Barney, who shrugged. He waited as long as he could before breaking the silence.

"I don't suppose you have a card reader here, Keith?" he asked. "I want to get started on this right away."

Morrow's eyes snapped open. "Of course; you must be keen to explore the depth of my vulnerability. But not right now. I have other work for you to do."

"Oh?" Roads said cautiously.

"Yes. The time is two-fifteen. You are still here, which I take to mean that you have not received a report from RSD HQ regarding the latest robbery."

Barney glanced at her watch. "That's right. But that doesn't mean we won't. Sometimes it takes a while for a break-in to -"

"I have just had word from one of my subordinates," Morrow interrupted. "An entry alarm was triggered twenty minutes ago. Our friend has been busy."

Roads gripped the edge of the table. "Where?"

"One hundred and fourteen Old North Street. If you hurry, you might catch him on the way out."

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Barney lifted her coat into her lap. "It'll take at least ten minutes to get there."

"I know," Roads said.

"And he has an annoying habit of triggering alarms when he leaves, not as he enters." The Head shrugged with his eyebrows. "Still, someone will meet you there. Call in the troops and see what you can find, but remember: I didn't tip you off."

"Of course not. Thank you." Roads clambered across his seat.

"A pleasure - and to have met you, my dear." Morrow smiled at Barney. "Do keep in touch."

The Head flickered once, and vanished.

2

2:45 a.m.

The rain had gone as suddenly as it had come, leaving nothing but dampness in the air and swirling water on the streets. In places, storm drains had been overloaded or blocked, and mirror-flat puddles shattered into spray as the RSD patrol car passed.

Roads drove while Barney arranged the rendezvous with HQ, using the secure phone in the dash rather than the radio. The duty officer confessed to being slightly overwhelmed with requests: more than just the Mole had been busy. It took five minutes to confirm that a footsquad and van would be dispatched to Old North Street as soon as possible, and that curfew would be lifted in the area once power loads could be juggled across the city to accommodate the extra demand.

When she had finished, Barney collapsed into the seat and slicked back her still-damp hair. The alcohol slowly dissolving in her stomach didn't ease the sensation that her world had suddenly been turned upside down. Watching Roads drive wasn't helping, either.

Kennedy Polis had been designed and built with an emphasis on new ways of managing resources, waste, and movement. The last, in particular, gave the city a unique shape. Instead of a complicated tangle of roads and freeways, Kennedy had boasted a massive twin-track personal rapid transport system arranged in seven concentric rings - designated A to G - spaced one kilometre apart, web-like, around the

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nominal heart of the city. Each elevated guideway, not much wider than a conventional sidewalk, had originally carried six- or two-seater cabs that could be summoned from numerous stops and junctions along the network. Powered by linear induction motors, the cabs had been computer-controlled, quick and safe, designed as a compromise between buses and taxis. Armed with a smart card, a commuter could have summoned a cab at any time from anywhere in the city - arrival within two minutes, guaranteed - and taken it wherever he or she liked.

The annual cost of regularly using such a service had amounted to little more than the cost of maintaining a private motor vehicle to travel the same distance, so patronage of the system - nicknamed the 'Rosette' - had been high. As an added incentive, the city's streets were deliberately narrow - with priority lanes given to bicycles and service vehicles rather than general traffic - and followed the path of the Rosette almost exactly. These long, curving maintenance roads provided the only relatively uninterrupted stretches of tarmac in the city, apart from radial freeways pointing the four directions of the compass.

Following the War and the enclosure of the city, private vehicle ownership had been banned and use of the Rosette rationalised. New outer sections, once intended as complete additions to the original ring structure, had been turned into loops connecting the inner rings with more distant sites, thus allowing commuters access to their workplaces. Little-used segments had been shut down completely, their reaction plates and control systems cannibalised to repair others. The only vehicles allowed on the roads were those performing the work of the Mayoralty.

The streets were, therefore, empty for the most part, maintained irregularly, and ill-lit at night. Rusting hulks left over from the old days had long since been recycled, but there were still plenty of other hazards. Where tarmac had crumbled, a new surface compounded from old rubber tyres filled the gaps. Traffic lights no longer worked at all. The

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motorist's only advantage lay in the assumption that all wheeled traffic was important, and therefore had right of way.

Roads, accordingly, drove as though he was the only person on the road. The harbour lay to the south of the city, with Old North Street perversely to the south-west, in an area that had fallen into disrepair after the deactivation of the nearest segment of the Rosette. Following maintenance roads along J loop back to G ring, he pushed the patrol car's small electric motor to its limit, growling around bends and accelerating across intersections without even pausing.

Along a relatively straight stretch, Roads fumbled with one hand inside his coat and handed her the data fiche.

"We'll have to decide what to do about this later," he said. "Until then, keep it safe for me."

"Will do, boss." She tucked it into the breast pocket of her shirt. The sharp edges of the card nagged at her. Accepting help from a known felon smacked of corruption, and contradicted everything she thought she knew about her partner.

"You really surprised me tonight," she said.

He glanced at her, then back to the road. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, Phil." She studied his face closely in the dash light. "When the hell did you start dealing with Keith Morrow?"

"A long time ago," he said, his expression fixed. "But it's not as bad as it looks."

"Are you sure? For someone who swears he's not crooked, you keep the damnedest friends."

"Is that what's bothering you?"

"Well, you've got me worried, I'll admit."

"Don't be," he said. "I haven't spoken to him for almost twenty years, until tonight."

"But you *did* deal with him?"

"In a way. We helped each other out, once." He shrugged. "It's a long story, and not particularly relevant."

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She wanted to believe him – and did for the most part – but the question had to be asked. He was so much a part of her life that the very thought of him betraying her made her stomach turn.

"Promise me you're telling the truth," she said.

"Easy," he said, and smiled. "You've never met a straighter cop."

Her doubts ebbed at that. They had been partners for long enough to know when they were telling the truth, as well as their games.

"I know," she said, returning the smile and adding a suggestive leer. "At least, that's what I've heard."

"So believe it."

"As long as you tell me the full story one day."

"Maybe." He returned his attention to the road. "But not right now, okay?"

She took the hint.

Roads directed the car along a cross-route between G and F rings. The headlights seemed to disappear into the gloom, sucked away from them by the night and returning only in brief reflections off broken glass. Whole blocks had been left to the elements, abandoned for more convenient locations closer to the Rosette. Decaying facades gaped back at her like mocking skulls, blank and impersonal yet eerily animated all the same. If buildings could look wild, untamed, then these did, as though the dead blocks resented the intruder that had so rudely disturbed their brooding, uneasy rest.

Then, as they neared the address Morrow had given them, Roads flicked off the headlights.

"What —?" she began.

"No need to let the Mole know we're coming," Roads said, his voice soft. "If he's still around."

Barney put one hand nervously on the dash. Privately she doubted that the Mole would be anywhere near the address Morrow had given them: not because Morrow had lied, but because the Mole seemed to have an uncanny knack of slipping away well before anyone came close.

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That wouldn't stop her from trying, of course – but the possibility of crashing into something in the dark concerned her more, at that moment. The road ahead was utterly dark.

"Jesus, Phil!"

"It's okay. I can see fine."

The car swerved to the left, and she clutched the dash hard. "Are you *sure?*"

"Positive."

Dark buildings loomed on her side of the car, and she flinched instinctively away. Roads had been RSD's champion marksman for more years than she could recall, but that didn't make her feel any safer.

Suddenly Roads spun the wheel and brought the car to a sudden halt.

Barney jerked back into her seat. "Now what?"

He pointed past her, through the window on her side of the car. "We're here: 114 Old North Street."

"How can you tell?"

"Would you believe I'm psychic?" He opened his door and stepped out of the car.

"Sure." She unclipped the holster of her pistol, grabbed a torch, and did likewise. "And I'm General Stedman."

"Pleased to meet you." Roads indicated the low, iron fence that separated the tangled yard from the pavement.

Barney's eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness. Now that she looked, she could see a corroded brass plate on the fence with the building's number.

Not psychic, then. She cursed him under her breath, feeling stupid and resolving to be more observant in future.

One hundred and fourteen was large, forbidding, and seemed to have been carved from a solid lump of stone two storeys high. The ground-floor windows were boarded shut, like the warehouses of the harbour; its facade was similarly weathered. Someone had painted "RUSA OUT!" in

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paint across one wall. An open gate leading to a short flight of steps granted access to the yard. The main door of the building was ajar.

"What now?" she whispered.

"We go in."

"Okay. But after you, this time."

He led the way through the gate and up the steps. At the entrance, he nodded her to one side, then nudged the door open with his foot.

Barney clicked on the torch she had brought with her and swept the beam across the rubble on the floor. The light revealed old food cans, empty; rotten cardboard boxes and a pile of yellow newspapers; a sofa that had seen better days, half a century ago. The house had obviously escaped the usual scouring for recyclable resources. The next room was similar. Roads pointed to split up and edged into the darkness of the building, torchless.

The ground floor was empty. They met at the base of the stairs and headed upward. The first floor was empty too, and the second.

"Cellar," said Roads, his breath thick with dust-laden air. They found the entrance in a closet off the unused kitchen. The door was locked.

Barney took position on one side as Roads kicked it in. The lock splintered with a loud crack. She pointed the torch through the open doorway.

Dim light cast faint shadows at the bottom of a flight of stairs, its source out of sight. Movement in the shadows coincided with the sudden cessation of sound, as though someone had quickly moved for cover.

"Who's there?" she called.

"You tell me," floated back a voice.

Roads gestured for her to cover him as he went down the stairs. She moved to another position, juggling torch and gun in both hands, trying to get a better angle. From the top of the stairs, she could only see two or three metres across the room below, and Roads obscured much of that. When he had descended a half-dozen steps, she dropped to her knees and aimed over his shoulder.

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"Morrow sent us," Roads said. He stopped as something moved out of Barney's line of sight.

"What a coincidence," said the voice in return. "He sent me too."

Barney saw Roads' shoulders tighten as someone stepped out of the shadows and into the light. Roads' pistol snapped up, ready to fire. She craned for a better view, but could see little above the waist of the person confronting him.

"I'm your consultant," said the man. "And you must be Phil Roads. Come on down and I'll show you what I've found so far."

Roads didn't respond immediately. His posture remained tense, as though he had seen something that bothered him. But just as Barney was about to ask what was wrong, his pistol slowly fell, and he took another step down the stairs.

Then the sound of a vehicle pulling up outside the house reached her. She listened briefly, until she recognised the familiar whine of an RSD engine.

"Phil," she hissed into the cellar. "The squad's here."

Roads stopped on the last step and looked up at her. "You go," he said. "Have them seal the house and set up a cordon – you know the drill. Just talk to me before letting anyone else down here."

"Are you sure?" She frowned at his concerned expression. "I can —"

"No." He cocked his head. "I'll be okay. Git."

The squad had already begun unloading equipment from the van by the time she left the house. Komalski, the officer in charge of the foot squad and the cordon, greeted her warmly, despite the hour. Cleaning up after the Mole was a familiar job for both of them, and under normal circumstances she would have responded in kind. But the fact that Mole might be only minutes away – plus her misgivings about Roads being alone in the cellar with one of Keith Morrow's gangsters – dispelled any pleasantries she might have attempted.

She briefed Komalski as quickly as she could. As soon as she was sure he knew what to do, she hurried back into the house.

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The cellar door had swung shut since she had left, but no attempt had been made to seal it again. It opened easily, and she craned her neck through the doorway to listen for movement. Voices floated up at her from the pitch-black space below, too faint to be understood but not indicative of trouble.

"Phil?" she called.

The voices stopped for a moment, then he replied: "Barney?"

"Are you okay?"

"Fine. Come on down."

With the aid of the torch, she negotiated the narrow flight of steps. The wall to her right vanished as she descended. She swept the light across the cellar. It seemed to stretch forever into the shadowy distance, cluttered with benches and inactive computer terminals. A methodical hurricane appeared to have blown through the room, emptying filing cabinets, searching through cupboards and opening boxes at random.

Roads was sitting on a stool in the middle of the room. The tension she had sensed in him earlier hadn't gone, but he had it under control. Opposite him, a tall black man leaned against one wall. The man was totally bald and, beneath a black skinsuit, economically muscled. His eyes glittered oddly in the torchlight, sparkling like jewels.

As he raised a pair dark glasses to cover them, Barney realised they were artificial.

"This is Raoul," said Roads. "Morrow sent him."

The man grinned a mouthful of gold teeth and offered his hand. Barney hesitated, then shook it, hoping her nervousness didn't show.

"I haven't touched anything," he said. "Just locked the door on my way in and waited."

"No-one else has been here?" asked Barney, forcing her clenched jaw muscles to move.

"Not a soul. I've confirmed that the Mole triggered the alarm deliberately when he left. The team sent in to investigate had only been

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in the area a few minutes when the Head ordered them to leave and contacted me."

"Why you?"

"Until a week ago, I ran this operation. I can tell you what's missing."

Barney walked across the room to peer at the debris - anything other than him. "But can we believe you?"

"Implicitly." Raoul grinned. "At least, as far as this room is concerned. On anything else, you'll have to take your chances."

"And why's that?"

"Why do you think?" Raoul's smile only widened. "When you work for the Head, you don't speak freely with RSD. Not without his permission, anyway."

"Thanks, Raoul." Roads broke in, standing. "Barney and I will go up and talk to the team while you get started. We need a complete inventory of everything in the room, plus a list of anything missing - although it looks like the usual story, so far. If you'd like some help, just ask."

"A couple of officers for the grunt work. That's all."

"I'll send them down."

As Roads and Barney climbed the narrow stairs, the black man seated himself before a terminal and began tapping into the system. When they had reached the kitchen, Barney let free the breath she had been holding.

#

While she and Roads had been busy, the foot squad had deployed itself throughout the streets and alleys around the house, sealing the area from what little traffic there was at that time of night. A request to Power Central had not yet been answered, and the night was still pitch black. Until the lights along Old North Street and its tributaries returned to life, the scene would remain shrouded with shadows, like a frieze of an empty tomb.

Roads sent four officers down into the cellar: two to help Raoul, two more to go through the motions of fingerprinting and photographing.

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He obviously didn't expect any new evidence to emerge from the procedure, but they had to try regardless. Barney was already dreading the report she would have to file later that morning with Margaret Chappel, head of RSD.

"You know what I think?"

Roads was leaning up against the car, deep in his own thoughts. "That you'll be glad to catch this bastard and get back on day shift?"

"No. That we're in over our heads, and getting deeper by the second."

Roads looked up at her. "You mean Raoul?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can understand that. Unfortunately, if we want Morrow's help —"

"But *do* we?" Barney broke in. "I think he's hiding something."

"And I agree."

"Can we trust him, then?"

"What Keith said about himself was true, Barney. He's just a modern version of the old junkyard men, collecting gadgets for the rainy day that may never come. Hence his position on the Most-Most Wanted list: the distributors in R&R don't know what he is, but they know what he's got, and they'd love to get their hands on it." Roads shrugged. "No-one's managed to get close because he'll fight when he has to."

Barney absorbed that in silence, until the question that nagged at her most finally broke free:

"That trick with the hologram . . . is Morrow *really* dead?"

"He sure is." Roads's gaze wandered as he replied. "His mind was transferred to a neural net just before the War, shortly before his body died of a motor neurone disease. Now he fits into a crate about half the size of an ordinary coffin, and weighs twice as much."

"Doesn't that make him vulnerable?"

"Only if someone knows where that crate is - and he makes sure no-one does. It could be on the other side of the city, for all it matters."

"How?"

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"Because he can use communication links to transmit data, just like a computer. All he needs is the right hardware and he can 'be' wherever he likes."

It was this that bothered Barney most of all. "You talk like he's a machine, and yet he reckons he's human. Surely he can't have it both ways?"

"Unfortunately, he can." Roads looked sympathetic. "He explained how he works, once, but I'm not sure it makes a lot of sense."

"Try me."

"Serious?"

"Why not? You said you would back at the bar."

He shrugged. "All right then. Have you ever heard of something called 'syncritical path analysis'?"

"No."

"How about the Boss Voice theory?"

"Never," Barney said.

"Well, neither had I until Keith explained them to me." He smiled. "It helps if you imagine the brain to be a collection of many parts working in concert rather than a coherent whole; more like the organs in a body or the species of an ecosystem than the components of a machine. Some parts keep you breathing, others monitor your use of language or memory recall; there might be thousands of individual parts in your head, each evolved to perform a particular function, and they all interact: a portion of one will play a role in the function of another, and vice versa. With me so far?"

Barney nodded. "I think so." She had taken a term of basic psychology back in high school, and the general principle rang a bell. "The whole thing is moving, right? Even when we're asleep?"

"As I understand it, yes. Everything in the brain is cyclic and chaotic. You have oscillations that appear regular, but arise purely by chance; if the parts – the pattern generators – were rearranged in even a slightly different way, the end result would be quite different. So the closest you

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get to stillness is when you meditate and reveal the standing wave, the holding pattern, beneath the mess. But the sum of this 'mess', not the holding pattern, is what we call consciousness; if you add all the processes together, in other words, what you get is 'I', the Boss Voice in our heads."

Roads glanced at Barney to confirm that she was still keeping up. Again she nodded, although less certainly than before.

He went on: "Researchers back in Morrow's day apparently knew how the brain uses chaos to encode and transmit information along neurons; that's how they built the implants used in berserkers. Decoding the parts of the brain and the way they interact involved similar principles. It was the sum of the interactions between the parts – the syncritical path, as they called it – that Morrow's pet scientists set out to measure."

"Like brainwaves?"

"No, although there is a relation. Electrical and magnetic activity of the individual parts could be measured, and their relation to the whole could be approximated. Apparently."

"So . . ." Barney prompted. "They copied the parts?"

"They copied the chaotic way Keith's parts behaved - the functions governing their behaviour, at least - onto an enormous neural net, an electrical analog of a human brain. This was much easier than building a virtual model of his entire brain, neuron for neuron. Even though they often didn't know what the individual parts did, they in effect made a copy of his consciousness in the process. As long as the parts were there, with their strange attractors and their links to each other, the whole thing worked. And is still working today."

"But what about his memory?" Barney broke in. "That's not a process, is it?"

"Some memories were, mainly the ones that related to sensory perception. Those that didn't were supplemented by notes he made before he died. Otherwise, he's exactly the same as he ever was - except

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that he's potentially immortal, and far better off than he ever was. Or so he says."

Barney shook her head. "I think I'm going to have to take your word for it."

"Don't. Look it up one day. I may not have it right myself, or Keith might've been bullshitting me." Roads half-smiled. "But whatever they did, I'm betting not many people tried it. It was an expensive and revolutionary experiment, and only someone rich and desperate would have tried it. Keith may be the first and last of his kind, anywhere in the world - a unique relic from the old days."

Barney understood what Roads was saying there, at least, but didn't think that was a good enough reason to let a known criminal remain free. Relics had proven to be highly dangerous before.

Although she was too young by twenty years to remember the Dissolution, Kennedy's schooling system had made certain she knew the reasons why it had occurred. In individual conflicts, the reasons for going to war had been territorial, but overall the cause was people: eight billion of them by 2040, and only a minority satisfied with their lot.

A burgeoning population may have caused the War, but it was a new minority that contributed to the severity of the Dissolution. Although the nuclear phase of the War had lasted only a few days, it set a dangerous precedent of mass-murder that overshadowed less visible and more efficient means of killing. One of the greatest threats was to be found on the ground, where soldiers armed with the latest mechanical and biological weapons created havoc on the battlefields.

Berserkers – the most ruthless caste of the many biomodified combat soldiers created by the US Army – killed at random for decades after the War. Just one could decimate a small city in a matter of weeks. They were unstoppable, implacable and utterly unwilling to negotiate. Their motives were hard to fathom; although some were genuinely insane, it appeared that others had been given explicit orders to kill civilians – which they did with all their genetically-honed combat skills. This

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parting gesture from the military lingered for forty years until the last known survivor was hunted down and killed in Kennedy.

The United States might have pulled itself together after the War, had it not been for the berserkers and other creatures like them. That was the lesson Barney had learned – both in high school and from her father's death – and the reasoning behind the city's Humanity Laws: biomodification had resulted in the suffering of millions, and would no longer be tolerated at any level of a sane society.

It was no wonder, then, that Keith Morrow made her nervous. He was obviously different from the berserkers, but that didn't stop him being *more than human* - and if he had broken the Humanity Laws, then it was her duty to turn him in. That they needed his help to gain information about the Mole only made her more uneasy.

And then there was Raoul, with his artificial eyes – tangible, clear evidence of biomodification. Who knew how deep his inhumanity ran, or what dark motives his appearance concealed?

"I don't think Keith felt threatened by us," Roads went on, "so we can probably take everything he said to be the truth."

Barney looked up at him. "But what about what he *didn't* say?"

"Yeah, I don't know."

She tapped the heel of one boot to the toes of the other. She hated that she had no choice but to go along with the situation. It was wrong in principle, if not in the details as well. Maybe later, when things were back to normal, she could reconsider and take appropriate action.

"What are you going to tell Margaret?" she eventually asked.

"I'm not sure yet." Roads grimaced. "An anonymous tip-off, probably."

"Well, let me know so our stories'll match."

"I will."

The radio crackled and Roads pulled his receiver from his pocket.

"Roads."

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"Sir?" It was Komalski. "Something just went by us, but we're not sure what. It looked like it was heading your way."

Roads was instantly alert. "Where was it?"

"Corner of North-East and Murdoch Lane. Barker and Stilson saw something pass over their heads. They think it might have been someone on the rooftops."

"Okay, we'll keep an eye out. Thanks for the warning."

Giving the receiver to Barney, Roads signalled to the three officers in the van and relayed the information. The five of them spread out in an expanding circle from the car.

Barney touched the reassuring weight of her sidearm and studied the darkened street. Windows stared blindly back at her; narrow alleyways gaped like open pits.

Behind her and to her left, Roads turned slowly in a full circle, peering into every shadow. The seconds ticked by, until Roads suddenly froze.

"There!" he hissed, pointing.

Barney caught a flicker of movement in an alley twenty metres away. Roads took off toward it, and she followed him, the other officers not far behind. Fumbling for the radio, Barney shouted orders while she ran.

Roads was halfway up the alley before she even reached it.

"Shit." Nuggets of fallen concrete threatened to trip her. "Phil - wait!"

But Roads had already turned left at the end of the alley and disappeared.

When she reached the intersection, he was gone altogether. Even the sound of his footsteps had faded.

The three officers burst from the alley behind her.

"Split up," she told them, and picked a side street at random. She could see no-one, nor anything to suggest that Roads had been that way recently. The streets, still damp after the rain, were empty.

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Reinforcement arrived, in the form of Komalski and two other men, and the search widened. Barney chose another side street and followed it to its end. Apart from a feral cat looking for food scraps in the gutters, she found nothing. Stony-faced houses stared solemnly back at her, any one of them potential harbour for a fugitive. The clicking of her soles echoed on cracked pavement as she followed another lane back to Old North Street. The flashing light of a second RSD van strobed the area in blue: more back-up had arrived. She thought of Raoul's cold eyes reflecting the blue from the safety of 114, and repressed a shiver.

Heading back into the maze, she recalled the officers assisting her.

"Anything?" she asked when they had regrouped.

"Not a trace," said Komalski. The heavy-set cop was sweating. "Of Roads, or anyone. Any idea who he was after?"

"No, I only caught a glimpse." She glanced nervously at her watch. "Where the hell is he?"

"Should we buzz HQ, get the other squad? If we quarter the area -"

"No, let's give him a little longer. He'll have to come back this way. Four of you, go back to the house and keep an eye out. Komalski, Vince, stay here with me."

"Yes, sir."

The minutes crawled by. Komalski eyed the dark buildings that surrounded them.

"Do you think he's —?"

"No. He'll be okay," she said as much to reassure herself as him.

The other officer cocked his head. "Listen."

Footsteps approached. Barney tensed as the sound grew nearer. The steps were unevenly paced, not Roads' steady plod. She held her pistol at the ready.

A shadowy figure stepped out from behind a fence not far from them. She almost took a shot at it, then, turning the reflex into a wave, flashed the torch to attract its attention.

Metal Fatigue

Waving back, Roads limped to join them. His breath came heavily, as though he had only recently stopped running. His trousers were torn, and a small amount of blood showed through the opening.

"Are you okay?" asked Barney.

"Been better." He came to a halt with an audible sigh. Barney offered him the receiver, which he put into a pocket with a sheepish expression. "Sorry to keep you all waiting. I'll take this with me, next time."

"Good idea. Where did you get to?"

"I lost him four blocks down. He went up a ladder and onto the roof. I tried to follow, but the ladder collapsed when I was halfway up." He winced, flexing his leg. "I don't think it was an accident."

"Should we try and go after him?"

"No. He'll be miles away by now. He's one fast sonofabitch, that's for sure."

"Was it the Mole?"

"No, someone else. Bigger." He tapped a button on his overcoat. "It's lucky I had this. Didn't get a good look at his face, but I managed to tag his profile a couple of times. If the shots turn out, we might be able to work out who it was, and if he's relevant."

Barney nodded. Roads had maintained a long-standing dispute with RSD supplies for the disguised camera. Miniaturised equipment was at a premium, of course, but he had argued that on occasions the right tools were a necessity, not a luxury. If he did get a good picture of the man he had chased, then the effort had proved worthwhile.

"Could be a coincidence, you think?" she asked, following on from his last comment.

"Maybe." He glanced up and down the street, as though making sure they were alone. "Komalski, go back and help secure the cordon. Vince, go with him. I don't want anyone else getting in. Barney and I'll be at the house in a few minutes."

"Yessir!" The two men jogged up the street and turned a corner.

When they were gone, Roads sighed again, this time in annoyance.

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"I was *this* close, Barney," he said. "I can't believe he got away so easily."

She studied him closely, noting the bunched crow's-feet and sweat on his brow. "You can quit playing the tough guy now. It hurts, doesn't it?"

He sagged. "Like hell. Want to have a look?"

She knelt and peeled back the ripped fabric. The wound was shallow but long, from the back of his knee to halfway down his lower leg. Blood seeped steadily from it. She brushed away dirt with her fingers and used spit to clean the rest.

Roads handed her a handkerchief without looking down, and she covered the gash as best she could. As strange as she found his phobia, she had to feel sympathy for him. A cop afraid of blood was like a surgeon afraid of sharp knives.

She stood, wiping her hands on her coat. "There. Nothing serious. All you need is a tetanus shot and you'll be right as rain."

"Thanks, Barney. I owe you one."

"One what?"

He smiled, obviously back to his old self. "That's up to you."

She was about to reply when the streetlights suddenly came on. Pale yellow light, too weak to dazzle but bright enough to illuminate, flooded the suburb. The road lit up as though it were a stage and the two of them actors frozen in a tableau.

Barney stood, her words forgotten. His eyes caught hers, and she stared back, fascinated by the grey swirls and patterns of his irises. Although he had the best eyesight of anyone in RSD - had she doubted it, the way he'd caught sight of the man in the alley would have convinced her - the orbs themselves were reassuringly human. Nice eyes, kind eyes, eyes a girl could fall for as an old friend had once said, but otherwise nothing out of the ordinary. They were even slightly bloodshot.

She shivered, remembering yet again the artificial lenses of Morrow's consultant. If Roads had had eyes like Raoul, Barney doubted that she

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would have liked him half as much as she did. Which was more than enough for the time being, maybe for both of them.

Roads broke the moment by reaching for a cigarette. The pale, short-lived flame sent shadows flickering across his eyelids and forehead. When he looked back at her, he smiled gently.

"Want one?" he asked, offering her the pack.

She shook her head. Anti-cancer vaccine bred into tobacco plants had effectively made smoking a safe practice, but cigarettes were prohibitively expensive due to short supply. Maybe that explained Roads' involvement with Morrow: nothing more serious than black-market smokes. The thought came as something of a relief after her earlier fears.

"Let's get back," he said. "We've got work to do."

"Yes, boss." She took a deep breath to gather herself. "A thief to catch, et cetera."

"And don't you forget it."

The short walk back to the house passed in silence.